Cultural Variations in the Socialization of Young Children’s Anger and Shame

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Tamang and Brahman Nepali children have culturally specific emotion scripts that may reflect different emotion socialization experiences. To study emotion socialization, the child–adult interactions of 119 children (3–5 years old) were observed and 14 village elders were interviewed about child competence in Tamang and Brahman villages. Tamang rebuke the angry child but reason with and yield to the child who appears ashamed. Brahmans respond to child anger with reasoning and yielding but ignore shame. Tamang practices are consistent with their view that competent children are socially graceful and never angry. Brahman practices appear to be consistent with the privileges and duties of high caste status. The roles of cultural heritage, religious differences, and majority and minority status in emotion socialization are discussed.

Our understanding of how children’s emotions are socialized is incomplete without an account of the role of cultural factors (Cole & Dennis, 1998; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Raver, 2004; Saarni, 1999). The fact that culture influences emotional experience, expression, and related behaviors is indisputable (e.g., Mesquita & Frijda, 1992), but much remains to be known about how and why culture influences particular aspects of emotional development.

Cultural comparisons are an excellent way of determining which aspects of development are universal and which are culturally variable. In the study of emotional development, most comparative studies index culture on the basis of nationality or social position (e.g., ethnic minority status). These comparisons document group differences, but when groups differ in many factors it is difficult to determine which are key and why culture has an influence. We compare two ethnic groups in one nation: Nepal. They share numerous social, economic, and demographic similarities but have distinct cultural values that are relatively preserved because of their remote locations. By observing interactions with children in their households, and interviewing village elders, we hoped to come nearer to understanding how culture contributes to emotion socialization.

Culture and Emotion

The capacity to be emotional is regarded as a universal ability but culture influences how individuals appraise situations, whether they communicate particular emotions, and when certain emotions are evoked (e.g., Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Certain basic human emotions are also thought to be universal, stemming from the evolution of a biologically based capacity to appraise and prepare to act upon situations in the interest of well-being (e.g., Frijda, 1986). For example, when efforts to protect or regain individual well-being are thwarted or well-being is challenged by unfair treatment, all people should react in the way that, in English, is called getting angry.

Emotional processes, however, are not fixed states within individuals but active processes by which individuals relate to their circumstances as they perceive them (Barrett & Campos, 1987). Emotions
organize how we act upon those circumstances and communicate our intentions and needs. Thus, it is important to study emotions in their situational context. Because cultures vary widely in their standards for conduct, emotional behavior should be affected by those standards. However, the debate about culture and emotion is much more complex, questioning whether other cultures have equivalent experiences that Western science calls "emotion," and whether we can bridge the psychological spaces between cultures. Much of this debate, however, has rested on evidence of adults' conceptions of emotions and not on emotional development. By adopting a developmental approach, we can examine the socialization of emotion, how others convey to children what events are significant for well-being, and how one manages emotions and behaves in those situations (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Therefore, it should be possible to observe the cultural socialization of emotion by studying very young children as they are acquiring the cultural norms of their community.

Anger and Shame in Nepal's Rural Tamang and Brahman Children

Despite living under circumstances that differ markedly from those represented in the child development literature, rural Nepali schoolchildren associate emotions and situations in much the same way as schoolchildren in Western nations (Cole & Tamang, 1998; Hardman, 2000; Harris, Olthof, Terwogt, & Hardman, 1987). For example, they ascribe feelings that are glossed linguistically as anger to experiencing blocked goals or unjust treatment. Nonetheless, Nepali schoolchildren from two ethnic groups, the Tamang and Brahmans, have culturally distinct scripts for how they would react and behave in identical situations (Cole, Bruschi, & Tamang, 2002; Cole & Tamang, 1998).

Brahman schoolchildren, like their counterparts in the United States, say they are angry (risayo, ris uthyo) when their goals are thwarted (e.g., someone spills a drink, ruining just completed homework that then needs to be completely redone). Brahman children, however, are emphatic that they would not convey their anger to the friend or parent who spilled the drink, unlike U.S. children who explain that expressing anger corrects mistakes in the present and future. In contrast, Tamang children say they would be "ashamed" (pebu), and not angry, because it would be their own fault that they placed the homework near the drink. Unlike U.S. children who would act instrumentally under such circumstances, both Brahman and Tamang children would simply remain quiet. Although this evidence does not address what children actually do, the data reveal culturally distinct scripts (Cole et al., 2002). Regardless of the context of the vignette, these differences emerge. They suggest that Tamang and Brahman children have different socialization experiences from which they derive their emotion scripts.

The qualities of culture that influence emotion socialization are not well articulated. Generally, differences are interpreted with regard to societal collectivism and individualism. Like many Asian nations, Nepal can be called a collectivist society. All of its peoples value group harmony, deference to authority, and social conformity more than individual self-assertion and personal freedoms and rights, although they also have individualistic interests. Collectivist societies are thought to frown upon anger because it threatens social harmony and challenges authority but value shame because it reflects regret when one fails to behave in accord with social standards (Fung, 1999; Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000).

