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Cultural Pathways to Socio-Emotional Development and Learning

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This article discusses the role of culture in children's emotional development and learning. Cultural orientation regarding self and relationships with others shapes cultural models of emotion regulation and expression. While independent cultures support open expression of emotions, interdependent cultures value the modulation of emotions. Children learn culture-appropriate ways of emotion regulation through socialisation in the family, acquisition of language, exposure to cultural products (e.g., children's books), and school activities. This article offers recommendations on how to design culture-grounded socio-emotional programs that take into account cultural values, indigenous content, and emotion regulation strategies contingent with culture-specific adaptive goals.

■ **Keywords:** culture, emotion regulation, socio-emotional learning

The importance of socio-emotional competencies for child psychological wellbeing, mental health, and academic success is well documented (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Garber, Braafladt, & Weiss, 1995; Gilliom, Shaw, Beck, Schonberg, & Lukon, 2002; Gumora & Arsenio, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003; Sanson, Hemphill, & Smart, 2004; Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993; Trommsdorf & Cole, 2011; Waldemar et al., 2016). Given this, in the past decade we have witnessed a significant growth of programs aimed at promoting socio-emotional skills in children and adolescents (Bowles et al., 2017; Brown, Low, Smith, & Haggerty, 2011; Committee for Children, 2002; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Gordon, 2009; Kusché & Greenberg, 1994; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). The outcomes of these programs are very encouraging: A meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs point out that socio-emotional learning improves youths' socio-emotional skills, reduces behavioural problems, and promotes academic learning (Durlak et al., 2011).

There has been a conscious effort to adapt socio-emotional programs to diverse populations within a particular country. For instance, the Strong Start curriculum was modified to make it relevant to the African-American population in the United States (Graves et al., 2017). Modifications included using storybooks with African-American characters and discussing issues relevant to the African-American community. The Strong Teens program was successfully adapted for Latino youth in the United States (Castro-Olivo, 2014). The adaptation included lessons on ethnic pride and coping skills for acculturation stress. Socio-emotional learning is also crossing national borders. For example, in Brazil, a combined mindfulness and socio-emotional program was effective in improving mental health of 5th-graders (Waldemar et al., 2016). In Argentina, cooperative activities coupled with mindfulness increased altruistic behavior in elementary schoolchildren (Lozada, D'Adamo, & Carro, 2014). The violence prevention program Second Step was successfully adapted for preschool children in Guatemala (Clinton, Edstrom, Mildon, & Davila, 2015); some schools in Hong Kong began implementing the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum (Kam, Wong, & Fung, 2011). Socio-emotional learning has become an essential part of school curriculum in Australia; and there are initiatives to instill socio-emotional learning programs in Portugal and Poland (Bowles et al., 2017).

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Fostering children's ability to manage their emotions is one of the important goals of social-emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2017). Growing evidence suggests that socio-cultural context shapes children's emotional development (Morelen, Zeman, Perry-Parrish, & Anderson, 2012; Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011; Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida, 2007; Wan & Savina, 2016; Wilson, Raval, Salvina, Raval, & Panchal, 2012). It was found that Japanese children demonstrate a higher level of perspective-taking ability and fewer aggressive responses than their North American peers; they also show a high level of empathy (Azuma, 1986; Cohen & Hoshino-Browne, 2005; Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, Cole, Mizuta, & Hiruma, 1996). Chinese children endorse higher levels of enjoyment, pride, anxiety, and shame, but less anger in an academic context compared to German students (Frenzel, Thrash, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2007). Nepalese Tamang children were more likely to feel shame in difficult situations, while Nepalese Brahman and American children feel anger (Cole, Bruschu, & Tamang, 2002). American children reported a stronger desire to communicate anger and sadness and a motivation to obtain social support to a greater degree than Indian children (Wilson et al., 2012). At the same time, they were more reluctant to show sadness than children from Ghana and Kenya (Morelen et al., 2012). American children preferred talking to someone when experiencing difficult emotions to a greater degree than their Chinese peers (Wan & Savina, 2016). Finally, Brazilian children, compared to their Norwegian peers, generated more passive and playful emotion regulation strategies and expressed a stronger desire to obtain help from others (Vikan, Kårstad, & Dias, 2013).

Together, these findings suggest that a socio-cultural context should be taken into serious consideration when developing and implementing socio-emotional programs. The goal of this article is to explore cultural pathways through which children acquire emotional competencies. Knowledge about cultural models of emotions and how they shape a child's emotional development is essential for designing culture-grounded SEL programs.

