



Brief report

Gender and age differences in parent–child emotion talk

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This study examined gender differences in emotion word use during mother–child and father–child conversations. Sixty-five Spanish mothers and fathers and their 4- ($M = 53.50$, $SD = 3.54$) and 6-year-old ($M = 77.07$, $SD = 3.94$) children participated in this study. Emotion talk was examined during a play-related storytelling task and a reminiscence task (conversation about past experiences). Mothers mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words than did fathers. During the play-related storytelling task, mothers of 4-year-old daughters mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words than did mothers of 4-year-old sons, whereas fathers of 4-year-old daughters directed a higher proportion of emotion words than did fathers of 4-year-old sons during the reminiscence task. No gender differences were found with parents of 6-year-old children. During the reminiscence task daughters mentioned more emotion words with their fathers than with their mothers. Finally, mothers' use of emotion talk was related to whether children used emotion talk in both tasks. Fathers' use of emotion talk was only related to children's emotion talk during the reminiscence task.

Parent–child emotion talk influences children's emotion expression (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2013). Through everyday conversations, children develop culture- (Cole, Tamang, & Shrestha, 2006) and gender-specific (Demuth, 2013; Melzi & Fernandez, 2004) means of expressing emotions. Research has examined whether there are gender differences in parents' emotion talk with children. When gender differences have been found in English-speaking mothers, mothers reference emotions more with daughters than sons (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Following stereotypical patterns (Shields, 2002), fathers mention fewer emotion words than mothers (Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995).

Much research has been conducted with English-speaking families. However, based on the number of words referring to emotions across languages, speakers vary in the number of emotion words they use (Knuppel, Steensgaard, & Jensen de Lopez, 2007). Emotion terms are nuanced differently across languages (Wierzbicka, 2004).

Whereas there is some research on mother-child emotion talk in Spanish-speaking families (Cervantes, 2002; Melzi & Fernandez, 2004), there is little in Spain. In contrast to English-speaking mothers, Peruvian mothers of sons used more emotion words than did mothers of daughters (Melzi & Fernandez, 2004). Our goal is to understand gender and age patterns in parent–child emotion talk in Castilian families. Central to this study, Spaniards perceive women as more competent than men in emotional intelligence (Lopez-Zafra & Gartzia, 2014).

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Patterns of conversations in Castilian families may differ from previous research conducted with Latino/a Spanish speakers because of the European context. Conversely, given similarities across countries when SES is shared (Tudge *et al.*, 1999), Castilian families may be similar to Peruvian families (Melzi & Fernandez, 2004). Empirical research is needed to determine whether there are similarities or differences across Spanish and Peruvian families. Given that past research on Latino families does not include fathers, this study increases our understanding of parental influence. Through investigation of families in diverse communities, we can identify how parents socialize gender-based emotion expression. Examination of patterns across cultures gives insight into processes of social development.

Age may also play a role in parent-child emotion talk. Indeed, gender differences in emotion talk do not appear until age 6 (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). By age 6, girls used more positive emotion expression than boys, whereas boys used more negative emotion expressions than girls.

Finally, we examined parent-child emotion talk across reminiscence and play-related storytelling to investigate differences across contexts. Reminiscence enables children to understand emotions in temporal perspective, which is more difficult when discussing present emotions (Laible, 2004). One of the main differences between reminiscence and play is that reminiscence involves one's own past experiences and thus should be more emotion laden.

Our hypotheses were that: (1) mothers would use a higher proportion of emotion words than fathers; (2) parents would mention a higher proportion of emotion words with daughters than sons; (3) parents would mention a higher proportion of emotion words while reminiscing than storytelling; (4) daughters would mention a higher proportion of emotion words than sons; and (5) children's and parents' emotion talk would be related.

Method

Participants

Sixty-five Spanish children, aged 4 (18 girls, $M = 53.22$ months, $SD = 3.87$; 18 boys, $M = 53.22$ months, $SD = 3.87$) and aged 6 (13 girls, $M = 76.78$ months, $SD = 3.93$; 16 boys, $M = 76.23$, $SD = 3.88$), and their parents (mothers $M_{age} = 36.29$ years, $SD = 2.84$; fathers $M_{age} = 40.56$ years, $SD = 4.35$) participated.

