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Title	EMOTION COMMUNICATION OF JAPANESE MOTHERS AND THEIR INFANTS
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Citation	乳幼児発達臨床センター年報, 21, 27-34
Issue Date	1999-03
Doc URL	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/2115/25336">https://hdl.handle.net/2115/25336</a>
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	21_P27-34.pdf



## EMOTION COMMUNICATION OF JAPANESE MOTHERS AND THEIR INFANTS

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### Abstract

As part of an observation in a longitudinal project, 42 pairs of mothers and their 10 months infants were observed in a separation episode. Mother's 1) actions 2) utterances 3) degree of affect attunement to the infant, and the infant's 1) degree of distress during a 30 second separation, and 2) upon reunion were coded and analyzed. The main results were: 1) Fifty percent of the infants showed intense distress during separation; among them 33.3% remained in intense to medium distress after reunion, while 66.7% of them showed no distress at all, 2) Four categories of utterances by the mothers upon reunion were observed in response to infant distress: labeling infant feeling, apologizing and excusing, assuring and/or soothing, and distracting by asking questions, 3) Sixty-eight point eight percent of the mothers of infants observed with some degree of distress showed affect attunement, 4) Twelve mothers (28.6%) made apologies and/or excuses to their infants who showed some degrees of distress, 5) Eight of the nine mothers (88.8%) who made apologies and/or excuse showed medium to high degrees of affect attunement during reunion. Mothers' response by apologies and/or excuses was contrasted with strategies used by Western mothers.

**Key Words:** Emotion regulation, affect attunement, Japanese infants, separation episode, *amae*

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of emotion regulation is becoming increasingly important in recent research in emotion development. It is also becoming an indispensable concept in temperament literature (e.g. Rothbart et al., 1992). Different researchers have slightly different conceptualizations. One author for example, has defined it as '...the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features to accomplish one's goals.' (Thompson, 1994: 27-28).

One of the issues in the research of emotion regulation concerns with individual differences. The individual differences in emotion regulation during early infancy were reported to predict later sociability (e.g. Eisenberg et al., 1997). Calkins has suggested

two sources of these individual differences in children's emotion regulation ability. The internal source refers to the neuro-regulatory systems, behavioral traits, cognitive components, etc., of the child. The external source refers to interactive caregiving styles of the child's caregiver, including responsivity, reciprocity, support, neglect, etc. of the caregiver. The latter also includes explicit training in the child's socialization, such as modeling, reinforcement and discipline. A whole range of individual differences in emotion regulation are considered to arise from the interaction of these external and internal sources.

However, during early infancy, the characteristics of the caregiver are considered an important aspect of the external sources of individual differences in emotion regulation in the child. The development of infant's emotion regulation can be characterized as revealing three trends (Walden & Smith, 1997, pp. 18-21). The first is a developmental trend from a predominance of strategies requiring caregiver participation to less reliance on the caregiver and a more enlarged repertoire of intraindividual strategies. The second trend concerns mostly with the addition of mentalistic strategies to the repertoire of concrete, behavioral strategies characteristic of the earlier period. The third trend is the occurrence of an increase in capability in emotion regulation and changes in characteristics in the speed and intensity during infancy. During the first few years, the mode of regulation shifts from the mode of dyadic regulation to the mode of self-regulation (Sroufe, 1996, p. 192).

According to Gianino and Tronick (1988), there are two classes of regulation behaviors, namely, the self-directed behaviors and the other-oriented behaviors. The former refers to gaze aversion, or self-soothing behaviors such as thumb-sucking. The latter refers to the reading of messages in infant's expressions, and behaviors serving to facilitate the goal-directed behaviors of the infant, including both the infant's own spontaneous behaviors as well as the infant's behaviors resulting from caregiver's supportive and reciprocated behaviors.

Because of the relatively primitive stage of the very young infant's regulatory function, mother-infant interaction is dominated by the mother's modulating behaviors. When the infant's own capacity becomes more developed, the role played by the caregiver decreases, enabling the infant to shift to an intraindividual strategy. The regulatory strategy of the caregiver is a direct frame, or scaffolding, for the infant's emotion regulation and, later when internalized by the infant, becomes the infant's own emotion regulation strategy (Lyons-Ruth & Zeanah, Jr., 1993; Walden & Smith, 1997).

