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Young children’s views of emotions in themselves:  
Preschooler’s reporting about their own emotional experiences

KUBO Yukari

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how young children understand their own emotions. In study 1, each preschool child was asked (1) others’ emotional (happiness, sadness and anger) antecedents, and (2) his/her own emotional (happiness, sadness and anger) antecedents. It was found that preschoolers were less likely to give immediately plausible antecedents for sadness and anger experienced by themselves than sadness and anger experienced by others. They gave immediately plausible antecedents for happiness experienced by themselves and by others. The results of others’ emotional antecedents questions showed that they have general knowledge of negative emotions as well as positive ones. It suggests that although preschoolers have general knowledge of negative emotions, they do not report antecedents of their own negative emotions. Why do they tend not to tell about their own negative emotions? One possible explanation is that they might regulate expressing their own negative emotions. Emotion scripts of the culture may cause them not to report antecedents of their own negative emotions.

The purposes of study 2 are (1) to replicate Study 1’s findings and (2) to examine the hypothesis that preschool children tend not to tell about their own negative emotions because of their tendency to regulating their own negative emotion expressions. If the hypothesis is correct, when they are asked to tell about a kind of negative emotion, which has weaker physical expressions than sadness or anger, they might talk more about it than sadness and anger. In Study 2, bad feeling [yana-kimochi in Japanese] is adopted as the negative emotion that has weaker physical expressions than sadness or anger and lower cultural demand for self-regulation. The results showed that preschoolers tended not to immediately report plausible antecedents of their own feeling bad as well as feeling
sadness and anger. In other words, they did not talk about even the kind of negative feelings with weaker expression and lower cultural demand for self-regulation. Therefore it does not seem plausible that children's regulating their own negative emotion expressions is the reason why children tend not to report antecedents of their own negative emotions.

Another possible explanations of their tendency not to report antecedents of their own negative emotions were discussed in terms of not only cognitive factors but also motivational factors.

* * *

If young children are given the emotions: happy, sad, angry and so on, they can suggest a situation likely to cause them. For example, they were told, "One day, Jennifer got very, very angry. Why do you think Jennifer was so angry?" Most of the children's answers were appropriate (Trabasso, Stein, and Johnson, 1981). Thus, young children understand generalized others' emotions well. They might have emotion scripts. Emotion scripts mean knowledge of the appropriate emotions that are likely to be elicited in others and self (Lewis, 1989).

Then, how about young children's understanding of their own emotions? Are there any differences between understanding of others' emotions and their own emotions? How has children's understanding of their own emotions developed? Does it have similar developmental patterns to understanding of other's emotions?

The purpose of this study is to answer these questions.

Children's reporting about their own emotions might reflect their understanding of their own emotional lives. We would like to get clues from children's narratives in order to explore characteristics of young children's understanding of their own emotional lives.

Regarding social and emotional development, around four-year-old is one of milestones. From around four-year-old they can understand other's false belief (Wellman, 1990; Astington, 1993). And they become to infer other's emotion based on not only his/her desire but also his/her belief (Harris, Johnson, Hutton, Andrews, and Cooke, 1989). They basically understand other's mind and emotion.

Then how about understanding of their own minds and emotions? Until about two-year-olds children have objective self-awareness, that is they recognize the existence of their own selves (Lewis, 1999). Then they begin to construct the content of their own
Young children's views of emotions in themselves (KUBO Yukari)

selves. They may construct their own self through interactions with others (Fivush, Kuebli, and Clubb, 1992; Miller, Wiley, Fung, and Liang, 1997). For example, they might constitute their 'narrative selves' through conversations with their significant others. It may start in the second year of life.

In middle childhood, children become to organize their internal states and behaviors into dispositions. For instance, from around eight-year-old they begin to mention their own personality traits (Damon and Hart, 1988). What would it happen between two-year-old and the middle childhood? It was suggested that at age three children begin to describe themselves in terms of emotions (Eder, 1989). They may begin to think about their emotional lives in early childhood, and then they integrate their emotional tendencies into their personalities. Although this period seems very important to understand children's social and emotional development, we do not know enough about children's understanding of their own emotions and their emotional lives. This study attempts to provide useful clues for resolving this problem.

Study 1

Method

Participants
23 four-year-olds (range 3:11-4:10, 11 boys and 12 girls),
24 five-year-olds (range 5:0-5:10, 12 boys and 12 girls),
24 six-year-olds (range 5:11-6:10, 12 boys and 12 girls).

Procedure
Each subject was interviewed by a female researcher in a small room of their nursery school. The protocols were recorded with an audiotape recorder. These and notes taken during the interview were transcribed later.

