

Factors that Influence Parents' Meta-Emotion Approaches: Implications for Families

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigated the concept of meta-emotion by examining factors that were associated with specific types of meta-emotion approaches parents used. The main variables included parental stress, outside support, education levels. Other variables considered were number of children in the family, age of children, and children's gender. The concept of meta-emotion as well as the inclusion of these variables were important to investigate to further understand the factors that influenced parents' thoughts and reactions to their children's emotions and emotional responses. It was determined that 143 participants were needed. These participants were gathered by emails sent to students and faculty at Texas Woman's University. Participants were also gathered by dispersing flyers advertising the study in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas metroplex. Individuals who agreed to participate gave consent and then completed the anonymous online questionnaires through PsychData. Results yielded that parental stress was the only significant predictor of meta-emotion approaches.

Keywords:

Meta-emotion
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1.1. Introduction

Parenting approaches and behaviors have received considerable attention throughout the past several decades (Baumrind, 1967; Gottman & Declaire, 1997; Lewis, 1981; Solem, Christophersen, & Martinussen, 2011; Verhoeven, Bogels, & van der Bruggen, 2012). Well-known research on parenting styles has addressed and explored the contribution of numerous variables such as parental characteristics, children's traits, and environmental factors in how they relate to parenting behaviors (Baumrind, 1967; Gottman & Declaire, 1997). However, the consideration of parental thoughts and behaviors in regard to their emotions and their children's emotions is an area where research is lacking. This concept is known as *meta-emotion* (Gottmans, Katz, & Hooven, 1996).

This quantitative study delved into the concept of *meta-emotion* by investigating whether specific variables were associated with the types of meta-emotion approaches parents used. Specific variables included parents' education levels, outside support, and parental stress. Additional variables that were investigated included the number of children in each family, children's ages, and children's genders. The research questions generated for this study were:

- 1) What is the relationship between parental stress, education, and parental outside support on meta-emotion approaches when controlling for potential covariates (child's age, child's gender, and the number of children in the family)?
- 2) Is there an interaction between parental stress and parental outside support when predicting meta-emotion approaches parents use?

2. Background Information about Meta-Emotion

The term *meta-emotion* is described as the type of views parents hold about their own emotions, as well as the emotions of their children (Gottmans et al., 1996). Research has shown that parental perceptions of their emotions and their children's emotions may be indicators related to certain parenting characteristics they display (Legace-Seguin & Coplan, 2005). There are four specific types of meta-emotion approaches. These categories include *emotion coaching*, *parental rejection of negative emotion*, *parental acceptance of negative emotion*, and *feelings of uncertainty/ ineffectiveness in emotion socialization* approaches. Each approach differs with the levels of guidance,

encouragement of negative emotion, and acceptance of negative emotion that parents display towards their children in response to their children's behaviors (Paterson et al., 2012). See the table below.

| | Guidance Provided by Parents Towards Their Children's Emotions | Parents' Encouragement of Their Children's Emotional Expressions | Parents' Acceptance of Their Children's Negative Emotions |
|--|--|--|---|
| <i>Emotion Coaching (EC) Meta-Emotion Approach</i> | High | High | Low |
| <i>Parental Acceptance (PA) of Meta-Emotion Approach</i> | Low | High | High |
| <i>Parental Rejection (PR) of Meta-Emotion Approach</i> | Low | Low | Low |
| <i>Uncertainty/Ineffectiveness in Emotion Socialization (UI) Meta-Emotion Approach</i> | Low | Low | Low |

Note. Parents who adopt a UI meta-emotion approach tend to passively reject their children's negative emotions (Paterson et al., 2012).

As shown above, an *emotion coaching* meta-emotion approach is characterized by parents who acknowledge and guide their children's emotions (Gottmans et al., 1996). If children express negative behaviors, parents who adopt the *emotion coaching* approach are likely to guide their children to express their emotions in more prosocial ways. In comparison, a meta-emotion approach of *parental rejection of negative emotion* may be defined as parents who do not guide their children's negative behaviors and emotions (Paterson et al., 2012). Parents who adopt a *parental acceptance of negative emotion* meta-emotion approach are those who encourage their children's emotions and behaviors, but do not offer guidance to their children about how they can positively express their emotions. Finally, parents who adopt a *feelings of uncertainty/ ineffectiveness in emotion socialization* meta-emotion approach are classified as those who may not know how to guide their children's emotions and behaviors (Paterson et al., 2012). As a result, these parents are not likely to guide their children's emotions or encourage their children's emotional expressions.