From a communication, interactional point of view, it is clear how important a role the caregiver's regulation strategy plays in the current and later development of an infant's emotion regulation capability. However, the dominant approach in understanding the caregiver's characteristics in this respect has emphasized the concept of maternal sensitivity. According to this view, a sensitive caregiver is one who reads correctly an infant's emotion expressions, and responds appropriately. Although the emotion expressions of the newborn infant can be considered as arising mainly from biological, physiological sources that are universal, the caregiver's response, or her strategy, is inevitably shaped by, and based on, cultural practices of the caregiver's specific culture. In other words, through interacting with the caregiver from the very first days, the young infant's emotion

expressions are guided by, and then assumes the form of, the culture where the emotion communication takes place.

One of the reasons for this topic of emotion regulation to attract great attention from researchers is the recognition of the importance of social context in regulation (Thompson, 1994, p. 26). From a cross-cultural point of view, the emotion communication between the caregiver and the infant should be examined by taking the cultural perspective into consideration. However, current views concerning caregiver behavior have been limited and mainly advocated by Western researchers. It has been pointed out that dyadic relations between infant and the mother in Japan display some characteristics very different from that in Western societies, such as the U. S. (Ujiie, 1998; Chen & Miyake, 1986; Miyake et al., 1986). However, very few reports on cultural characteristics of the Japanese caregiver's emotion regulation can be found. The main objectives of this paper are to provide a description of the Japanese caregivers' behaviors as they engage in emotion regulation with their young children, and to examine the characteristics of their regulatory strategy.

As mentioned above, the characteristics of the characteristics caregiver that influence children's emotion regulation can be divided into two classes; the interactional characteristics and explicit training. In this paper, we focus on the degree to which the caregiver regulates the infant's emotion, direct soothing behavior and behavioral characteristics of the caregiver during mother-child interaction.

## METHOD

### *Subject*

Forty-two infant-mother pairs (21 boys and 21 girls) participated in a longitudinal project on emotion development and are the subjects of this report. The average age of the infants was 10.0 months (ranging from 9 months to 11 months), and that of the mothers was 28.9 years (ranging from 22 to 44 years). Three infants were born with Caesarean section, one was born with the birthweight of 2500g and had asphyxia, one was delivered by Caesarean section and was hospitalized for 14 days. All the other 37 infants were normally developing and without any particular abnormality recorded at birth.

### *Procedure*

The mother-infant pair was led into an observation room which was arranged and decorated as an ordinary sitting room at home. Each pair was asked to play with the toys prepared by the experimenter to warm-up for subsequent observations. After a series of episodes designed to elicit infant emotional expressions such as fear (Gozira, Stranger Approach), anger (withdrawal, and hiding of favored toy), surprise (Jack-in-the-box), and pleasure (peek-a-boo) were observed, a short separation episode was introduced when the mother stopped play, said good-bye to her child and left the infant alone in the room. The mother was completely out of the infant's sight for 30 seconds, and then returned to the infant. This separation session was video-recorded.

### *Coding*

Two coders well-trained in infant observation methodology carried out the analyses

of the video-recordings. The items that were coded are as follows:

Infant behaviors:

- 1) intensity of distress during separation and reunion (high, medium, and none).

Mother behaviors:

- 1) Detailed descriptions of mother's actions and vocalizations in the reunion,
- 2) The degree of mother's affect attunement (high, medium, and none), following Stern's conceptualization (Stern, 1984, pp. 3-12).

## RESULTS

### *Intensity of Infant's Distress*

Twenty-one infants (50%) showed high intensity of distress during separation. During reunion, two of these 21 infants (9.5%) showed high intensity of distress, five (23.8%) showed medium distress and fourteen (66.7%) showed no distress. Seven infants (16.7%) showed medium degree of distress during reunion, and one of them showed increased degree of distress after reunion. Fourteen infants (33.3%) did not show distress during separation, but one of them showed medium degree of distress after reunion.