Cultural Orientation and Emotion Regulation

Culture is 'a set of control mechanisms — plans, recipes, rules, instructions . . . for governing the behavior' (Geertz, 1973, p. 44). Culture plays a significant role in emotion regulation as it supplies individuals with rules and values regarding appropriate and inappropriate emotions and emotional expressions (Raver, 2004). 'Cultural models shape responses at every level of the emotion: the appraisal of the event, action readiness, bodily changes, expressive and instrumental behavior and conscious regulatory processes' (Mesquita & Leu, 2007, p. 736). The meanings of emotions can be understood only within a cultural context (Shweder, Haidt, Horton, & Joseph, 2008).

Individualism versus collectivism is one of the major frameworks used to describe cultural orientations (Chen, 1994; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Triandis, 1995). These orientations lead to different construals of self — namely, independent and interdependent — and through shaping the self, they have an impact on individuals' emotional, motivational, and cognitive experiences (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Independent cultures put an emphasis on personal rights above duties, celebrate personal autonomy, and consider personal achievement as an important source of wellbeing and life satisfaction (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). For independent cultures, the goal is to regulate the autonomous self and rely on one's own choices and preferences (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011). In interdependent cultures, group membership is a central aspect of identity; therefore, maintaining harmonious relationships with group members is important (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000; Triandis, 1995). Furthermore, interdependent cultures emphasise the importance of fulfilling social duties and expectations of others. As a result, interpersonal conflict is often avoided to maintain social harmony. For example, in sub-Saharan cultures, there is a belief that one can become a true self only through positive relationships with others (Metz & Gaie, 2010). An Afro-communitarian principle states: 'an action is right insofar as it prizes harmonious relationships, where harmony is a matter of both exhibiting solidarity with others and identifying with them' (Metz & Gaie, 2010, pp. 286–287).

Members of independent cultures tend to take a first-person perspective and attend to their needs and wishes, while members of interdependent cultures take a third-person perspective and adjust their reactions to accommodate to others (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011). In interdependent cultures, emotional experience is influenced much more by one's immediate relational context than in independent cultures (Oishi, Diener, Scollon, & Biswas-Diener, 2004). For example, Masuda and colleagues (2008) found that when looking at cartoons depicting interpersonal situations, Americans mostly focus on the emotions of the central person and pay less attention to the emotions of the surrounding people. The Japanese, however, focus on the emotional expressions of both — the central person and the surrounding people. Further, the presence of other people alters the emotional experiences of the members of interdependent but not independent cultures (Mesquita & Leu, 2007). In addition, social consequences of emotions are more salient in interdependent cultures. The cultural environment also offers specific situations that promote certain emotions (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). For instance, American

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culture offers many situations to make individuals feel unique and happy (D'Andrade, 1984). Individuals from interdependent cultures select situations that allow self-improvement and fulfillment of expectations of others (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011).

Each culture has a cultural model of emotion that promotes or inhibits certain emotions through socialisation practices (Matsumoto, 1990; Mesquita & Albert, 2007). For example, pride is not desirable in collectivistic cultures because it can disengage one from others; but it is valued in independent cultures as it reflects personal achievements and supports the self-enhancement goal (Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008). Shame, on the other hand, is more accepted in East Asian cultures than in North America, and it is widely used as a means of social control (Chen, Chen, Kaspar, & Noh, 2000; Mesquita & Leu, 2007; Sharma & Fisher, 1998; Wang & Leichtman, 2000). For instance, it is not uncommon for Chinese parents to say, 'Do you know how shameful it is to do that? Even if you are not ashamed, I feel ashamed.' Furthermore, shame creates an important avenue for self-improvement in East Asian cultures, but it is associated with damaged self-esteem in American culture (Mascole, Fisher, & Li, 2003).

The affect valuation theory states that culture promotes the experience of certain emotions, known as ideal affect (Tsai, 2007). Cultures based on the idea of independence and autonomy promote high intensity positive affect, while cultures that favour interpersonal harmony value emotional calmness (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011). Members of East Asian cultures are more willing to accept negative emotions because such emotions might motivate self-improvement (Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008). It was found that European Americans tend to value positive affect to a greater extent than their Asian counterparts and tend to redirect their attention from negative to positive or neutral experiences (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011; Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006; Tsai et al., 2007). In one study, European American children found positive distraction a more effective emotion regulation strategy compared to their Chinese peers (Wan & Savina, 2016). In another study, European American children showed a greater preference for excited smiles and perceived such smiles as happier than their peers from Taiwan (Tsai et al., 2007). In addition, it was suggested that children's books supply children with the notion of ideal affect, as it was found that children's books in the United States portray more excited activities and facial expressions than books in Taiwan (Tsai et al., 2007). Interestingly, across cultures, exposure to exciting (vs. calm) storybooks altered children's preferences for excited (vs. calm) activities and their perceptions of happiness.

