

Ontogenetic Phases of Emotional Development in the Childhood Period

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Abstract

The present paper, through a theoretical research and an explorative research, is with the primary objective to investigate the major phases in emotional development. These are the neonatal/infancy period, preschool period, childhood period and adulthood period. In the following article, the childhood period where the first three phases are covered will be approached and studied in more detail. The neonatal period covers the first 4 weeks of a child's life. The second phase in emotional development covers the ages between 2 and 6, i.e. the preschool period, when children are toddlers and preschoolers. According to the internalization model of emotional development, the third phase of development starts from age six onward.

Keywords: emotional development, neonatal/infancy period, preschool period, childhood period.

1. Introduction

The Holodynski and Friedlmeier's internalization model of emotional development postulates the existence of five major phases in emotional development: neonatal/infancy period, preschool period, childhood period, and adulthood period.

Each phase is characterized by the following (Holodynski & Friedlmeier, 2006):

- Specific emotion-related developmental tasks (called “milestones” by Holodynski and Friedlmeier), that children have to learn and master, and by
- Specific mechanisms that provide emotional development.

In this article, the first three phases covering the childhood period will be discussed in more detail.

2. Neonatal period

The neonatal period, also called “newborn”, covers the first 4 weeks of a child's life. Based on the results of studies aiming to investigate the emotional reactions of neonates, it was concluded that neonates have five precursor emotions: distress, disgust, fright, interest, and endogenous pleasure (for a review see Sroufe, 1996).

It is considered that these precursor emotions are universal to all newborn human beings. Moreover, they are seen as the biological mainstay for emotional development and as incomparable with the developed emotions of sadness, disgust, fear, interest, and happiness in adulthood (Holodynski, 2009).

Each of these precursor emotions possesses specific purpose and specific expressions: while distress, disgust, and fright aim to signalize need-related deficit states or impairments of physical integrity, interest, and endogenous pleasure help in the formation of psychological representations of the external world (the surroundings) and the internal world (related with the neonate's body).

Regarding the function of these precursor emotions, Holodynski (2009) notes that they mainly perform an interpersonal regulation function. "They are designed so caregivers will interpret them as appeals to carry out vicariously those actions that are necessary to satisfy the infant's motives" (*Ibid.*, 2009).

During infancy Sign-Mediated Emotion Systems emerge, i.e., a process of development of differentiated emotions occurs. The infants are faced with two main tasks:

- To start with the precursor emotions and form a differentiated repertoire of emotions presented by expression signs; and
- To develop a repertoire of actions for satisfaction of their own motives by themselves.

Neonates and infants' studies revealed that from the precursor emotions (already mentioned above: distress, disgust, fright, interest and endogenous pleasure) emerge the following functional emotional systems (Holodynski, 2009):

- Frustration, anger, and defiance along with sorrow and sadness;
- Disgust and aversion;
- Fear and embarrassment;
- Interest and surprise; and
- Pleasure, joy, affection, and amusement.

Holodynski makes the following description of the development of expressive reactions during infancy period: "The undirected, in part still unorganized expressive reactions of the neonate, which also require some time to 'build up steam', turn into cause-directed, emotion-specific organized expression signs with an unequivocal appeal character. The latter follow the cause promptly, their timing and orientation are coordinated with the specific context, their effect is confirmed by appropriate bodily reactions, and they can purposefully trigger motive-serving reactions-generally in the caregiver" (Holodynski, 2009: 149).

Regarding the mechanism that ensure the differentiation of fully functional emotions, the internalization model suggests that the interaction between two factors represents this decisive mechanism. The first factor is "the caregiver's mirroring of the infant's emotional expression and his or her motive-serving response interacting with" and the second one is "the infant's motor mimicry of the caregiver's emotional expression and his or her learning from experience" (Holodynski, 2009: 149).

In this context it will be interesting to briefly mention the Social-Biofeedback Model proposed by Gergely and Watson (1999) for the account of the early socio-emotional development of the human beings. The core assumptions of this model are that "in their initial state human organism has no differential awareness of his or her basic categorical emotion states, and that affect-reflective parental mirroring interactions play a vital role in the development of perceptual sensitivity to the infant's internal affect states" (108-109).

In close relation with the Gergely and Watson's statements is the assumption for the existence of intuitive parenting, which belongs to Papousek and Papousek (1987). The researchers postulate that parents intuitively reduce the complexity and duration of their messages when they communicate with their infants till the moment they can induce contingent reactions in the infant. Moreover, parents do in parallel interpretation of the infant's expression signs perceiving these signs as an appeal directed toward them and respond with appropriate care. Also, to ensure the success of learning processes, parents all the time try to maintain an optimal level of arousal in their infant, creating in this way an opportunity for the infant to learn through experience.