Questions
Two kinds of questions were asked. The interviewer asked each child: (1) others’ emotional antecedents, and (2) their own (self) emotional antecedents.

(1) "Mah-chan [the names used were appropriate for both male and female children] is feeling happiness (or sadness or anger) now. What do you think makes
him/her [to be consistent with a subject’s gender] feel happiness (or sadness or anger)?”

(2) “When do you feel happiness (or sadness or anger)? What makes you feel happiness (or sadness or anger)?”

Half of each age group subjects were asked about first (1) others’ emotional antecedents, and second about (2) their own (self) emotional antecedents. The other half of each age group subjects were asked first about (2), and second about (1). The order of three feelings was randomized.

If the subject didn’t answer or said that he/she didn’t know, the interviewer repeated exactly same questions again.

Coding

Children’s verbal responses were scored as follows:

- 2 points: If a subject tells a plausible antecedent at first question asking, the response is given a score of 2.
- 1 point: If a subject tells a plausible antecedent at repeated question asking, the response is given a score of 1.
- 0 point: If anything else, the response is given a score of 0.

Results

1. Others’ emotional antecedents

Fig. 1 Mean scores of others’ emotional antecedents for emotions and age groups
The means of emotions reported at each age can be found in Fig.1. A 3 (age: a between variable)×2 (sex: a between variable)×2 (order of questions: a between variable)×3 (kinds of feelings: a within variable) ANOVA on data revealed a significant difference only in age condition, F(2,59)=5.15, p<.05 and multiple comparison with Student-Newman-Keuls showed a significant difference between four-year-olds and five-, six-year-olds. In others’ emotional antecedents questions, four-year-old children’s scores were significantly less than elder children’s ones.

That is four years olds were less likely to give immediately plausible antecedents for any of the emotions experienced by others than five and six year olds.

2. Their own (self) emotional antecedents

The means of emotions reported at each age can be found in Fig.2. A 3 (age: a between variable)×2 (sex: a between variable)×2 (order of questions: a between variable)×3 (kinds of feelings: a within variable) ANOVA on data revealed a significant difference only in the kinds of feelings condition, F(2,118)=9.96, p<.05, and post hoc comparisons of means showed a significant difference between happiness and sadness, anger. In their own (self) emotional antecedents questions, children’s scores for sadness and anger were significantly less than their scores for happiness.

That is young children were less likely to give immediately plausible antecedents for sadness and anger experienced by themselves than for happiness experienced by themselves.
3. Comparisons between others' and their own (self) emotional antecedents

In each emotion, paired comparisons on the scores of others' emotional antecedents and the scores of their own (self) emotional antecedents revealed significant differences in sadness and anger ($t = 3.44, \text{df} = 70, t = 3.05, \text{df} = 70$, respectively, $p < .05$). Children's scores of their own sadness and anger antecedents were significantly less than their scores of others' sadness and anger antecedents. That is young children were less likely to give immediately plausible antecedents for sadness and anger experienced by themselves than sadness and anger experienced by others.

Discussion

The results of their own (self) emotional antecedents questions showed that young children were less likely to give immediately plausible antecedents of their own sadness and anger.

Why do they tend not to tell about their own negative emotions? One possible explanation is that they might not have enough knowledge of emotions.

The results of others' emotional antecedents questions at four-year-olds showed that they were less likely to give immediately plausible antecedents than five and six year olds. Regarding four-year-olds, they may not have enough knowledge about emotions.

The results of others' emotional antecedents questions at five-year-olds and six-year-olds showed that they have general knowledge of negative emotions as well as positive ones. But they were less likely to give immediately plausible antecedents of their own sadness and anger. It suggests that although five-year-olds and six-year-olds have general knowledge of negative emotions, they do not report antecedents of their own negative emotions.

Another possibility is that they might regulate expressing their own negative emotions. A six-year-old boy, who asked why Kih-chan was feeling sadness, answered like this:

"Is he crying? … Has he slipped and fallen down? We usually don't cry such a small thing."

There was a note of scorn in his words. It seemed that he combined sad feeling with
crying, and believed he should not express crying easily.

Concerning to anger, Japanese culture seems not to tolerate interpersonal aggression (Lewis, 1993). To express anger might be culturally inappropriate.

Thus preschool children have knowledge about emotion scripts. Emotion scripts of the culture may cause them not to attend to and/or report antecedents of their own negative emotions.

