

## Linking Maternal Emotion Socialization to Boys' and Girls' Emotion Regulation in Korea

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This study investigated whether Korean mothers' emotion socialization beliefs are related to emotional functioning in children differing across gender. We interviewed Korean mothers ( $N=100$ ) of first graders (55 boys; 45 girls) about their sensitivity, their reactions to children's distress, and children's emotion regulation. Two components of emotion regulation were distinguished: regulation and negativity. Results revealed that mothers' proactive sensitivity and their supportive reactions were related to their children's regulation, whereas unsupportive reactions were related to children's negativity. Child gender moderated the associations between mothers' socialization beliefs and children's emotion regulation: mothers' proactive sensitivity was more strongly associated with competent regulation in girls than in boys. Mothers' unsupportive reactions were related to increased negativity only in girls. Results are discussed from a cultural perspective, focusing on gender differences in the links between maternal socialization and children's emotional outcomes in Korea.

*Keywords:* culture, emotion regulation, emotion socialization, gender, maternal sensitivity, mothers' reactions to child negative emotion

Emotion regulation is the motivation and ability to control one's subjective experience of emotion and to strategically manage one's expression of emotion in communicative contexts (Saarni, 1999). Emotion regulation fosters one's emotional well-being, positive social relationships (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010), and academic competence (Gumora & Arsenio, 2002). In terms of its intensity and flexibility, Shields and Cicchetti (1997) conceptualized emotion regulation competence as consisting of two closely related yet distinguishable components: how strongly emotions are aroused (i.e., negativity) and how emotions are managed appropriately to a given

situation (i.e., regulation).

Emotion socialization can be defined as cultural processes by which socializing agents transfer social skills and knowledge for managing emotional arousal and enacting socially appropriate behaviors or displaying emotions (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Parents are powerful socializing agents, who teach their children culturally desirable ways of expressing needs and regulating emotions in accordance to cultural values (Cole & Tan, 2015). The present study explored how South Korean mothers' emotion socialization beliefs are associated with children's emotion regulation and whether these associations differ across child gender.

Parental emotion socialization goals and practices for their sons and daughters stem from the beliefs that parents hold about emotional

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competence within a specific cultural context (Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011). Thus, parenting emotion and gender socialization beliefs in a given society reflect its dominant cultural values. For example, children are encouraged to express their needs and emotions in communities where individualistic values (e.g., autonomy and self-assertiveness) are prioritized (Rothbaum, Nagaoka, & Ponte, 2006). In contrast, in communities where collectivistic values (e.g., interdependence and group harmony) are emphasized, caregivers tend to discourage children's negative emotion expression and encourage their display of socially engaging emotions (Cole, Tamang, & Shrestha, 2006). These socialization expectations, however, may differ for boys and girls (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010). The present study examined multiple aspects of mothers' emotion socialization beliefs, including sensitivity to child's emotional needs and reactions to negative emotion expression, while taking into account the unique cultural characteristics of contemporary Korean society. Compared to other Asian cultures (e.g., India and Nepal) or Western cultures (e.g., U.S. and Germany), Korean mothers' socialization beliefs can be placed somewhere in between traditional Asian and Western cultural values (Fäsche, Trommsdorff, Heikamp, Cole, Mishra, Niraula, & Park, 2011). Thus, there might be a dynamic interplay between traditional collectivistic values and individualistic Western cultural values in Korean mothers' emotion socialization beliefs in conjunction with gender socialization.

### **Maternal Sensitivity to Child Needs**

Caregivers display sensitivity to children's needs in distinguishable ways depending on culture (Trommsdorff & Friedlmeier, 2010). Empirical evidence showed that, in Western cultures, parental sensitivity has been characterized as dominantly *reactive* to children's expression of needs, because parents expect their children to become independent and self-assertive. In non-Western cultures, however, sensitivity has been reported to be more

*proactive*, because parents anticipate children's needs in accordance with the general value of interdependence (Rothbaum et al., 2006).