3. Significance of Meta-Emotion Approaches

The types of meta-emotion approaches parents adopt are quite significant, as they have been found to be associated with children's socialization and emotion regulation abilities (Lunkenheimer & Cortina, 2007; Wilson, Havighurst, & Harley, 2012). Children's abilities to regulate their emotions is associated with executive functions in their brains, which are also responsible for higher level thinking processes, such as attention, inhibitions of negative emotions, and memory (Grazino, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007).

The ways in which children gain skills to regulate their emotions is associated with guidance provided by their caregivers (Lunkenheimer & Cortina, 2007; Wilson et al., 2012). For example, parents exhibiting an emotion coaching meta-emotion approach may provide positive guidance if they see their child expressing their negative emotions in a physical, aggressive manner. Positive guidance would include giving advice about how the child could channel the anger using words rather than physical means. Parents may give children an opportunity to openly express how they feel and perhaps provide advice as to how to resolve the anger they may be feeling.

4. Stress, Outside Parental Support, and Education Levels

The study also assessed the variables of parental stress, outside parental support, and education levels in terms of how these may influence parents' meta-emotion approaches. Research has already established the role that environmental factors such as outside parental support, stress levels, and parental education might play in parenting behaviors (Guajardo, Snyder, & Petersen, 2009; Mitmansgruber, Beck, & Schubler, 2008). However, research has not investigated the impact these variables might have on parental meta-emotion approaches.

Thompson and Prottas (2005) indicated that stress is a variable that may affect the overall climate of home environments. Specifically, the researchers found that stress derived from sources such as family demands and one's occupation may affect individuals' levels of life satisfaction. In turn, it is posited that types of parenting approaches adults adopt may be impacted by levels of parental stress that adults experience. Research conducted by Beer and Moneta (2012) produced similar results in that the ways parents handled stressors within their environments directly impacted their parenting approaches. Despite a plethora of research conducted on parenting styles and stress, minimal research has been performed on the association of stress and how it may affect the types of meta-emotion approaches parents exhibit.

Outside parental support was also a variable included in the study. The combination of variables related to outside parental support, meta-emotion, and stress have not been heavily researched, which further underscores the need of this current study. Previous research has primarily focused on family structures (single and dual

parent households) in terms of how outside support may impact their parenting behaviors (Solem et al., 2011). Research has also investigated outside parental support in the form of relationships parents form with others, such as family or friends and how this type of outside support may impact their parenting approaches (Green, Furrer, & McAllister, 2007). Results have indicated that parents who receive greater amounts of outside support from others are more likely to perceive their interactions with their children in a positive light, as compared to parents who do not receive a high abundance of outside support. In addition, parents who receive outside support from others are more likely to form positive relationships with their children as compared to parents who do not have such outside support systems (Green et al., 2007). Although these variables have been considered in past studies, research has not specifically focused on the role of parents' meta-emotion approaches and how they may be impacted by social outside support parents receive. Demographic factors such as education levels have also been shown to impact parenting behaviors. For instance, (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009) indicated that parents with higher education levels were more likely to influence the probability that their children would set high educational goals and in turn receive influential jobs when they grew older. These achievements may be attributed to positive relationships parents hold with their children, such as those that encourage many interactions that integrate cognitive stimulation and positive guidance towards emotions their children express.

Research has also demonstrated that education levels may affect parental meta-emotion approaches and overall relationships formed with their children (Chen, Lin, & Lin, 2012). This may be attributed to certain factors, such as knowledge gained about parenting practices or mere experiences (Bornstein, Putnick, Suwalsky, & Gini, 2006). However, more research is necessary to examine the role that parental education might play in which meta-emotion approach parents tend to use. Although all these variables have been examined from the perspective of parenting research, additional research is needed in this field to further examine the impact of education, outside parental support, and parental stress, and how they all might affect the types of meta-emotion approaches parents exhibit towards their children. These factors are important to investigate, since meta-emotion approaches have been found to affect children's social and emotional development by directly influencing children's abilities to regulate their emotions (Wilson et al., 2012).