**Study 2**

The purposes of study 2 are (1) to replicate Study 1’s findings and (2) to examine the hypothesis that preschool children tend not to tell about their own negative emotions because of their tendency to regulating their own negative emotion expressions. If the hypothesis is correct, when we ask them to tell about a kind of negative emotion that has weaker physical expressions than sadness or anger, they might talk more about it than sadness and anger. In Study 2, bad feeling [yana-kimochi in Japanese] is adopted as the negative emotion that has weaker physical expressions than sadness or anger and lower cultural demand for self-regulation.

It was found that in Study 1 four-year-olds had poorer understanding of emotions than five-year-olds and six-year-olds. They seem not to tell about their own negative emotions because of their poor understanding. The reason of not telling their own negative emotions at four-year-olds may be different from at five-year-olds and six-year-olds. The hypothesis that preschool children tend not to tell about their own negative emotions because of their tendency to regulating their own negative emotion expressions may fit better five-year-olds and six-year-olds than four-year-olds. In order to attain the purpose (2), Study 2’s subjects will be only five-year-olds and six-year-olds. They will be asked about their own bad feelings as well as happy, sad, and angry feelings.

**Method**

**Participants**

30 five-year-olds (range 4:11-5:10, 12 boys and 18 girls),
36 six-year-olds (range 5:11-6:10, 20 boys and 16 girls).
Procedure

Each subject was interviewed by a female researcher in a small room of their
nursery school. The protocols were recorded with an audiotape recorder. These and
notes taken during the interview were transcribed later.

Questions

Each subject was asked about antecedents of not only feeling happiness, sadness,
and anger, but also feeling bad. In the questions of (2) their own (self) emotional
antecedents, each subject was asked explicitly whether he/she had a certain emotional
experience.

(1) “Mah-chan is feeling happiness [or sadness, angry, bad] now. What do you
think makes him/her feel happiness [or sadness, anger, bad]?”

(2) “Have you ever felt happiness [or sadness, angry, bad]? (If a subject answered
“yes”, then), what made you feel happiness [or sadness, anger, bad]?”

Half of each age group subjects were asked about first (1) others’ emotional
antecedents, and second about (2) their own (self) emotional antecedents. The other
half of each age group subjects were asked first about (2), and second about (1). The
order of four feelings was randomized.

If the subject didn’t answer or said that he/she didn’t know, the interviewer
repeated exactly same questions again.

Coding

Children’s verbal responses were scored as follows:

• 2 points: If a subject tells a plausible antecedent at first question asking,
  the response is given a score of 2.

• 1 point: If a subject tells a plausible antecedent at repeated question asking,
  the response is given a score of 1.

• 0 point: If anything else, the response was given a score of 0.

Fig.3 Selecting of facial expressions task (Ishii and Konno; 1987)
Selecting of facial expressions task

Each subject was shown 5 facial expressions (Fig.3, Ishii and Konno; 1987) and was asked which facial expression represented feeling happiness [or sadness, anger, bad].

Results

1. Selecting of facial expressions task

Almost of all children selected smiling face as feeling happiness, crying face as feeling sadness, and angry face as feeling anger (95%, 79%, 99% each), whereas as feeling bad, 36 children (54%) selected still face, 22 children (31%) selected crying face, and 9 children (14%) selected angry face. It seems to be confirmed that feeling bad has relatively weaker relationship with facial expressions than feeling sadness and anger.

2. Others' emotional antecedents

The means of emotions reported at each age can be found in Fig.4. A 2 (age: a between variable) × 2 (sex: a between variable) × 2 (order of questions: a between variable) × 4 (kinds of feelings: a within variable) ANOVA on data was conducted. Any significant effect was not found. That is almost of all young children gave readily plausible antecedents for any of the emotions experienced by others.

Fig.4 Mean scores of others' emotional antecedents for emotions and age groups

3. Their own (self) emotional antecedents

The means of emotions reported at each age can be found in Fig.5. A 2 (age: a between variable) × 2 (sex: a between variable) × 2 (order of questions: a between variable) × 4 (kinds of feelings: a within variable) ANOVA on data was conducted. Any significant effect was not found. That is almost of all young children gave readily plausible antecedents for any of the emotions experienced by others.
variable) × 4 (kinds of feelings: a within variable) ANOVA on data revealed a significant difference only in the kinds of feelings condition, F(3, 174) = 7.04, p < .05, and post hoc comparisons of means showed a significant difference only between feeling happiness and sadness, anger, bad. Children’s scores for sadness, anger, and bad were significantly less than their scores for happiness. Children’s scores for bad were not significantly different from their scores for sadness and anger. That is young children were less likely to give readily plausible antecedents for sadness, anger, and bad feelings experienced by themselves than for happiness experienced by others.