In contemporary Korean society, the basic features of traditional Korean values that encourage interpersonal relatedness and collective solidarity remain strong despite the adoption of Western values emphasizing individual success and independence (Choi, Kim, Drankus, & Kim, 2013; Park & Kim, 2006). One of the notable traditional features of Korean mothers' parenting that is still prevalent is maternal devotion to the care of their child and the emphasis on interdependent mother-child relationships (Park & Kim, 2006). Recent Korean studies have reported that intimate parent-child relationship facilitated children's motivation and ability for regulating their own behaviors (Jang & Jang, 2012; Park, Kim, Shin, & Lee, 2014). Also, Ziehm, Trommsdorff, Heikamp, and Park (2013) found that Korean mothers who endorsed proactive sensitivity believed that this could help their children to cope with negative emotions, whereas, in Germany (i.e., a culture where individualistic values are dominant), mothers preferred the use of reactive sensitivity for encouraging their children's independence. In another study on teachers' socialization beliefs, Rothbaum et al. (2006) found that, in Japan (i.e., a culture where interdependence is emphasized), teachers preferred to be proactively sensitive by anticipating children's needs in order to promote children's teacher reliance. Based on these findings, we expected that Korean mothers' higher levels of proactive sensitivity—which is characterized by anticipating children's needs—would be positively related to children's emotion regulation competence.

### **Mothers' Reactions to Child Negative Emotion**

Mothers' reaction to a child's negative emotion guides the child how to manage emotions in distress-eliciting situations. A number of studies in Western cultures reported that mothers' supportive reactions to child

distress (e.g., being responsive to children's distress and encouraging the child's emotion expression) fostered children's effortful control and emotion regulation (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; von Suchodoletz, Trommsdorff, & Heikamp, 2011), whereas mothers' unsupportive reactions (e.g., responding punitively to children's distress) were associated with children's poor ability to regulate emotion (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001). Studies in Asian contexts also reported that mothers' supportive reactions were related to successful emotion regulation in general, whereas mothers' unsupportive reactions were associated with dysregulated emotion and problem behaviors in Korea and China (Park, Lee, & Bae, 2011; Tao, Zhou, & Wang, 2010). However, the effects of unsupportive reactions on child emotional functioning seem less consistent. For example, unsupportive responses such as minimizing reaction were not related to, or even helpful for, children's regulation of emotion in some studies with Asian samples (Lee, Choi, & Sung, 2007; McCord & Raval, 2015; Tao et al., 2010; Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011). According to Friedlmeier, Corapci, and Cole (2011), parents in Asian cultures might be more likely to endorse unsupportive reactions in order to foster children's relational emotion competence (e.g., sympathy and shame) more than individual emotion competence (e.g., pride and self-assertion), and this may be why unsupportive reactions do not influence children's emotion regulation necessarily in a harmful way. Considering these results, we expected that Korean mothers' supportive reactions would be positively associated with children's effective emotion regulation. We also hypothesized that unsupportive reactions would be positively associated with higher negativity (e.g., easily frustrated) but not with lower regulation (e.g., responds negatively to friendly overtures by peers).

### Gender-Specific Emotion Socialization

Parental responses to children's emotions may

vary across child gender in specific contexts and cultures, which consequently encourages different emotional behaviors for boys and girls (Chaplin, Cole, & Zahn-Waxler, 2005; Denham et al., 2010; VanSchyndel, Eisenberg, Valiente, & Spinrad, 2015). Parents' gender-specific emotion socialization goals and practices are also apparent in contemporary Korean society (Park & Cheah, 2005). Few Korean studies, however, explored gender differences in the association between parenting practices and child social emotional outcomes, and the results are inconsistent (e.g., Kwon & Lee, 2005; Oh, 2014). In Korean culture, parental control and strictness especially toward sons are still valued, and boys experience mothers' unsupportive reactions more often than girls (Chung, Lim, & Kim, 2011), whereas girls typically receive more emotional support from parents (Yoon, Chung, & Chung, 2007). Given these findings, we expected that boys might not be as adversely affected by mothers' unsupportive reactions as girls. We also expected that mothers' proactive sensitivity, which can be seen as an indicator of an intimate relationship would be more strongly associated with competent emotion regulation in girls than in boys. Considering the lack of literature on how sensitivity to child's needs and reactions to child's display of negative emotions are uniquely associated with child's emotion regulation in various cultures, our study on Korean mothers' sensitivity can add new information to the theories on the socialization of emotion regulation. Furthermore, we would like to suggest the importance of considering intracultural variations by providing evidence for differences in these associations across child gender.