A concept like collectivism, however, overlooks the complexity of human motivations and the presence of important within-society differences (Kağıtçıbaşı & Poortinga, 2000). Because all the peoples of Nepal, like people in many agrarian communities, can be described as collectivistic, this concept alone cannot explain why Tamang and Brahman children's emotion scripts differ. Nepal has numerous ethnic groups with distinct customs, languages, and religion (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Its rugged mountainous terrain and slow rate of economic development have contributed to preserving such distinctions in rural areas (Karan & Ishii, 1996). Rural Nepal, therefore, provides a unique setting in which to examine distinct cultural differences within the relatively collectivist orientation of Nepali society.

In addition to sharing a general collectivistic orientation, the Tamang and Brahman villagers who participated in our research were similar in several other ways. They were landowners, but they subsisted primarily on what they farmed, having few additional sources of income. They had low rates of literacy, little access to health care, and high rates of infant mortality. Their households were comprised of large patrilocal families in which married sons and their families reside with their unmarried siblings in the home of the eldest male in the extended family (grandfather, father). Despite these commonalities, Tamang and Brahmans are regarded as quite distinct by the people of Nepal. These differences reflect practices for how they achieve and maintain
social harmony and order, differences that should influence emotion socialization.

Tamang society is distinguished by egalitarianism, tolerance, and cheerful generosity (Fricke, 1986; Holmberg, 1989; March, 2002). For example, if families experience good fortune, they share the wealth to avoid being in a better situation than others (Fricke, 1986; Holmberg, 1989). Anger, an emotion that motivates forceful action to overcome obstacles, carries the risk of interfering with the social goals of maintaining good humor and cheer. Anger motivates behavioral dominance, which violates the Tamang belief that one cannot and should not control others. In addition, the Tamang practice Tibetan Buddhism, which emphasizes compassion and counsels against strong emotions, especially anger, which disturb inner peace (Cozort, 1995; Desjarlais, 1992). The Tamang value self-conscious emotions, like shame, that imply awareness of and concern about the self in others’ eyes, modesty, humility, and respect. In sum, Tamang culture emphasizes having a peaceful sem (trans. heart–mind; Desjarlais, 1992) and a community that is full of cheer and sharing. Anger is inconsistent, and shame consistent, with their cultural priorities. This may explain why Tamang children say they would feel “ashamed” and not angry in situations that are characterized as anger-provoking (Cole & Tamang, 1998; Cole et al., 2002).

Brahmans are high-caste Hindus who enjoy privileged status in Nepali society based on the belief that high caste reflects inherited spiritual purity. The traditional function of the Hindu caste system is to regulate everyday social behavior in order to protect the high caste from spiritual pollution (Bennett, 1983; Gray, 1995; Kakar, 1981; Kinsley, 1993; Skinner, Pach, & Holland, 1998). As a result, interpersonal behavior requires a high degree of vigilance and self-control. High caste status cultivates ethnic pride and permits social dominance, neither of which is supported by shame. Brahman children must defer to their elders, and should be ashamed if they fail to do so, but they are also expected to be proud of their heritage and to fulfill their superior role in the social order. Indeed, Brahman adults are often perceived as arrogant and hostile by lower castes (Cameron, 1998). Even Brahman children, who are impoverished subsistence farmers in remote villages retain their high caste status and convey palpable pride in being members of the ancient tradition of the learned caste. This may explain why Brahman children endorse feeling angry when thwarted or treated wrongly when Tamang children, who are being acculturated into a community that avoids interpersonal dominance and control, do not endorse anger.

How do Tamang and Brahman children acquire their culturally specific ideas about how they should feel and act in response to provocation, injustice, and the criticism or teasing of others? Most scholars agree that children’s emotions are socialized in subtle ways that are embedded in their daily interactions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Cultural values, which organize a community’s beliefs and practices for maintaining standards of conduct, penetrate caregiver behavior. In the process of childrearing, children’s emotions are socialized. Although Tamang and Brahman communities share many features and values, we reasoned that Tamang and Brahman children must have different early childhood socialization experiences in regard to anger and shame because they have distinctly different scripts for basic emotions like anger and shame.

Tamang caregivers must respond to young children’s anger in ways that reduce any perceived benefit that a child might have in being angry, such as ignoring or rebuking the angry child. Ignoring would convey that a child’s anger is of no consequence and rebuking would convey that being angry is wrong. Shame, on the other hand, should be regarded more favorably, eliciting positive attention and guidance from caregivers. Brahman children, who readily justify feeling angry but are emphatic that it should not be expressed, must be socialized differently. Because they are expected to respect and obey the authority of caregivers, anger would not be encouraged. However, it may not be ignored or rebuked. Instead, caregivers may attend to the angry distress of a young child in ways that might cultivate the high level of self-restraint that distinguishes Brahman conduct. If so, Brahman caregivers, like many U.S. parents, may implicitly accept a child’s anger even as they support the development of emotional self-control and socially appropriate behavior (Denham, 1998; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Shame, on the other hand, may be less important, especially given the interest in a self-identity involving pride in being Brahman. They may actively discourage it or ignore it.

In the present study, we observed how the primary adult caregivers respond to the emotions of children aged 3–5 years. We focused on this age range for two reasons. First, we wanted to observe socialization processes and children younger than school age are less likely to hold or to be skillful at deploying cultural display rules. Second, pilot data indicated that 3- through 5-year-olds are angry much more often than 6- through 10-year-olds and that
caregivers coddle the angry infant but stop doing so once a child is weaned, typically around 24–36 months of age (Cole & Tamang, 1996). Thus, ages 3–5 years may mark a developmental transition that is ideal for studying the cultural socialization of emotion. This period is theorized to be crucial in emerging emotional self-regulation (Kopp, 1989).