**Fig. 5 Mean scores of self emotional antecedents for emotions and age groups**

![Bar graph showing mean scores of self emotional antecedents for emotions and age groups](image)

**Discussion**

It was found that children tended not to readily report plausible antecedents of their own feeling bad as well as feeling sadness and anger. In other words, children did not talk about even the kind of negative feelings with weaker expression but lower cultural demand for self-regulation. Therefore it does not seem plausible that children’s regulating their own negative emotion expressions is the reason why children tended not to report antecedents of their own negative emotions.

Then how do we explain their tendency not to report antecedents of their own negative emotions?

Account of this tendency by the emotion script of the culture could be still possible,
if emotion script of the culture implied not only regulating but also experiencing negative emotions. If emotion scripts of the culture made children believe that they should not have subjective experiences of negative emotions, children might believe that they do not experience feeling bad as well as feeling sadness and anger. It is not ascertained yet whether there is such a strong cultural script on emotion experiences or not. It should be one of research themes that deserves to continue consideration.

Another possibility is that young children’s negative emotions may be less labeled by others and it may cause them poorer discrimination of different negative emotion states. In general when young children express negative emotions, caretakers would focus to resolve the problem or to cope with the problem rather than focus on their negative emotions themselves. Young children may have less experience that labels and discriminates negative emotion states in self. So they may have less opportunity to learn to label their own emotion. On the other hand, they can see cause and effect in others’ emotions. They can have more opportunity to learn about others’ emotions. And there may be individual differences among caretakers in their coping strategies to their children’s negative emotions. The relationship between caretakers’ coping strategies and their children’s views of their own emotions is also the research theme worth consideration.

Overall results could be interpreted that young children may consider their own emotional lives to be positive one. Some investigators have tried to discuss that young children have positivity bias (Saarni, Mumme, and Campos,1998). They wrote young children tended to evaluate their own emotional lives to be more positive than real ones as similar as their evaluation of their own academic success. This is a motivational factor’s explanation for this study’s findings. And another possibility mentioned at previous paragraph is considered to be a cognitive factor’s explanation for this study's findings. The relationship between the motivational factors and the cognitive factors seems to be another theme with further consideration.

Reference


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【要約】

幼児における自己の感情についての理解:
幼児は自分自身の感情経験をいかに報告するか

本研究の目的は、幼児が自身の感情をどのように把握しているのかを検討することである。研究1では、幼児一人ひとりに次のような2種類の質問をした；(1) 架空の人物が各感情（うれしさ、悲しさ、および怒り）を惹起する出来事を尋ねる、(2) 自分自身が各感情（うれしさ、悲しさ、および怒り）を惹起する出来事を尋ねる。その結果、悲しさと怒りを惹起する出来事について、架空の人物に関してはもっともらしいものをすぐに答えたが、自分自身に関してはすぐには答えないことが見出された。一方、うれしさを惹起する出来事については、架空の人物に関しても自分自身に関してももっともらしいものをすぐに答えた。その架空の人物の感情を惹起する質問への答えは、幼児が、正の感情についても負の感情についても一般的な知識は有していることを示している。ここから幼児は負の感情について一般的な知識を有しながら、自分自身の負の感情については語らないことが示唆される。一方、なぜ自分自身の負の感情については語らない傾向があるのかは、その説明として考えられるのは、彼らが自分自身における負の感情の表出を制御しているということである。感情の文化的なスクリプトは、彼らに自分の負の感情を語らせないのかかもしれない。

そこで研究2においては、まず研究1の結果を追試し、次に、修学前児は自分の負の感情表出を制御する傾向があるゆえに自分の負の感情について語らない傾向があるとの仮説を検討する。その仮説が正しいならば、負の感情であっても悲しさや怒りよりも感情表出の弱い種類の感情について、悲しさや怒りよりも語りやすいと考えられる。研究2においては、そのような悲しみや怒りよりも感情表出の弱い負の感情として、いやな気持ちを採用し、それを惹起する出来事を尋ねた。それはまた、制御することへの文化的な要請が低い感情であると考えられる。その結果、修学前児は自分自身に関して、いやな気持ちを惹起する出来事についても、悲しさや怒りと同様、語らない傾向が示された。換言するならば、修学前児は感情表出の程度が弱く、また制御することへの文化的な要請の低い種類の負の感情であっても、語らなかったのである。したがって、自分の負の感情表出を制御するゆえに自分の負の感情を惹起する出来事について語らない傾向があるとの説明は、適切ではないと考えられる。

それでは、修学前児が自分の負の感情を惹起する出来事について語らない傾向にあるのはなぜなのかについて、ほかに可能性のある説明を、認知的な側面のみならず動機付け的な側面から論じた。