### *Maternal Verbal Expression*

Four categories of maternal verbal expressions were observed:

- 1) Labeling infant's current feeling or emotion expression. Saying things such as,
  - 'Sabisi katta no' (Were you lonely?),
  - 'Kowakattano' (Was it frighten?),
  - 'Okottano' (Were you angry with me?),
  - 'Bikkurisitano' (Were you surprised/Frightened?),
  - 'Kanasikattano' (Were you sad?),
  - 'Iyadattano' (Did you not like it?), or
  - 'Naitetano' (Were you cry?).
- 2) Apologizing, and/or excusing oneself. Saying things like,
  - 'Gommenne' (Sorry),
  - 'Warukattane' (It's my fault),
  - 'Toire ni ittetano' (I had gone to the bathroom).
- 3) Soothing the infant by assuring him/her, saying
  - 'Daijobu' (It's all right),
  - 'Nakanaiyo' (Don't cry),
  - 'Yoshiyoshi' (It's all right),
- 4) Distracting by asking question, saying
  - 'Doshitano' (What's the matter?)

### *Mother's Affective Attunement*

Seven mothers (16.7%) were observed to show high degrees of affective attunement to their child's emotion expressions upon reunion. These accounted for 33.3% of mothers whose infants (21 of them, 10 boys and 11 girls) showed high degree of distress during separation. Twelve mothers (28.6%) showed medium degree of affective attunement. Of the mothers whose infants showed some degrees of distress during separation, 67.8%

showed some degree of affective attunement.

### *Mother's Apologizing*

Previous studies have pointed out strategies used by mothers in the face of their infants' distress or negative emotion expressions; however, little attention has been paid to the mother's behavior of apologizing under the circumstance. This is not a uniquely Japanese behavior style; indeed, it is widely seen in many Majority World (Kagitcibasi, 1996, p. 3). However, as it represents a strategy different from that typically found in Western societies, what we describe here should be of comparative interest.

Nine mothers were observed to vocalize 'apologies' and three to vocalize 'excuses' upon returning to their crying or fussing infants. No such vocalization was observed when the infants did not cry and/or fuss during separation. Furthermore, mothers who apologized and/or excused themselves showed more affect attunement (Fisher exact test,  $p = .002$ ; see Table 1). Of the 23 mothers who did not show affect attunement, only one did apologize or excuse upon reunion, whereas 47.3% of the affect attuning mothers made apologies and/or excuses upon reunion. Eight of the nine mothers (88.8%) who made apologies and/or excuse showed medium to high degrees of affect attunement during reunion.

However, maternal affect attunement, apologies and/or excuses did not appear to be related with the infants' degree of distress during separation. That is to say, that there was no significant relationship between infants' effectiveness of emotion regulation and mothers' affect attunement.

Table 1 Maternal Affect Attunement and Apologies/Excuses  
(number of person)

		Apologies and/or Excuses		
		YES	NO	Total
Affect Attunement	YES	10	9	19
	NO	2	21	23
Total		12	30	42

### *Mother's Behavior*

No particularly unexpected behaviors of the mothers were observed apart from pick up their infants, show toys to their infants.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Mother behaviors can be categorized into 4 groups, namely, "labeling child's feeling", "apologizing and/or excusing", "soothing", and "distracting by asking question".

2. Among mother behaviors, the one used most often in Japan is mother's label infants' feeling, followed by mothers' apologies and/or excuses to child. This is related to mother's affect attunement, and the child's condition before engaging in emotion regulation with the mother. However, mother's affect attunement does not necessarily lead to

cessation of infant's distress. In other words, the presence of attunement itself does not guarantee immediate effectiveness in subsequent emotion regulation of the infant.