Families were from Madrid, Spain, and lived in middle- to upper-class neighbourhoods. Families were recruited on a volunteer basis through word of mouth. All parents had a university degree. Parents provided written consent.¹

Materials and procedure

Parent-child interviews took place in participants' homes on 2 days. On the first visit, the mother or the father and the child were video-recorded while discussing the storytelling and the reminiscence tasks. Within a week, the other parent and the child completed these tasks. Task and parent order was counterbalanced.²

¹ This study was part of a larger investigation examining the relationship between parent-child emotion talk, parent-child touch, and children's understanding of emotions.

² ANOVA models conducted on parents' speech variables revealed no effects of either parent or task order. There were no significant differences in the length of talk between the first and the second day of testing.

Play-related storytelling task

A house and figures (grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, son, daughter, and dog) were used to elicit the storytelling task. This task prompts discussion about emotions and replicates Cervantes and Callanan (1998). The instructions were 'A family lives in this house. One day the parents leave their children overnight. The child falls and hurts himself. The dog runs away. Later the parents return. Use the toys to create this story'.³

Reminiscence task

Parent-child dyads were given four events typed on individual index cards. Each card contained one of the following phrases: 'day at the zoo', 'doctor's visit', 'first day of school', and 'a time that the child fell'.⁴ Parent-child dyads discussed the events in the order they chose.

Transcription and coding

Videotaped conversations were transcribed verbatim.

Utterance counts

Utterances were defined as sequences of words followed or preceded by a pause, change in conversational turn, or intonation (see Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Rowe, 2008). Excluded were unintelligible utterances and false starts (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006). The first author typed transcripts into utterances checked by the second author.

Emotion coding

Emotion words referred to affective states (e.g., *contento*/happy) and processes (e.g., *pasarlo bien*/have fun, Cervantes, 2002) based on Kuebli *et al.* (1995) and Cervantes (2002). The number of emotion words was calculated by totalling the number any emotion word was used by participants.⁵ Tables 1 and 2 display the number of emotion words in each category.

Reliability

The first author coded all transcripts. The second author coded 48 transcripts (20% of the data set) in Spanish. Reliability was achieved with a kappa of .80.

Results

To control for the amount of talk, emotion words were analysed as proportions (Curenton & Craig, 2011). Proportions were calculated for each individual by dividing each speaker's

³ *En esta casa vive una familia. Un día los padres se van de viaje y pasan fuera una noche. Cuando los padres se marchan, el niño se cae y se hace daño y el perro se escapa. Después vuelven los padres.*

⁴ *Un día en el zoo', 'la última vez que te caíste', 'una visita al doctor', 'una visita al zoo'.*

⁵ *If two emotion words occurred in one utterance, the utterance was recorded once (e.g., Pedro estaba triste y enfadado/Peter was sad and angry) and emotion words were recorded twice.*

Table 1. Total number of emotion words mentioned by parents and children during the play-related storytelling task

	Mothers	Fathers	Children with mothers	Children with fathers
Play storytelling task				
Happy/ <i>Feliz</i>	123	66	13	9
Sad/ <i>Triste</i>	47	78	3	7
Angry/ <i>Enfadado</i>	14	26	1	1
Love/ <i>Querer</i>	31	6	7	4
Concern/ <i>Preocupado</i>	66	36	6	4
Fear/ <i>Miedo</i>	41	27	12	5
Like/ <i>Gustar</i>	52	49	8	8
Dislike/ <i>No gustar</i>	9	12	6	1
Surprise/ <i>Sorpresa</i>	3	0	2	0
Indifference/ <i>Dar igual</i>	7	8	4	5
Distress/ <i>Agitado</i>	3	4	1	0
Embarrassed/ <i>Avergonzado</i>	2	2	2	0
Excited/ <i>Nervioso</i>	1	2	0	0
Total	399	316	65	44