Emotions, and caregivers’ responses to them, are embedded in interactions about events that are significant to the players. Emotional expressions often occur in brief time frames within longer interactions. Observation of the immediate responses of caregivers to a child who is clearly angry or ashamed provides a microanalysis of emotion socialization. Observation of the quality of social behavior, more generally, places these microprocesses into a larger interpersonal climate. We used Benjamin’s (1987) Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB) to investigate group differences that may surround the socialization of emotion. We chose this system because it conceptualizes social behavior as organized by two orthogonal dimensions—affiliation and psychological differentiation. Affiliation ranges from warm, loving behavior to hostile, attacking behavior. Psychological differentiation ranges from allowing others to do as they wish to trying to influence what others do. Based on the work of anthropologists, we predicted that adults in the Tamang household, with its emphasis on cheer, tolerance, and egalitarianism, would engage in more affiliative behavior with children than the Brahman household, with its emphasis on vigilance and behavioral self-restraint, which might involve more acceptance of child independence.

Finally, if Tamang and Brahman caregivers socialize children’s anger and shame differently because of their cultural values, their community values should be apparent in their conceptions of what constitutes child competence. To place group differences in the cultural context of community values, we interviewed village elders about children they regarded as doing well. We hoped this would allow us to assess the cultural factors that might explain socialization process differences.

Method

Sample: Settings, Participants, and Research Staff

Settings

Two Tamang and two Brahman villages participated in the study. They were similar in many ways. In each, the target ethnic group comprised over 90% of the population. All households subsisted on farming without the benefit of modern machinery, electricity, or phones. The households all had a patrilocal family structure (all male children and their families, and all unmarried children, live in the father’s household) and equivalent numbers of household members (M = 7.1 for Tamang, 6.4 for Brahman). Adult literacy rates and infant mortality rates were equivalent and access to health care, motorable roads, and telephones was restricted for all. Each village had one primary school established less than 20 years earlier.

Participants

We invited households that had at least one child who was 3, 4, or 5 years old to participate. If more than one child in this age range was present, the home visitor observed all children in the age range. There were 91 participating households and 119 children (3–5 years old) observed.

Given the low rate of adult literacy, verbal consent was sought from the senior adult in the household. Research staff explained the purpose and nature of the home visits in the mother tongue of the household. Village participation was acknowledged by a payment of $200 for a village project. In this way, every villager, regardless of participation, benefited from the presence of the project. One eligible Brahman family declined to participate. As a result, 49 Tamang and 42 Brahman households participated, yielding data for 61 Tamang (average age 4 years; 33 boys and 28 girls) and 58 Brahman (average age 4 years; 32 boys and 26 girls) children and their household members.

Seven elders from each ethnic group were interviewed about child competence. They were individuals whom the villagers respected and who, based on their age and status, were willing to discuss at length their views about many topics. The Tamang elders were 3 lamas (Buddhist monks), 2 grandfathers, and 2 grandmothers. The Brahman elders were 2 Brahman priests, 3 grandfathers, and 2 grandmothers.

Research Staff

The three home visitors were Nepali women from the villages who had completed secondary school (grade 10), which was rare for their cohort because the schools were established when they were young children and not all families sent children to school. Each home visitor was in her late 20s. Her native tongue was that of the families she observed. The elders were interviewed by the second author who was fluent in both tongues (Nepali and Tamang).
Observations

To reach a shared understanding of the purpose of the study and to preserve its cultural relevance, several steps were taken. First, the home visitors were told that the study’s purpose was to understand Nepali children’s development. They were asked to observe all 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children in each household for about an hour and to record in narrative form as much as they could about the sequence of experiences and activities of each child. Second, they were told to include a description of children’s emotions in their narratives. It is always a challenge to know whether the concept of emotion and the terms we use for different emotions are equivalent. To reach a common understanding, the first two authors described to each home visitor the Western concept of emotion (e.g., that one feels and acts in certain ways in particular situations). The home visitors then reacted with their own views about these ideas. They referred to a concept that has been translated as heart–mind (sem in Tamang; man in Nepali) that reflects internal states including what is referred to as emotions in English. They described the relations between situations and heart–mind and how young children looked in those situations. Although some aspects of emotion seemed unique to each culture, we concluded that there was sufficient consensus about young children’s emotions. The home visitors were asked to include changes in a child’s sem/man in their narratives describing the child’s experiences and activities.

The home visitors wrote the narratives in Nepali; the Tamang observers recorded direct quotes in Nepali script but using Tamang language, which is no longer a written language. They were allowed to interact in the household, as it would have been quite unusual, impolite, and confusing for the participants if the visitors did not, but they were encouraged to minimize their contributions to interaction. They were told to follow the children in the age range and to include descriptions of the location, the individuals who were present, and as much of what was happening in the household as they could. The home visitors provided rich descriptions, including many direct quotes. All narratives were discussed after completion to clarify any confusion or missing information. The average length of observations was 45 min.