## Method

### Participants

The current study was a part of a multinational project including five countries (i.e., Germany, India, Korea, Nepal, and U.S.) on maternal parenting beliefs and children's socioemotional

development. In the current analysis, a total of 100 Korean mothers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.23$ ,  $SD = 3.24$  years) whose children were first grade in elementary school ( $M_{\text{age}} = 6.7$ ,  $SD = 0.31$  years, 45% girls) were included. The first year in school was chosen because it is an important transition period from family to school contexts for developing socioemotional competence in multiple domains (Trommsdorff, Cole, & Heikamp, 2012). Participants were recruited through elementary schools in Seoul and its vicinities in South Korea in 2010. After the mothers voluntarily agreed to participate, permissions were acquired from the school principals, followed by informing mothers about the current study goals and procedures. The majority of mothers (69%) were college graduates or above ( $M = 15.8$  years) and the majority of mothers (78%) reported their SES as middle- or upper middle-class.

### Procedure

All data used in this study were collected through mother interviews using standardized quantitative measures. Four Korean graduate students had been trained by the Korean team leader to have a clear understanding of the measures and procedures before they started interviewing the mothers. The mothers were interviewed either at their homes or in the university lab depending on their preferences. The interviewers recorded mothers' responses to forced-choice standardized questions.

### Measures

*Caregiver sensitivity to child needs.* Mothers' sensitivity in parenting was measured with the Caregiver Sensitivity Interview Questionnaire (CSI; adapted from Rothbaum et al., 2006). The original CSI includes 12 scenarios to assess teachers' preference about anticipating or responding to children's needs in the school context. For the sake of the length of the interview, 5 out of the original 12 scenarios were chosen, and wordings were modified to fit the family context. For the current analysis, one

scenario was excluded because it asks about the belief on children's role rather than mothers' role. During the interview, mothers were asked about how a mother should behave in each scenario (see also Ziehm et al., 2013). An example scenario is, "The child probably stumbled over a stone but s/he is not crying." Mothers were presented with each scenario followed by two forced-choice options: "Would you think it is important for a mother to observe a child always carefully so that she knows when to offer help?" (proactive sensitivity) or "...to wait until the child requests it?" (reactive sensitivity). The maternal proactive sensitivity proportion score was calculated by dividing the total number of proactive responses by 4 (the total number of scenarios).

*Reactions to child negative emotion.* Mothers' reactions to their children's negative emotion were assessed with a self-reported measure of the Coping with Children's Negative Emotion Scales (CCNES; Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002). The original measure includes 12 hypothetical situations in which children often experience negative emotions. To restrict the length of the interview, 5 situations were chosen (e.g., "If your child becomes angry because he/she is sick or hurt and can't go to his/her friend's birthday party"). Each scenario was followed by six different ways of responding to children's negative emotions: Distress Reaction (e.g., "get upset with the child"), Punitive Reaction (e.g., "tell the child that's what happens when s/he is not careful"), Expression Encouragement (e.g., "tell the child it's okay to cry"), Emotion-Focused Reaction (e.g., "distract the child by talking about happy things"), Problem-Focused Reaction (e.g., "help the child think of places s/he hasn't looked yet"), and Minimization Reaction (e.g., "tell the child that s/he is overreacting"). Mothers were asked to respond to these six possible ways of responding for each situation on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). In this study, scores for each of the patterns in 5 situations were averaged to create each subscale score.