Table 2. Total number of emotion words mentioned by parents and children during the reminiscence task

	Mothers	Fathers	Children with mothers	Children with fathers
Reminiscence task				
Happy/ <i>Contento</i>	105	96	19	13
Sad/ <i>Triste</i>	23	14	6	3
Angry/ <i>Enfadado</i>	12	20	3	8
Love/ <i>Querer</i>	15	10	2	2
Concern/ <i>Preocupado</i>	9	5	0	1
Fear/ <i>Miedo</i>	46	68	17	19
Like/ <i>Gustar</i>	240	199	37	48
Dislike/ <i>No Gustar</i>	41	42	14	20
Surprise/ <i>Sorpresa</i>	3	0	1	1
Indifference/ <i>Dar Igual</i>	6	9	4	4
Distress/ <i>Agitado</i>	7	3	3	3
Embarrassed/ <i>Avergonzado</i>	15	1	1	0
Excited/ <i>Nervioso</i>	5	16	0	2
Total	527	483	107	124

emotion utterances by their total utterances. Because of non-normality of data, follow-up tests were tested with ANOVA and nonparametric tests.

Analyses of parents' emotion talk

A 2 (Parent gender) \times 2 (Task) \times 2 (Child gender) mixed-design ANOVA with parent gender and task as repeated factors was conducted on the proportion of emotion words. Mothers ($M = 0.06$, $SD = 0.03$) used a higher proportion of emotion words than fathers ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.03$), $F(1, 61) = 5.44$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $Z = 2.59$, $p = .01$. Parents ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.06$) used a higher proportion of emotion

words while reminiscing than storytelling ($M_{\text{proportion}} = 0.07$, $SD = 0.03$), $F(1, 61) = 43.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $Z = 5.51$, $p = .0001$. Table 3 displays the number of emotion words.

A Parent \times Task \times Age \times Gender effect was revealed with two significant follow-up tests. While reminiscing with 4-year-olds, fathers of daughters used a higher proportion of emotion words ($M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.06$) than fathers of sons ($M = 0.03$, $SD = 0.04$), $F(1, 33) = 4.46$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .12$, Mann–Whitney, $U(16) = 89.00$, $Z = 2.31$, $p = .02$. While storytelling with 4-year-olds, mothers of daughters used a higher proportion of emotion words ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.03$) than mothers of sons ($M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.02$), $F(1, 33) = 6.86$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .16$, Mann–Whitney, $U(16) = 87.00$, $Z = 2.37$, $p = .02$.

Because the tasks were dyadic, we also examined the dyad as a unit. Similarly, there was a significant effect for Parent, $F(1, 61) = 5.58$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $Z = 2.39$, $p = .02$ ($M_{\text{Mother}} = 0.08$, $SD = 0.06$, $M_{\text{Father}} = 0.06$, $SD = 0.05$) and Task, $F(1, 61) = 48.61$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .44$, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $Z = 5.85$, $p = .0001$, $M_{\text{Reminiscence}} = 0.10$, $SD = 0.07$, $M_{\text{House}} = 0.05$, $SD = 0.03$). There was also a significant interaction effect, Parent \times Task \times Age \times Gender, $F(1, 61) = 6.75$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$. While storytelling with 4-year-olds, mother–daughter dyads used a higher proportion than did mother–son dyads, $F(1, 33) = 5.95$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .15$, Mann–Whitney, $U(16) = 92.00$, $Z = 2.22$, $p = .03$. Father–daughter dyads used a higher proportion than did father–son dyads while reminiscing with 4-year-olds, $F(1, 33) = 5.01$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .13$, Mann–Whitney, $U(16) = 85.00$, $Z = 2.44$, $p = .01$. Thus, dyadic patterns were similar to parents' patterns.

Analyses of children's emotion talk

More than 50% of the children did not mention any emotion words. Children's data were dichotomized based on whether they used an emotion word and analysed using chi-squares.

Four chi-square tests were performed for each task to determine if daughters and sons were more likely to use an emotion word with each parent. Daughters were more likely than sons to use an emotion word with fathers while reminiscing, $\chi^2(1, N = 65) = 4.97$, $p = .02$. The other chi-square tests were not significant.

