Comparing Palestinian and American Children’s Understanding of Fear

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Introduction

Children begin to develop a coherent understanding of emotion at a young age. Research indicates that eighteen- and thirty-six-month-old children can label their own and other's emotions, discuss past and future emotions, and talk about the causes and consequences of emotion states (Bretherton, Rothbart, & Chen, 1988). While there are several factors that contribute to the development of emotion understanding, we propose that children's social environment – including their experiences and interactions – has a significant impact on how they understand others' emotional displays and respond to emotion-inducing events. Of particular interest is how children belonging to different cultures – Palestinian and American – and social environments (e.g., the presence or absence of war and conflict) understand basic-level expressions of emotion (e.g., happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust), with a specific focus on fear.

What do children think is scary? Prior research indicates that preschool-aged American children use the fantasy theme (e.g., including monsters, ghosts, and other imaginary creatures) to describe the causes of fear (Lenz, 1985; Strayer, 1986; Denham & Zoller, 1991). Will this finding replicate cross-culturally?

How do Palestinian and American children recognize facial expressions of fear? Is recognition of some basic-level facial expressions of emotion universal to human nature, as prior research suggests (Ekman, 1980), or can some expressions be culturally determined?

Method

Participants

Participants are (N = 60, male and female, ages 3 to 7 years) Palestinian children living in the Greater Jerusalem, Israel, for all of whom Arabic was their primary language. The comparison group includes (N = 30, male and female, matched for age and sex) American children, who were enrolled in Massachusetts day care centers/preschools, for all of whom English was their primary language.

This Study

This study investigated how Palestinian and American children understand fear – its causes and associated facial expressions. Palestinian children are of interest because, unlike their American counterparts, they have been born and raised in the presence of prolonged conflict and war.

The children participated in two tasks:

1. A story-telling task: Asking preschoolers to tell a story that describes the cause and consequence for each of five emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and surprise).

2. A facial categorization task: Asking preschoolers to select ‘scared’ faces from an array of different facial expressions of emotion examines the breadth of their fear category.

Procedure

Each child was tested individually in his/her native language (Arabic or English). The study had two phases.

Phase I: Story-telling. In this phase, children were asked to tell a story that describes the cause and consequence for each of five emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and surprise).

Phase II: Choice-from-Array task. On each of five trials (happiness, surprise, sadness, fear, anger), participants were presented with a different array of six facial expressions (happy, sad, angry, scared, surprised, disgusted). Participants were instructed to, “Look very carefully at all of the pictures,” and then asked, “Does anybody feel ’X' (one of the five target emotions)?” After the child made a selection, the child was mildly praised and the selected picture was removed. The child was then asked, “Does anybody feel the like ’X’ or did you pick them all out?” This procedure was repeated until the child indicated that nobody else felt the target emotion.

Results

Story-telling Task Results

Themes Children Used in Describing the Causes of FEAR

Figure 1: Palestinian children were more likely to use the reality theme in their stories to describe the causes of fear than American children were. This suggests that the social environment – the presence or absence of prolonged war and conflict – influences the way children understand fear. For Palestinian children, a greater exposure to reality-based fear makes the reality aspect more salient when they are asked to describe the causes of fear. Furthermore, understanding reality-based fears at a young age is an advantageous acquisition for Palestinian children as it can help them recognize important cues in an environment of threat.

Figure 2: As we predicted, Palestinian children's fear category was broader than American children's. A higher proportion of Palestinian children included the non-target negative facial expressions (angry, disgusted, sad) in their fear category than did American children. In a repeated measures ANOVA, the culture x emotion interaction for fear was not significant. Due to our prior prediction, planned comparisons revealed significantly more than Palestinian children included the surprise (F(1, 57) = 4.15, p = .05), sadness (p = .02), disgust (p = .09), and marginally more included the anger face (p = .07).

Category Task Results

Figure 3: Palestinian children’s surprise category was also broader than American children’s: A higher proportion of Palestinian children included non-target negative facial expressions (angry, disgusted, sad) in their surprise category than American children. Palestinian children were less likely to include the ‘happy face’ and the ‘surprised’ face in their surprise category. In a repeated measures ANOVA, the culture x emotion interaction was significant, F(1, 57) = 4.86, p < .001. In Fisher’s LSD comparisons, there were no significant differences between Palestinian and American children for any of the faces.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study demonstrated that Palestinian children’s concept of fear differs from American children’s.

* In the story-telling task, Palestinian children were more likely to use the reality-theme to describe the causes of fear, whereas American children used the reality theme and the fantasy theme more equally.

* This study extends previous findings that show children use the fantasy theme to describe the causes of fear to a cross-cultural sample (Lenz, 1985; Strayer, 1986; Denham & Zoller, 1991).

* Because Palestinian children are more conversant with the threat and conflict that surrounds them, their reality-based scripts for fear are more developed and more salient than their fantasy-based scripts for fear.

* Some Palestinian children did use the fantasy-theme to describe the causes of fear, suggesting that fear of fantastical creatures is a fundamental aspect of childhood development.

* Both American and Palestinian children included several non-target negative facial expressions in their fear category, but Palestinian children were more likely to include other negative facial expressions.

* This finding suggests that threat and fear is so pervasive in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that they attribute fear to all negative facial expressions at an age that children in American have begun to differentiate among them.

References


