Using Functionalist and Sociocultural Theory to Examine Coregulation of Distress in Mother-Child Interaction

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Abstract

The literature on child development and childhood settings has identified emotion regulation, or the ability to modulate emotions to engage with the environment, as a topic of interest to parents and educators. Nonetheless, there continue to be wide variations in the assumptions about and approaches to understanding the topic. Research about emotion regulation has either focused on the intrapersonal dimensions of such modulation or enveloped interpersonal factors within coping or attachment models. This paper provides an overview of theoretical and empirical approaches previously used to understand emotion regulation then explores the usefulness of considering functionalist and sociocultural approaches by reinterpreting previously published findings from this new perspective (Tonyan, 2005a, 2005b). The key features of the two approaches are a focus on the activities in which emotions are regulated, the meaning and goals of regulation, and rethinking assumptions about time. In addition, the concept of guided participation from a sociocultural approach focuses analysis on the ways in which communication and coordination around distress are likely to vary across cultural communities.

Key Words: Emotional development, sociocultural theory, interaction

Introduction

Imagine a typical morning for Carla, a two-year-old attending preschool. She attempts to listen to her favourite book being read in the circle although she is feeling sad because she has just said goodbye to her father. By the time she goes to the outdoor play area, Carla feels better. But then her friend, Latisha, whizzes by on her tricycle and accidentally slams into her. Carla stands on the playground, overwhelmed by her emotions.

The ability to modulate emotions to engage the environment in an emotionally challenging situation, what researchers call emotion regulation or emotion-related...
coping, underlies countless everyday experiences. In early childhood centre settings around the world young children encounter their first social interactions outside their nuclear families. Children face many challenges to their emotion-related regulatory capability as they adapt to new settings and as they learn to relate their own experiences to larger circles of “social others”. The ways in which they adapt will vary across cultural communities. What Carla does with her emotions can make a big difference in her day and in the experience for everyone present at the early childhood centre setting. Children who have not learned to regulate emotions, may become too overwhelmed to engage with friends, teachers or in activities and may develop behavioural problems which mask their emotion regulation difficulties.

What is Emotion Regulation?

Psychologists from many different theoretical frameworks have for a long time been interested in understanding the intersection of affect, behaviour, and communication (Greenberg, Kusche, & Speltz, 1991) and have studied these systems which converge within the construct of emotion regulation. As a result, researchers define emotion regulation in many ways (Thompson, 1994), but themes do emerge from the variety of definitions. Emotion regulation involves: (a) multiple systems, including autonomic responses, affective experience and expression, cognition, and communication; (b) interpersonal and intrapsychic components, but is fundamentally social; (c) a temporal process; and (d) individual tendencies and contextual influences (Tonyan, 2001).

A previous review of the literature, identified three main approaches to understanding emotion regulation (Tonyan, 2001). One approach, characterised as temperamental-coping, sees emotion regulation as individual differences, closely related to temperament and personality that identify innate or inborn tendencies to emotionally respond to others and to situations in particular ways. Eisenberg and her colleagues, among many others, have generated a great deal of evidence following this approach (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2001; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1999; Eisenberg et al., 1997). This research measures the degree to which children’s responses to the environment involve negative emotions, or negative emotionality. Children high in negative emotionality, respond with intense negative emotions. Individual difference in the kinds of strategies they use are seen as more significant for some children than for others, particularly in their relations with others. Some researchers in this vein, including Eisenberg and her colleagues as well as Shields and Cicchetti (1997) used surveys completed by parents or teachers to measure individual differences whereas others have used complex physiological measures and/or behavioural measures (e.g., Calkins, Smith, Gill, & Johnson, 1998). This research identifies strategies that are more adaptive than others. For example, cognitive restructuring, that is, thinking about the problem in a more positive way, is often considered more adaptive than distraction/avoidance (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 1993).

Considering Carla’s episode, the temperamental-coping approach would focus on Carla’s temperamental disposition that is mediated by the coping strategies she has learned to use in such situations. This approach would suggest to parents and practitioners that they investigate how Carla tends to respond to emotional situations —
if she tends to respond in relatively mild ways, she might be able to wait, take a deep
breath and join her friends playing. If she tends to respond intensely to emotional
situations, she may need help learning strategies to cope – a supportive adult might
notice her standing there and suggest that she take a deep breath or find something she
really enjoys doing.