The home visitors were unaware of our specific interest in anger and shame. Anger and shame were clearly familiar emotions to our observers. The most common English equivalent of anger is ris in Nepali and bomo in Tamang and of shame it is laj in Nepali and pe in Tamang. This is not to say that the equivalent terms have identical meanings. In Nepali and Tamang languages, the word for “shame” is used for embarrassment and shyness, internal states that share an uncomfortable self-consciousness. The functional equivalence of terms was supported by the fact that the observers demonstrated facial expressions, vocal tone, and postures, and described situations in which these emotions are elicited, that were consistent with emotion theory.

Reliability estimates for the observations were conducted by the first author, who speaks all three languages. On the basis of five co-conducted observations in each village, interobserver reliability for events ranged from 90% to 100% per observation with an average of 93.6%. The observations were conducted over a 2-month period when farming demands were minimal due to cold weather.

Child Competence Interviews

Fourteen village elders were interviewed extensively about many aspects of village life and history, including their views of children who were doing well in their communities. Each elder was interviewed individually. To assess views of child competence, we used the Criteria for Child Competence interview (Durbrow, Pena, Masten, Sesma, & Williamson, 2001), a method for assessing culturally variable views of child competence. The interview was translated and back-translated by the first two authors. The back-translation was approved by Eric Durbrow, the anthropologist who developed the interview.

The procedure involves asking the respondent to “think of a child who is doing well.” The respondent is told not to give the identity of the child who comes to mind, but is asked the child’s age and gender. Specific probes are used to facilitate responses when the respondent is recalcitrant or brief. Typically, this pattern is repeated four times to yield descriptions of older and younger boys and girls. To reduce the burden on our respondents, we limited the questioning to younger (age <12 years) children. After the first child was described, we asked the elder to think of a child of the other gender who was 12 years or younger. After this, the interview turns to how children become competent.

Measures

Coding of Observations

The narratives were translated into English by the first and second authors before coding. These
translations and the original narratives were sent to a third person, a Nepali who was fluent in all three languages and unaware of the study predictions. He was instructed to critique the translations. He differed in interpreting 10 phrases, mainly due to marks on the page that made it difficult to read these passages. These differences were discussed until consensus was reached as to an accurate translation.

All children in the target age range within the home were coded. Adults from the extended family (aunts, uncles) and other children (older siblings, cousins) were often present. For the overall structure of social interaction between adults and children, we included everyone present. For the socialization of anger and shame, we focused on children in the target age range (3–5 years) and primary caregivers, that is, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers.

SASB (Benjamin, 1987). To capture the general interpersonal climate of households, the SASB was used to categorize interactions between adults and children. The coding was conducted by the third author, a Nepali woman in a U.S. graduate training program in Psychology. She was unaware of the study predictions and the ethnic group membership of each household. Two fellow graduate students coded a portion (11%) of the narratives to estimate reliability, which was 86% between SASB coders.

The SASB conceptualizes interpersonal behavior as being organized by two dimensions—affiliation and psychological differentiation. These are orthogonal such that one can conceptualize social behavior as a circumplex with eight points. At the apex, behavior is characterized as absent of psychological differentiation or affiliation. At the opposite pole, behavior is high in psychological differentiation and absent of affiliation. At the left of the circumplex, behavior is high in disaffiliation and absent of differentiation, and to the right it is high in affiliation and absent of differentiation. The remaining four points on the diagonal axes, therefore, reflect combinations of affiliation and differentiation. In addition, the focus of behavior on every point on the SASB circumplex is differentiated as focused on the self or on the other. We used other focus codes to classify adult behavior toward children and self focus codes for child behavior. This yielded eight other and eight self codes. Moving clockwise around the SASB circumplex, the other/self codes are emancipate/separate, affirm/express, love/love, nurture/trust, control/submit, blame/sulk, reject/protest, and ignore/distance. Examples of each point for each focus are presented in Table 1.

Socialization of emotion coding. The narratives were used to identify young children’s emotions, the situational contexts in which they occurred, and the responses of adult caregivers. This system was developed by the first and second authors with the home visitors. To avoid imposing a scheme based solely on Western models, we discussed the range of situations and responses, settling on sets that captured the bulk of our observations and appeared to capture distinctions that were meaningful to the native Nepalis. The first step of the coding was to identify instances in which a child emotion was described. As stated earlier, we achieved general consensus about basic emotions, but there were emotional events that did not translate into English (e.g., “his face became very green”). Once we identified one of the basic emotions, we coded the context that appeared to elicit the child’s emotion and the immediate responses of caregivers to the child. The person who provided the quality check on the translations also served as a reliability coder. Percent agreements ranged from 79% to 100%, with an average of 88.2%.

(a) Situational contexts of children’s emotions (11 codes) Three codes described child self-directed activity: play, work, and misbehavior. Seven codes involved child interactions with others: affection (a child was touched or spoken to tenderly), teaching (something was discussed, explained, or taught to the child), refusal to yield (a child’s request was denied), physical punishment (a child was pushed with force or hit), scolding (a child was rebuked without humor or sarcasm), teasing (a child was criticized with humor including ridicule and mocking), and work assignment (a child was given a chore). When context could not be determined, it was classified as uncodable.