Multiple studies in different cultures reported CCNES as a valid and reliable measure for assessing mothers' responses to children's negative emotions (e.g., Altan-Aytun, Yagmurlu, & Yavuz, 2013; Fabes et al., 2002). Several studies have replicated a two-factor structure (i.e., supportive and unsupportive reactions) of this measure (e.g., Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Park et al., 2011). The current study also used two overall reaction composites in the analyses. The supportive reactions score was computed by averaging the score of expression encouragement, emotion-focused reaction, and problem-focused reaction ( $\alpha = .73$ ). The unsupportive reactions score was calculated by averaging across distress reaction, punitive reaction, and minimization ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

*Children's emotion regulation.* Mothers reported children's emotional expressiveness and regulation with the Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC; Shields & Cicchetti, 1997) on 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*almost always*). This instrument consists of 24 items, which yield two subscales: Negativity (e.g., "easily frustrated") and Regulation (e.g., "responds positively to friendly overtures by peers"). The current analysis resulted in two factors of negativity and regulation after dropping 6 items with low factor loadings (below .35). Cronbach's alphas for negativity (10

items) and regulation (8 items) were .80 and .78, respectively.

### Results

First, in preliminary analyses, we found that correlations among mothers' reports of sensitivity and two types of reactions to child distress were not significant. Children's regulation and negativity were also not interrelated, suggesting that they are distinct constructs (see Table 1).

Second, using hierarchical regression analyses, we examined whether maternal sensitivity and reactions to child distress were related to child regulation and negativity, controlling for SES and child gender. We also explored the potential moderating effect of child gender in these relations (see Table 2). Maternal proactive sensitivity was positively related to children's regulation but not to negativity. Two maternal reaction composites were also differentially associated with children's emotion regulation. Children whose mothers reported high supportive reactions showed higher levels of regulation, whereas children whose mothers reported high unsupportive reactions had higher levels of negativity. We also found that child gender moderated the link between mothers' unsupportive reactions and child regulation. To

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Maternal Proactive Sensitivity, Reactions to Child Distress, and Children's Regulation and Negativity (N = 100)*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Mother proactive sensitivity	—				
2. Mother supportive reactions	-.11	—			
3. Mother unsupportive reactions	.03	-.06	—		
4. Child regulation	.24*	.21*	-.05	—	
5. Child negativity	.08	.01	.27*	.07	—
<i>M</i>	.49	4.90	3.76	3.33	1.86
<i>SD</i>	.26	.75	.75	.48	.44
Range	0-1.0	2.8-6.9	2.3-6.0	1.8-4.0	1.0-3.1

\*  $p < .05$ .

Table 2  
*Mothers' Sensitivity and Reactions to Child Distress Predicting Children's Regulation and Negativity (N = 100)*

	Regulation		Negativity	
	b (SE)	$\beta$	b (SE)	$\beta$
Step 1	$R^2 = .10^{**}$		$R^2 = .02$	
SES	.19 (.06)	.30**	-.06 (.06)	-.10
Gender	-.09 (.09)	-.10	-.08 (.09)	-.09
Step 2	$\Delta R^2 = .10^{**}$		$\Delta R^2 = .08^*$	
Proactive sensitivity	.48 (.17)	.26**	-.12 (.17)	-.07
Supportive reactions	.15 (.06)	.23*	.02 (.06)	.03
Unsupportive reactions	.02 (.06)	.04	.17 (.06)	.29**
Step 3	$\Delta R^2 = .10^{**}$		$\Delta R^2 = .01$	
Gender $\times$ Sensitivity	.60 (.34)	.19 <sup>†</sup>	.07 (.36)	.02
Gender $\times$ Supportive	-.03 (.12)	-.02	-.01 (.12)	-.01
Gender $\times$ Unsupportive	-.38 (.12)	-.44**	-.13 (.12)	-.16
	Final model: $R^2 = .31$ , F(8, 91) = 5.15***		Final model: $R^2 = .11$ , F(8, 91) = 1.42	

Note: SES = 1(low) - 5(high). Boys = 0, Girls = 1.  
<sup>†</sup>p < .10. \* p < .05. \*\* p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.