The second or situational approach focuses on the kinds of strategies that young
children use in emotionally salient situations, such as frustrating or mild fear-inducing
situations reproduced in laboratories (e.g., Bridges & Connell, 1991; Parritz, 1996).
According to this approach, the strategies children use depend on their capabilities and
the contexts in which they find themselves. Such approaches often assume that children
start out with few abilities for self-regulation and develop toward increasing self-
regulation (for a review see Kopp, 1989). For example, when mothers are kept
distracted, toddlers engage in more self-soothing strategies, but when mothers are free
to interact, toddlers turn to mothers for comfort (Grolnick, Bridges, & Connell, 1996).
In laboratory settings, researchers have been able to show that children shift from a
relative inability to soothe themselves to increasing abilities to distract themselves by
engaging in an alternative activity (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004). Looking at Carla’s
episode from a situational view, it would be noted that Carla’s father has just left, but
that the teacher is nearby and suggests Carla’s favourite game, which she begins and is
soon busily engaged.

A third, relational approach considers emotion regulation as part of early co-regulation,
within the context of an attachment relationship (for a more detailed review, see
Tonyan, 2001). This approach fundamentally argues that during infancy and early
childhood children, on their own, are incapable of effectively maintaining emotional
and physical homeostasis. Early experiences in which emotions become overwhelming
provide the contexts in which children learn from others to establish expectations and
learn strategies they carry forward into future interactions and relationships (Cicchetti,
Cummins, Greenberg, & Marvin, 1990). Some attachment theorists suggest that
effective emotion regulation is a part of a secure attachment relationship (Sroufe, 1995).
Others suggest that emotion regulation is part of a strategy children use to maintain their
attachment relationship (Cassidy, 1994). Both however suggest that emotion regulation
strategies children use depend on the quality of their relationships with caregivers. A
traditional relational perspective might lead parents and practitioners to pay attention to
Carla’s relationship history and expectations: because her father has often helped her
cope with similar bumps and bruises, she knows on some level that emotions are
manageable and that she will soon be ready to play. Alternatively, those who have used
attachment theory to understand caregiver-child relationships in early childhood settings
(see for example Howes, 1999) would notice the quality of the relationship Carla has
with her teacher because she may seek comfort or help to manage her emotions when
she feels overwhelmed.

What is a Functionalist Approach to Emotion Regulation?

Human beings encounter problems, find solutions to problems, or side-step
problems in the course of their adaptation to social and non-social demands
of the world in which they live. These encounters constitute the ‘setting events’ for the generation of emotion and emotion regulation, positive and negative. Emotion and emotion regulation centre on dealing with the problems of existence and of adaptation to the reconstructed past, the attributed present, and the predicted future (Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004, p.379).

The three approaches described above suggest that the ways in which children respond to and cope with the emotional ups and downs of their lives affect their relations with others. These approaches, however, do not adequately deal with the complexity of emotion and emotion regulation as described in the above quotation (also see Cole et al., 2004). Emotion theories have traditionally focused on intrapersonal aspects of emotion, like feeling states or facial expression, as central to and adequate for understanding emotion (Barrett & Campos, 1987). Correspondingly, approaches to emotion regulation have commonly assumed a two-phase process in which discrete emotions are first felt and then regulated (Campos et al., 2004). The two-phase assumption in the temperamental-coping view makes a distinction between negative emotionality and coping. The situational view focuses on the coping strategies, or the response to the felt emotion. In the relational view the child’s feelings depend on their relationship history. For example, a child who has experienced inconsistent responses to their distress on separation may experience intense fear and have less effective strategies for modulating that fear.

Functionalist theory posits that emotions are fundamentally interpersonal. The ways emotions are expressed have direct impact on the both the physical and social environment, which may lead to changes in self and/or others (Barrett & Campos, 1987). Similarly, emotion regulation in this framework is considered to be an ongoing process. Writers in this tradition explicitly reject the two-phase notion of regulation and present alternative working definitions of emotion and emotion regulation (Campos et al., 2004):

- Emotion is the process of registering the significance of a physical or mental event, as [how] the individual construes the significance (perceived insult, threat to life, deprecation by another, relinquishment of a desired state, avoidance or resolution of a problem, etc.) determines the quality of the emotion. The degree of perceived significance determines the magnitude of the emotional response, as well as its urgency.