(b) Child emotion (six codes) The target emotions were angry and ashamed. Coders, however, were not aware of which emotions were the targets. They also coded happy (khushi), sad (dukkha), afraid (dar, longka), and worried (pir, chinta).

(c) Caregiver responses (seven codes) Parents’ and grandparents’ responses to child emotions were ignoring (was present and aware of the child but did not respond), teaching (calmly reasoned with the child), scolding (rebuked the child with an angry tone), striking (hit the child by hand or with an object), teasing (criticized the child with humor), cajoling (coaxed the child or yielded to child request), and nurturing (hugged, kissed, spoke endearingly, or gave a treat that was not requested by the child). No instance of physical punishment was regarded as abusive by the village community or U.S. standards. Observers were aware that they should report any inappropriate physical punishment to the research team.
Results

Descriptive Statistics for Children's Emotions, Their Contexts, and Caregiver Responses

Before the main analyses, we conducted a check for gender differences. There are clear gender role differences for adults in Nepal, but it is unknown whether these exist in young Nepali children. Nonetheless, it was possible that caregivers would respond differently to young boys and girls who are emotional. No differences emerged for any of the study variables and therefore gender was omitted from analyses. The young age of the children may account for the lack of gender differences.

Children's Emotions

As shown in Table 2, happiness was the most common emotion (n = 270; 47.2%), followed by anger (192; 33.6%) and shame (62; 10.8%). Sadness (34; 5.9%) and fear/anxiety (14; 2.4%) were less frequent.

Situational Contexts for Children's Emotions

As can be seen in Table 3, a range of contexts elicited the various child emotions. In order of frequency, play was most common followed by receiving caregiver affection, having a demand refused, being scolded, being physically punished, self-directed work, being taught, misbehaving, being criticized, and being assigned work. On three occasions, context could not be determined.

Caregiver Responses to Children's Emotions

There was also a range of caregiver responses to all child emotions, as shown in Table 4. Nurturing and ignoring comprised the majority of responses. With less frequency, caregivers responded by reasoning, cajoling, scolding, striking, and teasing.

Relations Among Ethnic Group, Child Emotion, Context of Emotion, and Caregiver Response

The primary aim of the study was to investigate cultural differences in the socialization of children's anger and shame. Because most variables were not normally distributed, we tested the full model, including the predicted interactions of emotion, care-
giver response, and ethnic group using multiway frequency analysis (SPSS-12.0 Hierarchical Log Linear program). The variables were ethnic group membership (Tamang, Brahman), child emotion (anger, shame), situational contexts for child anger and shame, and caregiver responses to child anger and shame. To reduce expected cell frequencies of less than five, some modifications of the context variables were required. Anger and shame rarely occurred (n = 3) in the context of caregiver nurturance; this context was combined with teaching because both involve positive adult attention. We also combined self-directed play and work into a self-directed activity category. Misbehavior (n = 6) was rare and less easily combined and therefore omitted. Finally, the three cases in which context could not be determined were omitted. In sum, there were seven situational context categories for 245 instances of child anger and shame.

The analysis yielded 9 significant associations of the 14 tested by the full model. There were significant main effects for emotion, context, and caregiver response but these were all qualified by significant interactions with ethnic group membership. There were five significant two-way interactions. As stated, three involved ethnic group membership: ethnic group and emotion, partial $\chi^2(2) = 16.84, p < .0005$, ethnic group and situational context, partial $\chi^2(8) = 21.23, p < .01$, and ethnic group and caregiver response, partial $\chi^2(6) = 19.04, p < .005$. In addition, there were significant relations between emotion and context, partial $\chi^2(16) = 37.02, p < .005$, and emotion and response type, partial $\chi^2(12) = 51.30, p < .0001$. Finally, the predicted three-way interaction of ethnic group, emotion, and caregiver response was significant, partial $\chi^2(12) = 22.26, p < .05$.

The frequency tables indicate the nature of these interactions. First, we present the significant associations that did not involve ethnic group membership. These reveal that situational context and caregiver response are related to the emotion the child displayed, as expected on the basis of emotion theory and socialization theory, apart from any influences of culture. Figure 1 shows that children’s anger is observed more than shame when children’s demands are refused or children are physically punished and shame is more likely when children are scolded, criticized, or even the focus of positive caregiver attention (teaching, nurturing). It is worth reiterating that, in Nepal, the same word is used for shame, embarrassment, and shyness; caregiver attention to the individual child can make a child feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. Also shown in Figure 1, child anger was more likely than shame to receive active responses from the caregiver (75.6% of responses). Caregivers never scolded, struck, teased, or cajoled an ashamed child.

Ethnic group membership was significantly associated with child anger and shame, the situations in which they occurred, and caregiver responses to them. As can be seen in Table 2, shame was more common among the Tamang (32.8% shame, 67.2% anger) compared with Brahman children (17.0% shame, 83% anger). Table 3 shows that the contexts of emotions were more often similar than different. Brahman children spent a larger percent of their time in self-directed play (29.2%, Tamang 15.6%). Brahman children experienced slightly more physical punishment (11.6%, Tamang 8.5%) and Tamang children experienced slightly more scolding and criticism (19%, Brahman, 13.4%), which may partially account for the differential rates of anger and shame.