4.1. Child's Age, Child's Gender, and Number of Children

Child's age, child's gender, and number of children in the family were also variables of interest in the study. Research is needed on these variables to determine of how they may be associated with meta-emotion approaches parents adopt. By factoring these variables into this current study, it will provide a clearer picture as to how they may be associated with parental stress levels and social outside support.

Child's age. Research has yielded that parenting practices evolve as children get older (Burke, Pardini, & Loeber, 2008). For instance, more guidance may be needed when children are young, but as children grow older, they are more likely to desire autonomy. As a result, parenting styles or approaches may become less involved, as compared to when children are younger. This may influence parents' beliefs about their children's emotions and the amount of involvement parents have with guiding their children's emotions or electing to ignore them. Also, younger children are more likely to rely on their parents, who may be key individuals that play a role with shaping their children's social competence skills and knowledge in social settings (Edwards, 2014).

Child's gender. Research has found an association between children's gender and parents' reactions towards their children's behaviors (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Raley & Bianchi, 2006). Even though conformity to gender-specified roles has changed in the past several decades, some parents raise children based upon their expectations of what children's behaviors should align with in terms of their gender (Kane, 2006). For instance, some parents believe that expressing emotions is more common or more accepted among female children than male children (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Raley & Bianchi, 2006). As a result, these parents may not encourage sons to openly express their emotions; however, some families whose perceptions do not reflect gender stereotyped norms may encourage these types of displays. The current study is needed to examine whether child's gender is a variable that influences meta-emotion approaches that parents adopt, as child's gender may affect parents' perceptions about their child's emotions if parents hold gender stereotypes.

Number of children. The number of children in the family was another variable of interest in the study. Previous research has indicated that parents who have more than two children may be more open to receiving outside support from others about parenting practices (Edwards, 2014). However, research is lacking in regards to how the number of children in the family may affect parents' meta-emotion approaches. The study will close the gaps in literature surrounding these variables by gathering participants and implementing the research methods.

5. Method

The following sections outline steps that were taken to answer the research questions posed in this quantitative research study. A description of participants and instruments are described below.

5.1. Participants

Participants included a total of 143 adults of both genders and all ethnicities who were a parent to at least one child between the ages of 1 to 18 years. *An a priori* power analysis was conducted using G*Power version

3.1.9 to determine the minimum sample size required to find significance with a desired level of power set at .80, an α -level at .05, and a moderate effect size of .15 (f^2) (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Participants were gathered by posting flyers, advertising the study in public locations within the Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas metroplex. Also, emails were sent to the student body and faculty members at Texas Woman’s University. Those interested in participating in the study were asked to type the URL of the PsychData questionnaire in a web Browser, which was found on the solicitation flyers and in the body of the solicitation email to individuals at Texas Woman’s University. After typing the URL in a web Browser, participants were asked to complete a consent form, acknowledging they agree to participate in the research study.

Preliminary analyses revealed the majority of the sample was White/Caucasian parents (72%). In addition, 90.2% of the sample was identified as mothers. In terms of education levels, the majority of the sample held a Bachelor’s degree or higher (73.5%), while 64.4% of the participants indicated their salaries were between \$50,000 to \$100,000 each year.

5.2. Instruments

Each variable was measured by specific instruments. Specifically, parental stress was measured using the Parental Stress Scale (Berry & Jones, 1995) meta-emotion was measured by the Emotion Related Parenting Styles (ERPS) questionnaire (Paterson et al., 2012) outside support parents received was measured using the Social Outside Support Questionnaire (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983) and children’s gender, the number of children in each family, children’s ages, and demographic information of the participants (such as their genders, education levels, and income) were measured by a demographic form created by the principal investigator of the study.

6. Results

To analyze the data, Canonical Correlation and linear regression analyses were used. To begin, a Canonical Correlation analysis was performed to explore the relationships between the potential covariates (child’s age, child’s gender, and the number of children in the family) and each meta-emotion category (EC, PR, PA, and UI). None of the covariates were significant, $p > .05$. Therefore, they were not included in the primary analyses.