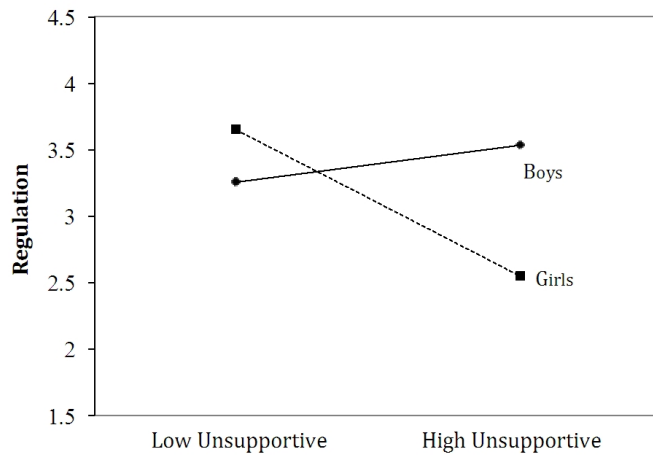


Figure 1. Child gender moderates the link between mothers' unsupportive reactions to distress and children's regulation. Only the slope for girls was significantly different from zero.

explore the nature of this interaction, we tested and plotted simple slopes for boys and girls. The slope for the link between unsupportive reactions to distress and lower regulation was significantly

different from zero for girls,  $b = -.30$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t = -2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ , but not for boys,  $b = .08$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t = 1.30$ ,  $ns$  (see Figure 1). The interaction between child gender and mothers' sensitivity

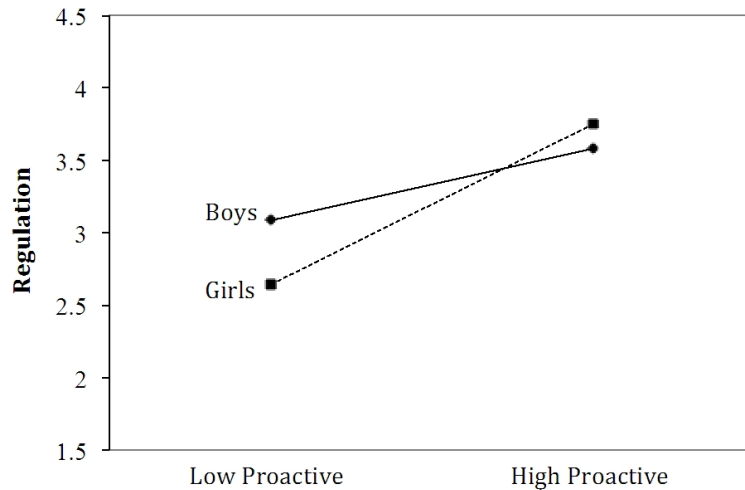


Figure 2. Child gender moderates the link between mothers' proactive sensitivity and children's regulation. Slopes for both boys and girls are significantly different from zero, but the slope for girls is more pronounced.

predicting regulation showed a trend level significance ( $p < .10$ ) and was further explored. The slope for the association between proactive sensitivity and higher regulation was significant for boys,  $b = .51$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t = 3.00$ ,  $p < .01$ , and girls,  $b = 1.10$ ,  $SE = .41$ ,  $t = 2.69$ ,  $p < .01$  (see Figure 2), but the slope was more pronounced for girls.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the associations between different dimensions of mothers' socialization beliefs and boys' and girls' emotion regulation by taking into account the Korean cultural context.

Interestingly, mothers in our study reported an average score of proactive sensitivity as .49 (0 = reactive sensitivity only; 1 = proactive sensitivity only), which suggests that they may be using both proactive and reactive sensitivity to similar degrees. This may be due to the interplay between traditional collectivistic values and individualistic values in contemporary Korean society (Park & Cheah, 2005). Supporting the hypothesis, however, Korean mothers' higher

proactive sensitivity (i.e., responding to anticipated needs of the child), rather than higher reactive sensitivity (i.e., responding to expressed needs when requested by the child), was associated with children's effective regulation of emotion. Given that maternal devotion to the care of the child and intimate mother-child relationships are still prevalent in Korea (Park & Kim, 2006), mothers' proactive sensitivity is likely to be perceived as warmth and intimacy to Korean children. Thus, mothers' proactive sensitivity may have positive influences on children's effective emotion regulation because more responsive and intimate mother-child interactions are known to facilitate children's internalization of parental values, which, in turn, guides their emotion regulation (Grusec & Davidov, 2010; Jang & Jang, 2012; Park et al., 2014).