Summarizing the knowledge about the infant phase in emotional development Holodynski (2009) emphasizes that infant precursor emotions can develop into completely functional motive-serving emotions only when the caregivers appropriately interpret the infant expression and body reactions, mirror them in their own expressions in the form of succinct expression symbols, and react immediately with motive-serving actions. Therefore, at the beginning the emotion process of an infant is shared between him/her and caregiver. Initially the caregiver initiates interpersonal regulation, and then the infant gradually more and more autonomous regulation (especially during the second year of life), which requires the caregiver's active support in regulation.

Furthermore, in parallel with the process of differentiation of emotions, which extensively occurs during the first 2 years of life, children also actively learn a variety of motive-serving actions, as normally, by the age of two years, they can already perform a number of their motive-serving actions by themselves, which makes them less dependent on their caregiver's regulation.

3. Preschool period

The second phase in emotional development covers the ages between 2 and 6, i.e. the preschool period, when children are toddlers and preschoolers. This is the period when the intrapersonal regulation emerges. The developmental task that toddlers and preschoolers face with during this period are:

- To perform motive-serving actions more and more frequently without need of any social support;
- To form the norm-oriented self-evaluative emotions shame and pride;
- and
- To develop emotion regulation strategies.

In relation to the first task the most important is that in contrast to the previous phase, where the caregivers strive to react immediately to their infants' emotional reactions and fully meet their accompanying motives, here the caregivers increasingly require their children to regulate their own actions and emotions independently, without help, by applying the expression signs and the actions acquired during the previous phase of interpersonal regulation.

With regard to the second task of development, the main goals a child face with are to learn that the current motive cannot always be satisfied immediately, and that motive satisfaction has to be coordinated with the demands of social environment and situation. Therefore, a child must develop his/her abilities to rank motives in a hierarchy, and to delay or completely abandon their satisfaction if his/her actions do not cover the social norms. It is considered that the appearance of episodes "...when a child no longer reacts only with joy over a successful effect but also with pride over meeting a behavioral standard, and he or she no longer reacts just with anger or disappointment over unsuccessful effects but also with shame over failure to comply with a behavioral standard", mark the beginning of this process (Holodynski, 2009: 153).

However, a conscious compliance of emotional norms, based on a purposeful decision can be seen only at the late preschool age (Barrett, 1995).

The ability to engage in emotion regulation in general, and to acquire regulation strategies, in particular, represent the third task of this phase of emotional development.

Children learn step-by-step to suppress or reject voluntarily an immediate emotional action impulse. Acquiring and independently implementing effective strategies for emotion regulation gives the children freedom to regulate themselves their emotions and does not require not they to return to the typical for the previous phase interpersonal regulation by their caregivers (Friedlmeier, 1999).

4. Childhood period

According to the internalization model of emotional development, the third phase of development starts from age six onward. The central task of this phase is an internalization of the psychological means of regulation.

Two observations have underlined this assumption: that adults do not share with and do not so clearly display their feelings to those around them as much as children do.

Also, in this phase, another major milestone in emotional development is formed, namely, the child's ability to use his/her own emotional displays to communicate and influence other persons with the aim to let them to act in line with his or her motives. Moreover, this ability will give the child the possibility to adapt to whatever cultural display rules (Ekman, 1972). Display rules are normative rules that prescribe us what kind of expressions is appropriate and socially acceptable for a given situation.

There is evidence that girls are better skilled in masking negative emotions with a positive expression than boys (Davis, 1995; Saarni & Weber, 1999). In addition, girls seem to significantly improve this ability from the ages of 4 to 10 years, whereas boys do not (Saarni & Weber, 1999).

In close relation with this ability is so-called "miniaturization effect" also emerges in the course of this phase. It is reflected in a tendency, when adults are alone they display a much weaker emotional expression than in similar situations in which people are present to whom they want to convey their feelings.

Finally, studies' results showed that this effect becomes apparent around the eighth year of life (Holodynski, 2009).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, these major phases in emotional development (neonatal/infancy period, preschool period and childhood period) are very important for all children. The early child period is considered to be the crucial in the human life-span development. Healthy and normal early development of a child, including his/her physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, strongly influences the subsequent personal and social functioning, well-being and life success.

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