When using the emotion coaching (EC) meta-emotion approach as the dependent variable when conducting the linear regression analysis, the overall model was significant $F(3, 138) = 4.74, p = .004, R^2 = .093, \text{adj } R^2 = .074$. Of the predictor variables, only stress was significant, $\beta = -.255 (SE = .023), t(141) = -2.99, p = .003$. Higher stress levels is associated with lower emotion coaching. Also, the interaction between outside support and parental stress (SSQ x PSS), was not significant, $\beta = -.023 (SE = .031), t(141) = -.269, p = .788$. The table below represents these findings.

Predicting the Emotion Coaching (EC) Meta-Emotion Approach from Parental Stress, Outside Support, and Education Levels with Interaction

| Predictor | Unstandardized | | Standardized | | t | p |
|-----------------------|----------------|------|--------------|--|--------|------|
| | b | SE | B | | | |
| SSQ (Outside Support) | .381 | .310 | .105 | | 1.229 | .221 |
| PSS (Stress) | -.068 | .023 | -.255 | | -2.991 | .003 |
| Education | -.023 | .125 | -.015 | | -1.187 | .852 |
| SSQ x PSS | -.008 | .031 | -.023 | | -.269 | .788 |

When using the parental rejection of negative emotion (PR) meta-emotion as the dependent variable in the linear regression analysis, the following results were found.

Predicting the Parental Rejection of Negative Emotion (PR) Meta-Emotion Approach from Parental Stress, Outside Support, and Education Levels with Interaction

| Predictor | Unstandardized | | Standardized | | t | p |
|-----------------------|----------------|------|--------------|--|--------|------|
| | b | SE | β | | | |
| SSQ (Outside Support) | .232 | .320 | .062 | | .725 | .470 |
| PSS (Stress) | .082 | .023 | .298 | | 3.496 | .001 |
| Education | -.207 | .129 | -.131 | | -1.607 | .110 |
| SSQ x PSS | .028 | .031 | .075 | | .895 | .372 |

Specifically, the overall model was significant $F(3, 138) = 4.80, p = .003, R^2 = .095, \text{adj } R^2 = .075$. Of the predictor variables, only stress was significant, $\beta = .298, (SE = .023), t(141) = 3.496, p = .001$. Thus, an increase in stress was associated with a higher use of the PR meta-emotion approach. Also, the interaction between outside support and parental stress (SSQ x PSS), was not significant, $\beta = .075 (SE = .031), t(141) = .895, p = .372$. The table below illustrates these findings.

When using the parental acceptance of negative emotion (PA) meta-emotion as the dependent variable in the linear regression analysis, the following results were found.

Specifically, the overall model was significant $F(3, 138) = 3.098, p = .029, R^2 = .063, \text{adj } R^2 = .043$. Of the predictor variables, none were significant, $p > .05$. Also, the interaction between outside support and parental stress (SSQ x PSS), was not significant, $\beta = .010 (SE = .039), t(141) = .122, p = .903$. The table below presents the statistical outcomes.

Predicting the Parental Acceptance of Negative Emotion (PA) Meta-Emotion Approach from Parental Stress, Outside Support, and Education Levels with Interaction

| Predictor | Unstandardized | | Standardized | | t | p |
|-----------------------|----------------|------|--------------|--|-------|------|
| | b | SE | B | | | |
| SSQ (Outside Support) | -.233 | .396 | -.051 | | -.588 | .558 |
| PSS (Stress) | .056 | .029 | .167 | | 1.929 | .056 |
| Education | .294 | .159 | .153 | | 1.849 | .067 |
| SSQ x PSS | .005 | .039 | .010 | | .122 | .903 |

When using the feelings of uncertainty/ineffectiveness in emotion socialization (UI) meta-emotion as the dependent variable in the linear regression analysis, the following results were found. Specifically, the overall model was significant $F(3, 138) = 22.551, p = .000, R^2 = .329, \text{adj } R^2 = .314$. Of the predictor variables, only stress was significant, $\beta = .579, (SE = .026), t(141) = 7.895, p = .000$. Thus, an increase in stress was associated with a higher use of the UI meta-emotion approach. Also, the interaction between outside support and parental stress (SSQ x PSS), was not significant, $\beta = .069 (SE = .035), t(141) = .954, p = .342$. The table below presents the results of this analysis.