The two-way interaction of ethnic group and caregiver response is best understood by examining the significant three-way association between ethnic group, emotion, and caregiver response, which supported the study’s main prediction (See Table 4). To examine this interaction, we compare Tamang and Brahman caregiver responses separately for child anger and shame. The top graph in Figure 2 shows that Tamang and Brahman caregivers are
equally likely to ignore, scold, strike, or cajole the angry youngster. Although teasing an angry child is infrequent, it occurred almost exclusively in Tamang households. Brahman caregivers were more likely than Tamang to respond to child anger with positive attention in the form of teaching and to a lesser degree nurturance. There were only three types of response to child shame, as shown in the bottom graph. Brahman caregivers ignored almost 75% of the instances in which children appeared ashamed whereas Tamang caregivers responded with ignoring but also teaching and nurturing.

Relations Between Ethnic Group Membership and the Quality of Adult–Child Interaction

To place the immediate responses of adult caregivers to young children’s emotions in the larger interpersonal context of the households, we analyzed the data based on the SASB coding. This yielded a total of 1,622 observations for children and 1,049 for adults. In fact, there was significantly more social behavior observed in Tamang (M = 39.06, SD = 11.40) than Brahman households (M = 30.43, SD = 11.16), t(89) = 3.64, p < .0005. Therefore, proportions were used for analysis.

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze predicted differences in the general nature of social behavior between adults and children. Preliminary examination of the distributions for each proportion score revealed that seven of the eight child codes were normally distributed (protesting was not) and three of the eight adult codes were normally distributed (emancipating, affirming, loving, rejecting, and ignoring were not) because they were less frequent.
Because transformation could not improve the distributions, these variables were omitted from the MANOVA.

The results of the MANOVA indicated that ethnic group membership was associated with 4 of the 16 SASB codes—2 self (child) codes and 2 adult (other) codes. As shown in Table 5, Tamang children engaged in more trusting behavior (accepting control in an affiliative way) and Brahman children in more separating behavior (acting independently, not affiliative or disaffiliative). Also shown in Table 4, Tamang adults engaged in more nurturing social interaction (modest control exerted in an affiliative way) and Brahman adults in more autonomy granting behavior (high psychological differentiation, not affiliative or disaffiliative). In sum, child trust and adult nurturance distinguished Tamang household social interaction, and the degree of psychological differentiation between adult and child distinguished Brahman interaction, but the groups were similar on most codes.

**Conceptions of Child Competence**

To contextualize the observational data, we examined elders’ views of children who were doing well and of how children become competent. This qualitative analysis involved identifying the most prominent themes in their interviews. Prominence was based on a theme being introduced early, often, and elaborated throughout the interview.

All Tamang elders focused on social competence in their descriptions of children who were doing well. Specifically, they described a child’s being friendly to others, using the proper kinship terms of address that convey respect and social grace, and promoting interpersonal goodwill and cheer. For example, they each mentioned the child knew what to say when meeting people on a village path and being friendly rather than shy in those encounters. In addition, five of the seven Tamang elders emphasized that competent children were “never angry” when things did not go their way.

All of the Brahman elders emphasized academic and social competence. They described children who focused on their studies, did not have to be coerced or ordered to do homework, and who respected their teachers and were acknowledged by the teachers. Brahman elders also referred to social competence but with a different emphasis than Tamang elders. They described competent children’s respect for teachers and adults in the home and in the village but not the skill of making others feel happy. Some
Tamang elders mentioned school success but did not elaborate on this aspect of competence. In describing how children become competent, all Tamang elders repeated one phrase in particular, “if listening, listening; if not listening, not listening.” This literal wording conveys their sense that one can only guide a child but cannot determine whether the child will comply. The Brahman elders, in relative contrast, emphasized the moral obligation of caregivers and teachers to direct and instruct children, with particular references to being sure children were educated and that they learned to be good Hindus. In response to the questions about why some children are not competent, Brahman elders said caregivers and teachers were to blame. Tamang elders attributed it to the child, repeating that you can try but cannot make a child listen.

Discussion

This study set in rural Nepal provides a glimpse into the emotional lives of very young children and the way in which cultural values might come to influence their emotional lives. Although Tamang and Brahman households were similar in many ways—in terms of both a collectivist orientation, demographic characteristics, and observed social behavior between adults and children—adult caregivers from each group responded differently to young children’s anger and shame. These differences were consistent with the cultural priorities described by elders, with previous studies of schoolchildren’s emotion scripts, and with anthropological accounts of these groups.

In many ways, children from these two distinct cultural groups have common experiences. Their households are similar in structure, size, and resources and their villages are agrarian communities that emphasize the good of the group more than the interest of the individual. Despite the limitations of a single observation of each child, similar portraits of the children’s active emotional lives emerge. Happiness was observed most often; approximately 60% of all adult–child interactions involved adult nurturance, control, and discipline and child trust, sulking, and autonomy. Children’s emotions occurred mostly in the context of being loved, disciplined, and told what to do. Both groups of youngsters became angry, and their anger mostly occurred when their wishes were not met or when they were punished or scolded. Thus, in many respects, this emotional portrait sounds typical for children of this age in most communities of the world (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). The use of two levels of analysis—the general interpersonal climate between adults and children and the immediate responses of caregivers to young children’s emotions—reveal how similar the two ethnic groups were. Nonetheless, the data supported our prediction that Tamang and Brahman children receive different emotion socialization messages. Tamang and Brahman responded to child anger and shame differently.