Relations between parents' and children's emotion

Point–biserial correlations indicated that children's and mothers' use of emotion words were related while storytelling, $r(63) = .41$, $p = .001$, and reminiscing, $r(63) = .36$,

Table 3. Mean number of words used by parents

	Four-year-olds				Six-year-olds			
	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Mother–child storytelling task	7.72	9.47	6.22	8.18	6.45	4.35	7.61	7.50
Mother–child reminiscence task	8.97	11.30	8.98	5.47	11.24	8.49	10.49	6.52
Father–child storytelling task	4.91	4.14	3.44	5.05	4.37	3.86	4.68	3.60
Father–child reminiscence task	8.05	9.58	5.27	5.92	11.30	11.03	11.54	6.37

$p = .003$. Children's and fathers' use was related while reminiscing, $r(63) = .48$, $p = .001$, but not storytelling, $r(63) = .17$, $p = .18$.

Discussion

This study examined gender differences in emotion talk in Spanish parent-child dyads while storytelling and reminiscing. Consistent with previous research conducted in the United States (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995), parents differed in emotion talk. As predicted, mothers mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words than fathers. Mothers may be more comfortable discussing emotions than fathers (Fivush *et al.*, 2000), reflecting traditional gender roles in Spain (Arcas, Novoa, & Artacoz, 2013). Although Spanish women have increasingly joined the work force, they remain children's primary caregivers (Gonzalez, Jurado, & Naldini, 2014).

Mothers were also more attuned to children than fathers. Mothers' emotion talk was related to children's emotion talk across both tasks, whereas fathers' emotion talk was related to children's emotion talk while reminiscing. Fewer than 20% of these mothers worked fulltime outside the home, whereas fathers worked long hours. Differences in the amount of time spent with children may partially account for Perlmann and Gleason's (1993) Bridge Hypothesis.

Not only did parents model gendered patterns, there was also evidence of treating children differently with parents of 4-year-old daughters mentioning a higher proportion of emotion words than parents of sons in specific tasks. Educated English-speaking parents either use emotion more with daughters than sons (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987) or the same amount with sons and daughters (Dunn & Brown, 1994). Parents may have followed stereotypes that girls are more emotional than boys (Brody, 1985).

Girls may be socialized early into a socioemotional orientation emphasizing emotional expressivity (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013), making them more socially mature than boys. Indeed, parents may have responded differently to children at this age because of the greater proclivity that 3- to 4-year-old girls show compared to boys in understanding display rules that affect emotional reactions (Cole, 1986). Our finding is consistent with studies conducted with English-speaking participants (Dunn *et al.*, 1987), but it contrasts with Peruvian mothers of sons who used more emotion words than mothers of daughters (Melzi & Fernandez, 2004). Perhaps culture is a greater influence than language on parent-child emotion talk.

Overall, this study suggests that parent-child emotion talk is gendered, which has implications for children's socialization of emotions. If girls and boys learn that mothers talk more about emotions than fathers and simultaneously, parents mention emotions more with girls than boys, and preschool girls might learn more about emotions than boys. Moreover, children may learn it is more appropriate for females to discuss emotions. Indeed, daughters were more likely than sons to mention emotions with their fathers when reminiscing.

Parents also mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words when reminiscing than storytelling. Moreover, parents' emotion talk was related to children's emotion talk while reminiscing, whereas only mothers' (but not fathers') and children's talk was related during storytelling. Reminiscing about experiences is more salient emotionally if the experiences are shared. Storytelling, in contrast, allows participants emotional distance because the experiences are not personally imbued with emotion.

In conclusion, our study adds insight on emotion socialization. Spanish mothers mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words than did fathers. Mothers of preschool daughters mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words than did mothers of sons while playing, whereas fathers of preschool daughters mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words than fathers of sons during reminiscence. Caution is warranted in generalizing the findings because of our middle-class, urban sample. Overall, Spanish mothers and fathers may have a distinct influence on children's emotion socialization.

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