Cultures shape emotional expression. Independent cultures regard emotions as a direct expression of the self and an affirmation of the importance of the individual; therefore, they encourage open emotion expression (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Many interdependent cultures (e.g., East Asian) value restraint in emotional expression, which serves to keep in-group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mesquita & Leu, 2007). In one study, children from traditional Indian communities were reluctant to show their negative feelings to others because they did not want to compromise their relationships with others (Raval, Martini, & Raval, 2007). Several studies have documented that East Asians use suppression more frequently than other cultural groups (Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007; Gross & John, 2003). Such a tendency reflects the idea that interdependent cultures give priority to social obligations and responsibilities rather than to self-expression (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008). In Chinese culture, the ability to regulate emotional expression is considered a sign of psychological maturity, a desirable moral trait, and a way to maintain harmonious relationships with others (Tardif, Wang, & Olson, 2009). On the contrary, in cultures that place value on autonomy and egalitarianism (e.g., United States), suppression is less present and more maladaptive (Butler et al., 2007). It is important to say that the introduction of a market-oriented economy in China resulted in a significant shift in the value system (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005; Guthrie, 2006). Therefore, the stereotype that Chinese are less emotionally expressive than members of Western cultures should be revised. Wan and Way (2009) demonstrated that Chinese urban adolescents readily expressed emotions in interviews about their friendship experiences. In another study, Wang and Leichtman (2000) found that Chinese children were more emotionally expressive than American children in their narratives.

Trommsdorff and Rothbaum (2008) argue that emotion regulation strives to achieve goals, reflecting culture-specific ideas about self and social relationships. Promotion goals are more prevalent in independent cultures and these goals are aimed at enhancing self-esteem, independence, and self-efficacy. As a result, open expression of emotions, high-intensity positive affect, and avoidance of negative emotions are valued. Prevention goals are more prevalent in interdependent cultures, and they serve to maintain interpersonal harmony, accommodate others' needs, and meet social expectations. Consequently, suppressing strong emotions and promoting emotional calmness and socially engaging emotions (e.g., empathy and shame) are encouraged (Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008).

Cultural Variations in Emotion-Related Language

Cultural values regarding emotions are transmitted through language (Russell, 1991; Slobin, 2003; Wierzbicka, 1993). Some languages have a large corpus of words describing emotions. For example, Russell (1991) found references to about 2,000

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emotion-related words in English, 750 in Taiwanese Chinese, and 7 in Chewong. Further, Chinese language holds a strong association between body parts and emotions, and this may account for the fact that Chinese often talk about emotions using somatic terms (Yu, 2002). For instance, anger literally means 'to create energy within the body'. In addition, many emotion-related Chinese words contain 'heart' as part of the word (Russell & Yik, 1996). Perhaps this is why Chinese children often make references to their 'hearts' when they talk about their emotional experiences (Wan & Way, 2009).

The Russian language has rich and nuanced linguistic structures for emotions, and emotions have a stronger association with body movement than in English (Wierzbicka, 1992, 1999). Further, 'Anglo-Saxon culture tends to disapprove of uninhibited verbal outpouring of emotions, whereas Russian culture views them as one of the main functions of human speech' (Wierzbicka, 1992, p. 403). This linguistic evidence may partially explain why Russians are characterised by free expression of emotions and the intense emotional quality of interpersonal communications.

Levy (1984) argues that cognitive-linguistic structures for emotions might have different degrees of elaboration. For some emotions, such structures are well developed and lead to hypercognition of those emotions. For example, anger is hypercognised in Taihitian culture because the Tahitian language has 46 words to describe anger. At the same time, certain emotions might be hypocognised if the language does not have a well elaborated structure for them. In Tahitian culture, such an emotion is sadness, since Tahitian does not have a word for sad feelings (Levy, 1984). Earlier, we discussed the importance of shame in Chinese culture. Linguistic evidence supports this fact: The word 'shame' is a hypercognised in Chinese culture and is one of the earliest emotional words Chinese children learn (Mascole et al., 2003). Further, one study found that the majority of Chinese children knew the meaning of 'shame' compared to only half of American children (Wang & Leichtman, 2000). However, the meaning of 'guilt' was much more familiar to American than to Chinese children.

