

Sociomoral Emotions in Parenting:

Punishment, Discipline and Love?

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Abstract

Using sociomoral emotions in parenting styles is common among many cultures but whether or not their use is of positive effect is something to question. By contrasting the American and Chinese cultures a greater understanding is gained not only of the uses of sociomoral emotions but also the potential emotional and psychological effects on children from their use. By referring to both published works and personal experience and observations an ideal world concept is presented in which sociomoral emotions are coupled with reasoning communication and a display of affection to achieve the best parenting results. Conclusions are such that affection is one of the most important factors in discipline and societal views of socioemotional emotions may affect the acceptance of their use.

## Introduction

Chances are the day your child was or is born will be one of the most memorable and happiest days in your life. This feeling, this emotion of happiness is considered a primary emotion. Primary emotions, as defined by Jeffery Jensen Arnett (2012), are the “most basic emotions, such as anger, fear, disgust, surprise, and happiness” (Arnett, 2012, p. 164). Secondary emotions, also referred to as sociomoral emotions, are likewise defined by Arnett (2012) as, “emotions that require social learning, such as embarrassment, shame, and guilt” (Arnett, 2012, p. 164).

Sociomoral emotions are commonly used in the discipline and or punishment of children, as well as adults. The varying degrees to which these emotions are utilized differ between cultures and have very different outcomes both between cultures as well as with in cultures. Two such contrasting cultures are that of the Chinese culture as Heidi Fung (1999) notes that it, “has long been characterized as a “shame culture”” (Fung, 1999) as well as the American culture which is decidedly more individualistic.

### Cultural Comparison

Keller et al (2007) breaks the cultural comparison into what they termed socialization agendas. The Chinese culture earns the distinction of being known as a shame culture due primarily to the view that raising a child is thought more of as training as child, that is to say that Chinese parents tend to take the lead and strive to train their children to act in socially acceptable ways (Keller, et al., 2007). In the efforts to train and ensure socially acceptable behavior the Chinese turn to shame without necessarily calling it that. By placing such a heavy emphasis on family honor and the honor of one's ancestors the sociomoral emotion of shame is learned and utilized in disciplining. This also further teaches and instills the importance of and dependence on family that is characteristic of the Chinese culture.

In contrast to the Chinese socialization agenda is the Euro-American agenda where Keller et al (2007) indicate that parents rely more on the choices of the child to lead and parents typically focus more on personal attributes or choices of the child in order to foster self-esteem (Keller, et al., 2007). The American culture places great value on individualism and subsequently the self-esteem and personal identity. Tobias Krettenauer (2012) provides this, "standards, rules, and goals need to be considered relevant to one's identity" (Krettenauer, 2012). Thinking then on Krettenauer's (2012) insights it is understandable that in American culture guilt would be more prevalent than shame. While still a sociomoral emotion guilt is related more with rules and standards than with honor and respect.

Interestingly enough Keller et al (2007) found that, "both Chinese and Euro-American mothers value the importance of making the child feel loved as the highest child-rearing priority and claim that education is an important socialization goal" (Keller, et al., 2007). This is not the

only commonality. While American culture focuses more on guilt and develops more individuality and Chinese culture focuses more on shame, by way of honor, breeding a greater collectivistic culture Pamela Garner (2012) noted:

*Parents who use high levels of power assertion to elicit compliance or respond to misbehavior tend to have children who have difficulty developing empathetic and prosocial tendencies, presumably because they comply with parental requests because of fear of external sanctions rather than an activation of their own internal processing* (Garner, 2012).

Alternatively, Garner (2012) suggests that reasoning with children generates greater potential for positive reactions. Another possible reason for the differing successes of shame and guilt within American or Chinese culture is suggested by Fung (1999) by her statement, “with few exceptions, contemporary Western theorists tend to treat shame negatively and primitively as a problem to be solved” (Fung, 1999) implying that the root cause is the way different sociomoral emotions are viewed by society.

### An Ideal World

As Garner (2012) suggests that reasoning may be a better option than the use of sociomoral emotions there is positive outcomes associated with both guilt and shame, though those outcomes hinge greatly on how the emotions are leveraged. Ideally parents should use a combination of guilt and shame followed by a conversation of reasoning. This combination provides for the greatest of positive reactions. Imagine placing a child in timeout, a technique commonly used in American culture, for breaking one or more rules or standard, they feel either guilty or shameful depending on the type of infraction. After ‘serving their time’ in time out

they are simply released there is no resolution, no reason, no understanding of what or why. It would like simple classical conditioning by which parents would simply be training children not to break rules rather than the moral reasoning.

There are also extremes to the sociomoral emotions. The most notable of these is embarrassment which can quickly turn to humiliation. This emotion should be shied away from as it has the potential to be more damaging to the individual in either culture destroying the image of value either as an individual or as a contributor to the collective. Use of humiliation can also lead to feelings of anger or resentment directed towards parental figures and in turn creates further misbehavior.

In addition to the moral reasoning gained from having reasoning conversations, this time spent together discussing the what and whys presents an opportunity for parents to express their love and affection to their children, reinforcing not only the rules existence but the genuine love and concern for the child. These demonstrations of love and affection are key in avoiding what Garner (2012) warns are “high levels of power asserting” (Garner, 2012). In short the ideal combination of sociomoral emotions and reason generates the optimal conditions for a child to learn and develop their own moral reasoning.

### Conclusion

The role of parent is complex and mixed within the complexity are the responsibilities to both teach and protect. Both of these responsibilities are aided by the rules and standards of the community and of the house as tools which inevitably present opportunities to teach the moral reasoning necessary as well as to express the loving protection of the parent – child relationship.

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