- Emotion regulation is the modification of any process in the system that generates emotion or its manifestation in behaviour … Regulation takes place at all levels of the emotion process, at all times the emotion is activated, and is evident even before an emotion is manifested (pp.379-380).

Importantly, these working definitions and the underlying assumptions described in the above quote highlight at least two relevant aspects of emotion regulation needed to
examine emotion regulation as an interpersonal process. First, emotion regulation is squarely situated in a ‘setting event’ of a ‘problem’ not abstracted abilities that can be summed up across contexts. The meaning of a particular behaviour must be considered relative to individuals’ perceptions of the ‘problem’ and relative to the social world in which they live. One example of research based on this approach (Tonyan, 2005b) examined the qualities of interaction at the episode level. Fifty mother-infant dyads were videotaped for 30 minutes in their homes when the children were 14 months of age and again when they were 24 months of age. The mother-infant interactions were segmented into episodes using a rating scale of distress vocalisations and were then coded within each episode.

Episodes began with an event that triggered or preceded distress and ended when the child was able to engage with the environment without signalling distress. The particular form of the behaviour, for example venting or comfort-seeking, did not matter as much as the relation between the behaviour and the setting, or how the behaviour related to the unfolding events (Tonyan, 2005b).

Second, this approach includes past, present, and future in the interaction. Attachment theory suggests one mechanism for the ways in which relationship history plays out in mother-infant interaction: expectations and interpretations within a particular interaction are based on a history of interactions (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986), what attachment theorists call an internal working model (Bretherton, 1985). In the above-described research, the quality of information that children signalled to their mothers around distress varied over time with their history of interaction. Children communicated more information to their mothers at twenty-four months when their mothers had previously responded to their distress at fourteen months (Tonyan, 2001, 2005b). In that sense, the past is present within an observed moment.

In sum, the functionalist approach suggests that in order to understand emotion and emotion regulation, the ‘setting event’ in which the processes take place, the significance of the type of event, and the degree of significance as perceived by the individual must be considered. This approach accounts for the complex factors that need to be understood or appraised as they are modified according to individuals’ perceptions of the situation relative to past, present, and future. Revisiting Carla, a functionalist approach would consider the significance of the events for Carla. For example, saying goodbye to her father would be more significant if her dad has been away for two weeks, or getting knocked by a friend on a tricycle might be less significant if Latisha invited her to ride the trike with her. A functionalist gathers evidence that allows interpretation of the whole event, of the history that can be inferred or discovered, of the sequence of events and the ways in which they relate.

What can Sociocultural Theory Add to Our Understanding of Emotion Regulation?

There are aspects of functionalist approaches to emotion and emotion regulation that are quite similar to and compatible with sociocultural or cultural-historical approaches to development. Functionalist approaches focus on the ‘setting event,’ and sociocultural
approaches suggest that interpretations must consider an activity as a whole rather than its separate components (e.g., Rogoff, 1995; Rogoff, 2003). Campos and colleagues (2004) pay attention to the past, present, and future similar to a sociocultural focus on the cultural, institutional, and historical context of activities and look for relations across time rather than separating time into distinct categories or “influences” (Rogoff, 1995; Rogoff, 2003). Nonetheless, there are at least two ways in which Rogoff’s (2003) articulation of a sociocultural approach to human development complements the functionalist approach to emotion regulation.

