EXPRESSIVE BEHAVIOR OF JAPANESE MOTHERS IN RESPONSE TO THEIR 5-MONTH-OLD INFANTS' NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE EMOTION EXPRESSION

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This study presents descriptive data on Japanese mother-infant emotional communication in the home. It is the first phase of a longitudinal, cross-cultural study of socialization of emotion. Twelve Japanese mothers and their 5-month-old infants were randomly chosen from a longitudinal sample of 44 in order to develop a coding system. Analysis was carried by replaying the video and coding spontaneous emotional expressions of mothers and infants at home. For this report, both infants and mothers' hedonic tones were analyzed.

Main findings were as follows: Mothers seldom respond negatively to their infants' negative emotion. By contrast, mothers tend to encourage and sustain infants' positive emotion by expressing clearly positive or playful affect. Percentage of mothers' non-response to each of infants' emotion expression varies: Lower percentage of infants' intense (cry) or clear (smile, laugh) expression tended to meet mothers' non-response than infants' slightly negative or slightly positive expression.

Key words: mother-infant emotional communication; negative and positive emotion expression

Introduction
Izard and Malatesta (1987) reviewed several cross-cultural studies and pointed out the cultural specificity of emotion socialization and the developmental role of very early instruction in emotion expression regulation. Caudill and Weinstein (1969) found that American mothers stimulated their infants more and their speech to the infants appeared
to be directed at reinforcing the happy vocalization, while Japanese mothers' speech to
their infants usually occurred in order to soothe them and put down their unhappy
vocalization. Dixon et al. (1981) mentioned that early parent-infant relationships among
the Gusii of Kenya were characterized by avoidance of eye-to-eye contact and restraint in
playful interactions. The Gusii believe the "evil eye," therefore they avert gaze and use
bland countenance in interpersonal relationships. These findings suggest that cultural
differences in socialization might be implicitly influenced by belief system each culture has
to produce different styles of expression regulation.

The purpose of this study is to present descriptive data on Japanese mother-infant
emotional communication in the home. It is the first phase of a longitudinal, cross­
cultural (Japan-US) study of socialization of emotion, focusing on how infants' regula­
tion of their expression is enculturated through the mother's behavior. In order to
understand this process, it is necessary to gather data on maternal responses to different
types of infant expressions and on the nature of the emotion expressions mothers display
to their infants in the home.

Method
Subjects

Twelve mothers and their 5-month-old infants were randomly selected from a
longitudinal sample of 44 (Table 1). They were participants in a Japan-US comparative
study of infant emotional socialization.

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<td>11</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
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Procedure

(1) Home observation of mother-infant emotional communication at 5 months of age

A total 90 minutes of spontaneous mother-infant communication in the home was
videotaped using 2 cameras, one focusing on each partner. Each mother was instructed
to behave as usual and to try to reduce their anxiety about being observed. The two
camera operators and one observer made every effort not to interfere with the mother and
infant's ongoing flow of behavior.

(2) Coding system for describing maternal and infant emotion expression

For this analysis, 30 seconds of every 2 and a half minutes were coded. The digital
timer images superimposed on the tapes were used. Categories used for infants' facial
and vocal expressions were as follows: (1) intense negative (e.g. intense cry), (2)
negative (e.g. fuss, cry, or negative vocalization), (3) slightly negative, (4) clearly
positive (e.g. clear smile, or laugh), (5) slightly positive or neutral. Both the antecedent events and the mother’s expressive and instrumental responses were recorded. Maternal expressions were rated for hedonic tones (negative, slightly negative, neutral, positive, and clearly positive) and quality (as playful, stimulating, or soft when relevant). These coding systems were tentatively developed by consulting Izard’s MAX (1983) and Scherer’s research on vocal expression (1982).

Three coders independently coded both the maternal and infant facial or vocal expression. With regard to disagreements, final decision was made after thorough examination and discussion among the coders.

Results and Discussions

(1) Mothers’ different hedonic tones in response to their infants’ negative or positive emotion

Mothers’ types of response to infants’ negative, slightly positive/neutral, or positive emotion expression were illustrated in Figure 1. Primary findings were as follows: Mothers almost never display negative affect to their 5-month-old infants except occasional empathic mock sad signals. When infants showed positive expressions, mothers tended to respond with the same expression with slight exaggeration. This was not true when infant expressions were negative.

FIGURE 1 Japanese mothers’ emotional expression in response to their 5-month-old infants’ emotion expression.

(2) Mothers’ non-response to infants’ negative expression

The percentages of mothers’ non-response to infants’ negative vocalization and/or negative facial expressions and intense cry were lower than when infants showed other negative expressions (Figure 2). Low frequency of the infants’ intense negative expression may cause higher percentage of mothers’ non-response to them.
FIGURE 2  Japanese mothers' non-response to their infants' negative expressions. The numbers on the graph indicate the percentage of mothers' non-response to each of infants' negative expression.

(3) Mothers' non-response to infants' positive expression
As shown in Figure 3, the percentages of mothers' non-response to infants' interest (face) and slightly positive expressions (face and/or vocal) were higher than to infants' positive expressions (smile or laugh).

FIGURE 3  Japanese mothers' non-response to their infants' positive expressions. The numbers on the graph indicate the percentage of mothers' non-response to each of infants positive expression.

This suggests that mothers of 5 month-olds may tend to express clearly positive emotion in responding to their infants' positive emotion expression in order to encourage or sustain their infants' pleasantness. They seldom show negative emotion expression to any infants' negative signal, although they show some sad/sympathetic responses to
infants’ distress, a finding consistent with reports from more structured observations. Rather than matching infant negativity, they displayed neutral or slight (but not intense) positive emotions to their infants’ negative emotion as they played the role of modulator of their infants’ negative emotion. As these findings were based on a small sample, we must examine the validity of the coding system adopted with larger sample and comparing samples from other societies.

References