Predicting the Feelings of Uncertainty/Ineffectiveness in Emotion Socialization (UI) Meta-Emotion Approach from Parental Stress, Outside Support, and Education Levels with Interaction

| Predictor | Unstandardized | | Standardized | | t | p |
|-----------------------|----------------|------|--------------|--|-------|------|
| | b | SE | β | | | |
| SSQ (Outside Support) | .229 | .356 | .047 | | .645 | .520 |
| PSS (Stress) | .205 | .026 | .579 | | 7.895 | .000 |
| Education | .127 | .143 | .062 | | .891 | .374 |
| SSQ x PSS | .033 | .035 | .069 | | .954 | .342 |

7. Implications for Families

As the study found, high parental stress levels were associated with meta-emotion approaches that aligned with less guidance parents offered to their children about their emotional expressions. When considering the role of parental stress and its association with meta-emotion approaches parents adopt, its important to discuss how these factors affect children’s development.

7.1. Environmental Factors and Emotion Socialization

Previous research has found that high stress levels within children’s environment may negatively impact their overall social and emotional development (Lenroot & Giedd, 2006). For instance, high levels of stress that children are exposed to within their surroundings have been found to be related to possibility of acquiring pathology and mental disorders (Lenroot & Giedd, 2006). More specifically, the first few years of life are essential for creating young children’s brain architecture (Gerhardt, 2015). Therefore, consistent, affectionate, and emotionally regulated child care from parents are essential for children’s future functioning of social competence and emotion regulation abilities. Research has found that children living within households with high levels of stress, such as parents arguing or unpredictable child care are related with elevated levels of cortisol in young children’s brains, which have been associated with aggressive behaviors as they mature (Gerhardt, 2015).

Young children, particularly those who are three years of age and younger are a focus for researchers that focus on children’s brain development (Gerhardt, 2015; Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2016). If young children under the age of three years are exposed to heightened amounts of stress within their environments, studies have found that neural connections in their prefrontal cortex do not grow, as compared to young children who do not have the exposure to high stress levels in their households. Implications for children living within homes filled with high stress levels are quite significant, as studies have found that they generally have less brain volume than children residing in low stress homes (Gerhardt, 2015).

Therefore, the findings from this study has significant implications for families as a whole, in terms of their roles and how they may influence children’s brain anatomy as well as social and emotional development. As previous research has indicated, the types of meta-emotion approaches parents adopt may influence children’s

emotion regulation abilities and social competence skills (Lunkenheimer & Cortina, 2007; Wilson et al., 2012). For instance, parents' responses to their children's emotional expressions are directly associated with how they socialize their children's emotions. If children are not provided with guidance about negative behaviors they express, they may not learn the proper steps to regulate their emotions. In turn, this may negatively hinder their relationships with others as they mature. An example of positively guiding children's behaviors includes parents who teach children how to express their emotions orally, rather than exhibiting physical aggression towards other children.

Children may be taught about the concepts and definitions behind emotions and what they resemble by using their parents as guides. Parents who express how they are feeling, using specific emotions as labels may assist their children with learning the association between the emotion and its expression. In turn, children may be able to use language to represent how they are feeling. Children also refer to their parents as a reference when learning to control their emotions. If children see their parents regulating their own emotions, without acting out aggressively or impulsively, then children will learn gain a building block towards understanding the techniques associated with emotion regulation.

8. Conclusions

The study investigated the associations between parental stress, outside support, and education levels in terms of whether these variables influenced parents' meta-emotion approaches. The number of children in the family, child's age, and child's gender were also variables in the study. Results found that high parental stress levels were associated with dismissing, disapproving, and laissez-faire meta-emotion approaches. Conversely, low parental stress levels were associated with an emotion coaching meta-emotion approach.

These findings have significant implications for the field of family studies. Specifically, parental stress levels and meta-emotion approaches are associated with children's emotion regulation and overall emotion socialization skills (Wilson et al., 2012). Children reared in households with high parental stress may generally fair worse, due to heightened cortisol levels in the brain, which have been found to be related with later aggressive behaviors (Gerhardt, 2015).

However, children raised by parents who are consistent, compassionate, and provide guidance to their children when needed have been found to do better, in terms of social competence abilities. Parents can assist their children with learning emotion regulation skills by modeling what various emotional expressions resemble. Children tend to be greatly influenced by what they witness within their environments. In turn, implications for the role of families is quite large for the future of children's emotion socialization abilities (Gerhardt, 2015).

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