First, a sociocultural tradition situates human development in activities valued within communities, but articulates a process through which individuals are guided by more expert others, called guided participation (Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993; Rogoff et al., in press). Guided participation involves mutual bridging of meanings as adult and child try to understand and to mutually structure the participation of the other as the interaction unfolds. In order to understand interaction in the context of emotionally challenging episodes, Tonyan (2001; 2005b) described the degree to which the child communicated information about the cause and/or desired intervention, called ‘clarity’, and the degree to which the mother responded to the child during the distress episodes. This measure was originally coded as ‘concordance’ and was eventually summed into a composite of ‘supportiveness’. To reinterpret that earlier work in light of guided participation, the dimensions of ‘clarity’ and ‘concordance’ reflect the process of mutual bridging of meanings. Similarly, mutual structuring of participation was examined in terms of contributions to the episode resolutions, that is the degree to which the mother and child contributed to the resolution of the distress as well as the degree to which they co-ordinated their efforts toward resolution (Tonyan, 2001, 2005a). As suggested by Rogoff’s (1993) conceptualisation of the universal aspects of guided participation, most of the mother-child dyads did communicate information to each other around the distress, mutual bridging of meaning, and did mutually structure their participation to co-ordinate their interactions. To reinterpret the above-described research within a guided participation framework provides direction for future research into the various forms and structures of interactions around distress across cultural communities. For example, future research could examine verbal versus non-verbal communication, the ways adults and children pace the interactions, including whether the mother waits responsively for signs of recovery or actively cues the baby with possible strategies, whether the child ‘takes the lead’ or waits for and responds to the mothers’ suggestions.

Second, Rogoff’s (2003) focus on the transformation of participation considers the ways in which participation in activities valued in communities change over time. Individuals begin to participate in new activities in a peripheral or observer role, and then shift to assuming increased responsibility over time. Shifts occur as individuals move from institution to institution, for example from day-care to entry into school, or within institutions, such as the birth of a sibling, shifting from grade to grade, or gradually assuming more household responsibilities. The above described research specifically examined changes in the balance between children’s and mothers’ contributions to episode resolutions over time, that is ratings of episode resolutions when the children were 14 months and again at 24 months (Tonyan, 2005a). A great deal of research and theory based on European heritage, predominantly middle class families has been read
to suggest that children increasingly regulate their emotions independently (Cole et al., 2004; Kopp, 1989). Children in this study, however, continued to resolve episodes in co-ordination with their mothers, although by 24 months they did contribute more to the co-ordinated resolutions (Tonyan, 2005a). Research by Mosier and Rogoff (2003) examined parental beliefs and behaviour around supporting autonomy, responsibility, and independence, as well as an analysis of the cultural/institutional context of emotion regulation. Their findings suggest that assumptions about the desirability of a shift toward independent regulation may reflect a particular cultural construction. Research that examined children’s increasing ability to regulate emotions without the support of others seldom notes the circumstances in which adults in various cultural communities expect or want children to independently regulate their emotions as opposed to the regulation of their emotions in co-ordination with others (Tonyan, 2005a).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a functionalist approach to emotion regulation combined with a sociocultural approach to development provides a useful way to organise research. Both approaches emphasise the understanding that humans do not just act, but instead act purposefully within activities and interpret the meaning of behaviour in the context of a meaningful activity or for functionalists the ‘setting event’.

A functionalist approach highlights the personal significance of the activity whereas the sociocultural approach highlights the socially shared meanings and value given the activity within that community. Within the context of a particular interaction both approaches highlight the importance of the past, present, and future rather than distinct or segmented ‘eras’ or time ‘frames’. A functionalist approach emphasises the personal interpretation and understanding of past, present, and future (Barrett & Campos, 1987) whereas the sociocultural approach highlights the history of the community within which the activity takes place (e.g., Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, Topping, Baker-Sennett, & Lacasa, 2002).

This paper has outlined two ways in which sociocultural theory can inform functionalist approaches to emotion regulation. Guided participation provides a useful conceptual frame for examining adult-child interaction around emotion regulation across cultural communities. Rogoff’s concept of transformation of participation can inform research regarding the processes of the development of emotion regulation by focusing attention to the ways in which both children and adults contribute to changes in expectation and participation over time. Research that examines the complementary processes of guided participation and transformation of participation across time and across cultural communities is needed.

References


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holli Tonyan was appointed lecturer in early childhood education at Monash University in 2005. Previous experiences included consulting in the evaluation of early childhood programs in the Los Angeles and surrounding areas, a postdoctoral fellowship in sociocultural approaches to human development, research in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (Los Angeles site), and working in centre-based infant care. Current projects explore play as an activity setting for interaction, comparing early childhood centre and home contexts.