Cultural Differences in the Family Socialisation of Emotion Regulation

Children's emotional development and learning are greatly affected by socialisation in the family. Parents hold culture-specific ethnotheories about children's socio-emotional development that guide emotion socialisation practices (Harkness et al., 2011; Keller, 2007; Trommsdorf & Cole, 2011). Such theories are informed by cultural orientations and lead to two developmental pathways: One is toward individuation and independence, whereas the other is toward group membership and interdependence (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003). Practices that promote independence involve distal warmth and closeness interspersed with periods of separation (e.g., sleep-over, babysitting; Rothbaum & Trommsdorff, 2007). Practices that support an interdependent self promote dependency needs and self-control and involve continuous contact with a child (e.g., co-sleeping and a longer period of holding a child). Close physical contact between a caregiver and a baby (e.g., co-sleeping) supports emotion regulation in young children in non-Western cultures (Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008). For instance, parents in Japan foster very close relationships with their young children, called *amae*, which promote dependency and indulgence. Such relationships facilitate a child's eager compliance and emotion co-regulation. In contrast, babies in Western cultures are encouraged to self-soothe (Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008).

Parents socialise children in accord with cultural values regarding emotions and their expression. In cultures where harmonious relationships with others are important, parents promote emotion modulation, while in cultures that put emphasis on the self, parents encourage open emotional expression, especially positive emotions such as joy, pride, and happiness (Trommsdorf & Cole, 2011). According to the notion of culture-relevant ideal affect, East Asian parents use more soothing practices and promote low intensity positive emotions, while European American parents use more stimulation and promote high-intensity positive affect (Tsai, 2007). Parents in Japan anticipate the child's needs and internal states and respond before the child expresses negative emotions, while parents in independent cultures (e.g., German) tend to wait until the child expresses his or her needs (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011). In China, mothers focus more on socially inappropriate behaviours and the impact of these behaviours on others, but often give less attention to their children's emotional states (Cheah & Rubin, 2004). On the contrary, European mothers focus more on their children's needs and help children feel good and maintain positive self-esteem. It is important to note that ethnotheories and child-rearing practices of parents from interdependent cultures who embrace an urban middle-class lifestyle might contain features of both ethnotheories found in traditional societies and those from independent cultures (Keller, 2007).

Emotion Regulation and Educational Context

School is an important socialisation context for children and adolescents.

> *In schools . . . children learn not only the 'curriculum,' but also the ways of relating to each other and to adults that the structure of the institution embodies. By participating in the everyday formats and routines of cultural institutions and traditions, children engage in their underlying cultural assumptions. (Rogoff, 2003, p. 234)*

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Teachers are essential for successful socio-emotional learning program implementation. More specifically, beliefs about SEL play an important role in teachers' motivation to implement socio-emotional interventions (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012; Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, & Curby, 2014). These beliefs might be informed by cultural models regarding emotions. Hyson and Lee (1996) studied beliefs about emotions in American and Korean early childhood education teachers and found that such beliefs can be organised around the following themes: the importance of the emotional bond between teachers and children, talking about emotions in the classroom, children's ability to express and regulate emotions, and the teacher's role in fostering emotions in the classroom. The authors also found that unlike their American colleagues, Korean teachers believed that children should be protected from emotionally upsetting events, and both teachers and children should avoid open emotional expression.

In Japan, teachers believe that children need opportunities to deal with emotionally laden interpersonal situations without adult mediation (Rogoff, 2003; Hayashi, Karasawa, & Tobin, 2009). For this reason, a large class size is preferred so children have more opportunities for developing socio-emotional skills. This is opposite to the situation in the United States where schools try to make the student-teacher ratio as small as possible and have as many adults in the classroom as possible. Such practices result from the belief that students need close supervision and individual attention.

Respecting teachers is important in Chinese culture, and students are expected to extend their filial piety and obedience to teachers (Phelps, 2005). Observations in Chinese classrooms indicated that students stay on-task and cooperate well with teachers (Salili & Lai, 2003). Chinese students are also socialised to work hard at an early age, and they attribute their success to effort as opposed to their ability (Lau, 1996; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Moral education, which is rooted in Confucian traditions, is a significant part of the Chinese school curriculum, with the ultimate goal to teach children self-control and to show respect for others. In Chinese schools, children are regularly engaged in public evaluations in which they are required to reflect on whether they have met school standards and made improvements over time (Chen, Kaspar, Zhang, Wang, & Zheng, 2004). Such practice trains children to monitor and regulate their behaviors.