This association between mothers' proactive sensitivity and regulation was stronger in girls than in boys. Korean parenting is characterized by an emphasis on interdependence and intimate relationship between the mother and the child. Also, like in many cultures, mother-daughter bonds are particularly more intimate than other parent-child dyads in Korea (Denham et al.,

2010; Jones, Eisenberg, Fabes, & MacKinnon, 2002; Oh, 2014; Park et al., 2014). Due to the combined effect of emphasis on values of interdependence and a strong mother-daughter relationship, Korean mothers' proactive sensitivity, which is characterized by comforting the child based on strong affective mother-child bonds may be conducive to competent regulation in girls especially. However, as the interaction term we reported was only trend level, we have to point out the speculative nature of this interpretation.

We also found that mothers' supportive reactions to children's displays of negative emotion were associated with children's high levels of regulation, whereas unsupportive reactions were related to children's higher negativity. This is in line with the previous findings in both Western and Asian samples. The well-established literature suggests that parents' supportive reactions to child distress facilitate children's development of emotion regulation and effortful control (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Park et al., 2011). On the other hand, children who experienced unsupportive reactions from parents are more likely to remain emotionally aroused and dysregulated under distress (Eisenberg et al., 1996) and to show increased negative emotion expressions (Fabes et al., 2001; Park et al., 2011). However, it is inconsistent with a few Asian studies that reported no association between mothers' unsupportive reactions and children's emotional functioning (Lee et al., 2007; McCord & Raval, 2015; Tao et al., 2010). This discrepancy may be due to cultural differences in the meaning of parenting behaviors or different measurements of unsupportive reactions that were used across studies.

Taking into account gender, the link between mothers' unsupportive reactions and lower emotion regulation was significant in girls but not in boys. This can be explained by the general notion that girls show higher susceptibility to parental emotion socialization (Denham et al., 2010). At the same time, a unique feature of gender-specific Korean parenting might have contributed to this finding. Under the influence

of Confucian philosophy, Koreans believe that men, who are considered the leader of the family, should not express their emotions openly from the early years of life. In fact, Korean parents tend to show more punitive and minimizing reactions in controlling boys' negative emotion expression than that of girls (Chung et al., 2011; Oh, 2014; Yoon et al., 2007). Because, mothers' unsupportive reactions to boys' negative emotions are considered more normative in Korean society, boys may not perceive these parenting practices negatively. Supporting this idea, Kwon and Lee (2005) found that, although 5- to 6-year-old boys experienced more unsupported reactions than girls, the association between unsupportive reactions and maladjusted behaviors was observed here only in girls. On the other hand, unsupportive reactions can be experienced as greater stressor for girls because they are considered less normative (Jones, Eisenberg, Fabes, & MacKinnon, 2002; Yoon et al., 2007).

Several limitations and potential avenues for future research should be noted. First, cautions should be warranted for cross-cultural interpretations of the findings because the current study only included a Korean sample, not intending comparisons with samples from other cultures. Future studies will benefit from using a cross-cultural design to examine whether different associations of emotion socialization beliefs and child emotion regulation occur. Second, other factors such as child temperament, child and mothers' personality, and peer relationships may additionally contribute to children's emotion regulation development. For the purpose of the present study, however, we have focused on factors that are culturally relevant (e.g., socialization beliefs and gender). Some methodological limitations should be noted as well. The findings are based on cross-sectional data; thus, we cannot determine the directionality of the association between mothers' parenting and children's emotion regulation. Also, the socialization scales used in the study measure mothers' beliefs about their parenting. These beliefs may differ from their actual parenting practices even though both parenting



beliefs and practices are influenced by cultural values (Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011). Finally, all measures were mother reported, creating a potential bias. Future studies might use a longitudinal and multimethod design to overcome these limitations.

In sum, mothers' proactive sensitivity and supportive reactions to children's distress were associated with children's competent regulation, and unsupportive reactions were related to high levels of negativity. These results support the findings from research in Western cultures. Meanwhile, stronger relations between mothers' parenting and girls' regulation shed some light on gender differences in emotion socialization within Korean society. As parenting is not context independent, our study suggests the importance of considering the cultural meanings of parent-child relationships for children's development. Future research should use culture-sensitive measurements and operationalization for studying parental socialization. Our study implies that researchers and practitioners should be sensitive to cultural expectations in a given society in evaluating parental socialization practices and providing parent education and support.

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