Brahman and Tamang are equally likely to respond to young children’s anger but they do so differently. As predicted, the majority (70%) of active responses by Tamang caregivers (i.e., not ignoring) involve rebuking the angry youngster (scolding, striking, teasing) whereas 85% of active responses by Brahman caregivers involve nurturing, reasoning, and coaxing the angry child to feel better. The rebuking of anger by Tamang caregivers includes “teasing,” which we defined as using humor to convey disapproval. Although it was an infrequent response to child anger, it is worth noting that it was done almost exclusively by Tamang caregivers. Teasing of children was also noted among the Lohorung Rai, another ethnic group of Nepal, and interpreted as an effort to induce shame (Hardman, 2000). Injecting humor into discipline may also reflect a more general effort to minimize conflict and maintain a cheerful interpersonal climate (March, 2002). Thus, although both groups respond to child

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Note. Bold font indicates significant group difference.
anger, Tamang caregivers do little to reflect upon or cultivate a child’s understanding of anger or even to communicate that it is justifiable. This pattern of findings is consistent with the fact that school-age Tamang children’s scripts for emotion downplay anger (e.g., Cole et al., 2002) and that Tamang elders’ views of competent children include not being angry.

Young Brahman children clearly have a different socialization experience when they are angry. Although Brahman caregivers do not encourage or amplify child anger, they are more likely than Tamang to attend to the angry child in ways the child may find positive. One context in which Brahman children became angry was when their demands were refused, most often a request for more food. Brahman caregivers, despite a stereotype that they are stern and unaffectionate, often yielded to the youngster’s demand or reasoned with the child about the situation. Thus, the implicit message to young children in Brahman households may be that anger is understandable and can be addressed. The Tamang message seems to be that the child’s anger is unjustified and does not warrant any positive attention.

This explanation for Brahman anger socialization does not address Brahman children’s understanding that felt anger can and should be regulated at the expressive level (Cole & Tamang, 1998; Cole et al., 2002). In fact, the narratives provided no evidence of explicit teaching of anger management or expressive control. We did not observe emotion coaching as described in the child development literature; caregivers seemed to socialize children’s emotions through contingent responses and through modeling (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Halberstadt, 1991; Parke, 1994). In the case of Brahman children, contingent caregiver responses alone do not explain Brahman children’s scripts for controlling the expression of anger. Caregiver contingent positive attention to child anger, however, may aid a child in understanding anger and its associated consequences, even when that information is not explicit, as seen in studies of U.S. middle- and low-income mother–child dyads (Denham, Renwick-DeBardi, & Hewes, 1994; Garner, Jones, Gaddy, & Rennie, 1997). Moreover, Brahman children may witness anger in their households, learning the situations in which it can be expressed (e.g., to one’s junior) and should be regulated (e.g., with one’s elder). Likewise, Tamang children may more often witness their caregivers behaving cheerfully, even in anger-provoking contexts. Future work, therefore, should explore a wider range of socialization mechanisms, including adult emotional behavior.

The most striking group difference involved children’s self-conscious emotion, which bilingual Nepalis usually translate into English as shame. Shame is attributed when a child’s head and eyes are down with shoulders elevated and tense, as if politely withdrawing one’s face from the gaze of others. Brahman caregivers largely ignore such emotion in children. Brahman caregivers respond with a relatively even mix of ignoring, reasoning, and nurturance, much like Brahman caregivers respond to child anger. This differential attention to specific negative emotions may explain why Tamang and Brahman children have different scripts for acceptable emotions in provoking situations. Tamang caregivers appear to cultivate self-effacement. Brahman caregivers are more positive, giving the child more attention and aid than they do when a child is ashamed. This may explain why Brahman children report controlling anger and Tamang children feeling shame in identical hypothetical challenging situations.

The SASSB provided a means of placing immediate, contingent caregiver responses to child emotion into the larger interpersonal quality of adult–child interactions in the home. In general, the quality is more varied within than between groups. Yet, the groups differ in the emotional tone of their efforts to influence children. Brahman engage in more unemotional control than Tamang who were more affectionately controlling. Possibly, the unemotional control of caregivers is one way in which Brahman children observe adult emotional self-restraint. The findings are consistent with profiles of these groups in the anthropology literature. Tamang households are described as highly social and warm (Fricke, 1986; Holmberg, 1989; March, 2002) and Brahman households as emotionally reserved (Kakar, 1981; Seymour, 1999). The empirical data suggest that these differences are subtle.