Cultural models also inform emotional reactions to accomplishment (Mascole et al., 2003). For example, Americans readily accept praise because it serves the self-enhancement goal, while Chinese react to praise with embarrassment and doubt whether they deserve such an evaluation (Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008). Additionally, in the United States, adults often praise children on their achievement without acknowledgement that other people (e.g., teachers) were instrumental in that achievement (Rogoff, 2003). Moreover, adults emphasise that the child achieved something by him/herself. A different situation is observed in Russia where success is attributed to the teacher and the teacher is thanked first.

In Japan, all school experiences are 'considered to be the curriculum for the formation of culturally valued qualities of personhood, such as perseverance in the face of hardship, cooperation, empathy, and the ability to reflect critically on oneself' (Hoffman, 2000, p. 201). In early elementary school, Japanese children show a remarkable ability to manage their behaviour without direct guidance from the teacher (Rogoff, 2003). For instance, they can break into small groups independently and run class meetings even without the teacher being present. Empathy and the sense of responsibility and belonging instilled in families pay off in school behaviour (Rogoff, 2003). In Japanese preschools, teachers promote in children a desire for social connection, empathy, social mindedness, and group living skills (Hayashi et al., 2009). The feeling of loneliness is considered a key component of sociality; the expression of sadness associated with loneliness is important to evoke *amae*, a feeling of empathy and close connection with others. Early education practices explicitly incorporate feelings of loneliness, dependency, and empathy in classroom discourse (Hayashi et al., 2009).

Recommendations for Designing Culture-Grounded SEL Programs

Our review indicated that child emotional development and learning are shaped by cultural values and practices. Cultures have different ideas about which emotional behaviours are adaptive and which are not. Therefore, socio-emotional programming should be sensitive to the indigenous contexts that guide a child's socio-emotional development and consider cultural values regarding social behaviour. Below we offer specific recommendations for designing culture-grounded SEL programs.

- The goals of socio-emotional programs should reflect cultural orientations, autonomy versus relatedness, and promote skills that are adaptive in a particular culture. It is also important to keep in mind that cultures are not homogeneous and static. Modern societies may depart from their traditional values and attitudes. For example, with increasing Westernisation among the urban educated middle-class in East Asian cultures, a new model that combines autonomy and relatedness is more appropriate (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005).
- Programs adapted from a different culture should be systematically modified to make them compatible with the population's values, language, and

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cultural context (Bernal, Jimenez-Chafey, & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2009). Uncritical adaptation of values from one culture to another may have negative consequences. For example, introducing Western values (e.g., materialism and individualism) into the educational system in several African countries had a harmful effect on moral education (Iheoma, 1985; Rwantabagu, 2010).

- The internalisation of socio-emotional skills is more successful when there is a fit between the emotion regulation goal and strategy (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011). Therefore, emotion regulation strategies should be contingent with culture-specific adaptive goals. For example, the goal of emotion regulation in cultures that support an independent self is to promote positive emotions and emotional expressiveness. In cultures that promote an interdependent self, the goal is to stay emotionally calm, and this involves modulating emotional expressions (Rothbaum & Rusk, 2011).
- It is important to consider how the outcomes of emotion regulation are perceived in different cultures. In a study mentioned earlier (Wan & Savina, 2016), American children stated that positive distraction and deep breathing might prevent them from acting out; but Chinese children did not mention acting out behaviour at all. Focusing on the wrong behaviour could make intervention ineffective.
- There are many cultural ways children learn socio-emotional competencies besides formal socio-emotional education at school. Cultural pathways to emotional competence include socialisation in the family, exposure to children's books and other media, and school organisation and activities. Program developers should know these informal pathways and utilise them effectively.
- Program content and delivery methods should also be culture-sensitive. If social stories are used as a teaching method, they should be derived from a socio-cultural context. In addition, program developers should consider incorporating into program content folktales, examples of popular oral tradition, and cultural artifacts that convey cultural meanings.
- Language is important for the expression of emotions and emotion regulation. When adapting programs from one culture to another, keep in mind that the direct translation of emotion words is not appropriate. Instead, a corpus of culture-specific emotion words should be generated. In addition, emotions can be expressed in many other ways besides language. It is recommended to incorporate culture-relevant art, music, or movement activities (e.g., dance), which youth can use for emotional expression.
- Finally, ecologically valid assessment tools should be adopted when evaluating the outcomes of SEL programs.

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