First of all, let us consider mothers' behaviors and utterances other than 'apologies and/or excuses'. Labeling infant's feelings, and asking the reason for those feelings can be considered typical examples of explicit training mentioned above. In discussing the importance of meta-emotion (referring to parents' emotions about their own and their children's emotions, and meta-emotion philosophy) for the children's long-term psychological adjustment, Gottman, et al. (1996) argued for the necessity for parents' to have an emotion-coaching meta-emotion philosophy which enables parents to be aware of their own and their children's emotion, as well as to coach their children especially when they are experiencing negative emotions such as anger and sadness. Accord to Gottman, et al. an emotion-coaching philosophy has five components: parents (a) said that they were aware of low intensity emotions in themselves and in their children; (b) viewed the child's negative emotion as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching; (c) validated their child's emotion; (d) assisted the child in verbally labeling the child's emotions; and (e) problem solved with the child, setting behavioral limits, and discussing goals and strategies for dealing with the situation that led to the negative emotion (Gottman, et al., 1996, p. 244). In addition, emotion-coaching is believed to facilitate development of the child's basic ability in soothing one's self physiologically and in focusing attention implying positive effects on the child's parasympathetic regulation (Gottman et al., 1996, p. 247). We want to point out that although this emphasis on viewing emotion cognitively and objectively is more characteristic of a Western approach to emotion, the fact that many Japanese mothers also label their children's feelings, and that they sometimes ask their crying preverbal infants, 'What happened to you?' as though they assumed the young children to be able to recognize their own emotion states, suggests feeling labeling and facilitating awareness of one's own emotion are strategies that are universal. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that, instead of a more direct soothing strategy (saying 'Don't cry'), many Japanese mothers adopt a less direct strategy of labeling their children's feeling when the children are in distress.

However, the mothers labeled their children's feeling in a wide variety of ways, not only for such negative emotions as *sadness*, *fear*, *anger* and *distress*, but for *surprise* as well. The maternal individual differences in feeling labeling seem to reflect mothers' cognition and interpretation of their children's emotion states. These differences would probably have some influence on the development of the dyadic relation and on emotion development of their children. In this study, individual differences were found in the kinds of emotions expressed by the children in response to separation. Future research will be needed to further investigate the connections of these differences.

Since maternal expressions of apologies and/or excuses upon reunion have not been reported previously, it is assumed that they are phenomena not often observed in Western societies. However, these are responses readily observable and understood in Japan. This and other observations have led the second author to assume the existence of an adult attitude in Japan toward children, especially children in distress, expressed as 'loneliness-prone' (Chen, 1996, pp. 121-123). In this study, only mothers whose children showed distress during separation were observed to make apologies and/or excuses for

oneself, in spite of the fact that all mothers left their children alone and made them feel anxious. It follows that it is not this behavior of leaving the child that led to their apologies and/or excuses, but the fact that their children were in distress due to their absence.

In addition, the above results showed that the mothers' apologies and/or excuses were related to maternal affect attunement. Mothers who apologized to their children upon reunion, were observed to repeat their apologies with utterances such as "Hai, hai, gomen nei, gomen nei, oh, oh" (Yes, yes. Oh, I'm so-sorry, so-sorry. Well, well), with a tone of voice encouraging crying or fussing infants to continue their current expressions and to welcome and endorse their dependent attitude for the time being; it appears almost as though mothers took efforts in maintaining the infants' current expressions so that they could join their infants' misery. This style of the mothers' emotion expression reminds one of the affect state of 'amae' in which one behaves emotionally, relying on the assumed unlimitedness of another's love. Amai is defined as an emotion state that arises when union with the other is totally accepted (Doi, 1991). The mothers' apologies seem to suggest that through uttering their apologies in such a tone of voice, the mothers were seeking understanding and forgiveness and appealed for a return to the previous undisturbed state before the separation.

Both affect attunement and 'amae' arise almost unconsciously (Stern, 1985; Doi, 1991), and are very different from the tendency to objectify and to interpret one's and the children's emotions, a tendency is said to be characteristic of emotion communication in many Western societies. The emotion regulation strategies of Japanese mothers seem to include elements that are quite different from that found in Western research. It is difficult to think that these strategies would have no effect on the emotion regulation of their children. Emde (1992) suggests that emotional experiences including that of 'amae' are stored as a part of procedural knowledge and will exert their influence later without becoming conscious. The mothers' emotion regulation strategies described in this paper, and the infants' emotion experiences shaped and regulated by these strategies will also influence children's emotion development in the future.

Finally, in this study, no significant relation between mothers' affect attunement strategy and its effectiveness on the actual emotion regulation of the infants were found. Future research is needed to take into consideration the characteristics of the children's emotions and the dyadic attachment relationship.

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