Why would these two groups socialize children’s anger and shame differently? Both groups want children to be polite and respectful, a value that reflects the general collectivistic view that anger endangers social harmony (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). The Tamang standard, however, seems to be that one should not get angry. A commonly heard phrase in Tamang households is “Tilda bomo khaba?” or “Why be angry?” The elder interviews in the present study and schoolchildren’s interviews in other studies clearly document a cultural standard that one should not get angry. There are three, related cultural reasons why this standard may exist among the Tamang. First, being socially skillful, particularly being able to promote
good feeling and cheer in others, is very important to the Tamang (Fricke, 1986; March, 2002). Feeling angry may make this more difficult to achieve. Also, according to Tibetan Buddhism, compassion and tolerance are very important. Anger is a destructive emotion, signifying attachment to selfish interests, which can undo the merit earned by compassionate and tolerant acts (Cozort, 1995). A third possibility is that minority status in the larger society makes anger problematic for the Tamang. Although they are an indigenous people, Tamang are a political minority in the majority culture of Hindu Nepal. Minority group status influences definitions of competence and how caregivers socialize children’s emotions (Barbarin, 1999; Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Ogbu, 1981). Just as in the United States, Nepali minority group members experience racism and prejudice as they interact with the majority culture.

Majority group status, which Nepali Brahmans enjoy, is a consequence not only of the Hindu caste system but also of Nepal’s adopting Hinduism as the national religion. For over 100 years, the rules of caste were also the law of the land, such that all people, Hindu or not, were stratified by caste, and caste violations (e.g., touching the water of a high-caste person) became criminal acts (Gurung, 2003). Even in poor, remote farming villages, Brahmans identify with the majority culture. Their ethnic pride and the fact that society bestows status as a dominant group upon Brahmans may minimize the value of being self-effacing and shameful relative to other collectivistic groups like the Tamang. In Brahman households, young children are expected to be respectful and submissive, but the relative differences revealed in this observational study suggest that shame is not generally promoted. Anger receives relatively more positive adult attention.

When properly regulated, anger may serve important aspects of Brahman competence. An often overlooked tenet of contemporary emotion theories is that anger, like all emotions, is adaptive (e.g., Barrett & Campos, 1987). Anger motivates actions that involve dominance, power, and persistence. The behavioral skills that constitute competence for Brahmans—protecting one’s purity, fulfilling a social role as a dominant party in intergroup relations, and for children, academic success—are served by the ability to access angry emotions. Anger conveys to others that they are behaving incorrectly and may be an effective way to protect one’s spiritual purity and maintain one’s social status. Indeed, lower caste members regard Brahmans as haughty, arrogant, and even hostile (Cameron, 1998; Gray, 1995). Moreover, due to their social position, the expression of anger to lower status persons by Brahmans is unlikely to be reprimanded or sanctioned.

Thus, in addition to “culture” and religion, majority/minority group status must be considered. The village Tamang and Brahman children in our participating communities had their first formal encounters with intergroup relations among peers in school (Cole, Walker, & Lama-Tamang, 2006). In the case of Brahman children, well-regulated frustration coupled with pride in being a member of the learned caste may facilitate academic persistence and mastery over difficult tasks. For the Tamang child, minority group status may cultivate a sense of shame (Cole et al., in press). It is notable that there were cultural group differences in the proportion of anger and shame, even in these young children, which did not appear to be wholly accounted for by situational differences.

The findings in this study represent first steps in the broader quest to understand what it is about culture that influences the socialization of emotion. Ultimately, we wish to understand why distinct cultural practices exist, how these implicitly and explicitly influence socialization goals and conceptions of child competence, how these goals are reached through caregiving practices, how children’s emotions are socialized, and how children acquire culturally specific emotional behavior and scripts for their behavior. Such complex questions are best addressed by research designs that improve upon our work. First, future studies should include more observations—of more children and more observations per child. Although we marveled at the rich portraits that our home visitors produced, larger samples with more observations would yield more reliable information. Second, those observations may be more revealing if they include extended sequences of interaction instead of the immediate responses that we recorded. If possible, it would be a considerable improvement if the intensity of children’s emotions was also assessed. A third improvement in design would be direct assessment of the various, related factors that comprise culture. Our study points to social practices that have been handed down from generation to generation, religious influences on right conduct, and socio-political factors, such as majority—minority status. Culture, religion, and social position are all highly related in Nepal but it may be possible to disentangle them further by studying more than two groups. Qualities ascribed to the Tamang, for example cheerfulness and egalitarianism, are descriptive of other indigenous groups of Nepal, such as the Lohorung Rai and Sherpa (Hardman, 2001).
2000; Ortner, 1999), and there are Hindu groups of low caste (Cameron, 1998). Because such a design calls for analysis of communities, households, children, and their emotions, a larger sample size with more extensive sampling would permit the use of nested design statistical analyses. Finally, it would be valuable to link socialization processes to later child outcomes, both in terms of actual behavior and in terms of emotional scripts, through a longitudinal design.

In addition to informing the field of child development about rarely studied groups, our findings have implications for the study of emotional development and the socialization of emotion. The findings clearly suggest that culture seeps into the ordinary day-to-day interaction of children and their caregivers. Although Tamang and Brahmins share many qualities of daily life, they have different methods of being harmonious, orderly communities. Brahmins are more hierarchical in their social structure than the egalitarian Tamang. Tamang are more outgoing and expressive, particularly in regard to infusing interactions with humor, than the reserved, highly regulated Brahmins. Contrasts of East and West underscore how very different two cultures can be but, because such contrasts involve numerous confounded differences between groups, they cannot specify what cultural factors influence particular developmental outcomes. Collectivism is too broad a construct for capturing the subtle differences in children’s emotion regulation patterns and how they are socialized.

References


