

“I’m changing the story here:” Emotional schema formation and communication between
caregivers and children

by

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B.S., Oklahoma City University, 2015
B.S., University of Washington, 2019
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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Human Sciences
College of Health and Human Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2025

Abstract

Emotions are a universal human experience; however, much work remains to be done in terms of understanding the formation of emotions and beliefs related to them, and how one's culture and/or identity may impact them. While research has been conducted regarding emotional regulation and emotional reactions, a deeper exploration into the processes regarding our core beliefs about emotions (i.e., emotional schemas) is necessary to bridge a gap in the existing literature. If caregivers are to make intentional choices about the messages they send children regarding emotions and emotional beliefs, something that has been found to have long-lasting impacts, it is important for researchers and those aiming to help them to better understand the process of creating emotional schema. In order to help caregivers create more effective and positive socialization experiences with their own children, it is imperative to first aid caregivers in distinguishing what they believe about emotions and why. To this end, this study used a qualitative narrative approach to (a) highlight commonly experienced socialization milestones around emotions across childhood, adolescence, and new parenthood and (b) provide recommendations for caregivers and professionals in helping fields (e.g., therapists, educators) based on these experiences. Guided by symbolic interactionism theory (Stryker, 2008) and utilizing a feminist framework (Biana, 2020), I conducted nine interviews with six caregivers of preschool-aged (3-5 years) children around the messages they received as children regarding emotions, how these shifted over time, and what meanings around emotions they would want their own children to have. Using thematic analysis to interpret these interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the coding team identified five themes related to participants' meaning-making around emotions: (a) *Culture/Context*, (b) *Changes Over Time*, (c) *Intentionality*, (d) *Parenting as a Practice*, and (e) *Emotion-Specific*. The findings of the interviews emphasize the important

role that caregivers tend to play in their children's lives when it comes to the formation of emotional schema but also highlight how inherently embedded in our current culture these messages can be. Acknowledging the influence of both caregivers and societal norms on the formation of emotional schema is an important step in working to determine what fits for the child or not, to help parents more effectively communicate messages regarding emotions with their children, and to disrupt intergenerational patterns that have been repeated and caused harm for far too long.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my major professors and chairs of my dissertation committee, Dr. Kristin Anders and Dr. Glade Topham. Without them, this dissertation would not have been possible. They both demonstrated extraordinary levels of patience, knowledge, expertise, and support. I do not know how they managed to balance encouraging my autonomy while still providing any and all necessary assistance, but they did so masterfully at every turn.

Kristin, your humor and warmth bring something indescribably beautiful not only to our field, but to the world in general. Thank you for all your help with my dissertation, but also for holding space for grief and processing when the world genuinely felt like it caught on fire. Likewise, it is only because of you that I felt confident enough to navigate my final year of a PhD while expecting my first child. Sending you *all* the Schitt's Creek and Taylor Swift quotes!

Glade, while I will forever question your love of dark chocolate, I will never question your generosity, patience, or large heart. Thank you for the humor, kindness, and guidance you have shown me throughout my five years at K-State. I have learned more than I ever could have imagined from you! I appreciate—yet hate—how difficult you've made it to say goodbye.

Thank you to the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Mindy Markham and Dr. Chardie Baird. Your insight, thoughtful feedback, and questions made this research so much more valuable. Likewise, you both provided me with the necessary inspiration and guidance to be more direct and purposeful in what I was asking and why. Thank you both for your support!

A huge thank you to my incredible coding team, Adam Hedelund and Meg Perez. I am lucky beyond words to have had the chance to work with you two. You're both brilliant and insightful, and I am so excited to watch your careers proceed. You're both already making such a positive difference in this world, and I know that will not change. There is no way this project would have been nearly as rich (or possible) without you both. You did this work out of the kindness of your hearts, and I will never be able to adequately thank you!

Though I cannot reveal their identities, I did want to thank the participants of this study. Their courage, honesty, and vulnerability were astounding. I was blown away by the level of self-reflection and insight in their interviews. Further, I am incredibly touched that they trusted me with their stories and were brave enough to share their unique experiences.

I appreciate my cohort, friends, and faculty I have met through the Couple and Family Therapy program. While I knew this program would change my life, I had foolishly thought this would be specific to my career. I so appreciate those I've met along the way and the lifelong friends I have found here.

Finally, thank you to my family. I truly love and appreciate you all. I'm sorry to my siblings for stealing so much of your food when I asked for "just a bite." Thank you all for making life so much better!

Dedication

To Leon. You have been wanted for so long and are already so loved. You were with me during every step of this dissertation, and I cannot imagine it any other way. You already inspire me to try to make the world a better place for you. I hope you feel safe with all of your emotions and know that you deserve to be your authentic self.

To Conrad. You are my best friend and the love of my life. There is no one I would rather go on this journey with. Thank you for always making me laugh, drying my tears, and welcoming every emotion in between. I love you with all my heart and cannot thank you enough for your support.

And finally, to the child I was. I will never stop trying to make you proud, and I will always strive to be the type of person you most needed.

Preface

Positionality Statement

I was interested in exploring beliefs about emotions for my dissertation due to personal experiences in my past as well as observations I made in my professional life. Like many individuals, I was socialized as a child to believe that certain emotions are better and that others need to be suppressed. Further, I developed a strange sense of emotional accountability, believing that I was in charge of overseeing all of the emotions of those around me. It was—quite frankly—exhausting, as was my subsequent journey to unlearn these messages in favor of healthier practices. In my career as a therapist, I was shocked by how many clients shared similar experiences around emotions and emotion-related messages. While I am honored to have played some small role in their processing of this pain, I cannot help but believe that this hurt and confusion is unnecessary. Because of this, I feel that further exploring this concept may help us to learn what steps we may take to prevent this pain in the first place; to this end, I hope this dissertation may make a difference in how we initially form thoughts around emotions.

I aimed to learn more about other people’s experiences of forming narratives about specific emotions, how these narratives have shaped their lives, and how contextual factors such as social location may create biased messages around certain feelings. It is my hope that we come to realize that no emotion is inherently “bad” rather than punishing ourselves and/or judging others for feeling the ways we/they do. Further, I would like to reveal harmful stereotypes that may exist around various emotions and ways to demonstrate and/or internally experience them. My own experiences have shaped not only who I am as a person, but my view

of the world; therefore, this positionality statement seeks to highlight my own social location and possible biases so that these are more overt and more easily challenged.

I am a 33-year-old White, bisexual, demisexual, demi-gender (she/they), female-presenting person who is currently able-bodied. I have existed within a larger body for most of my life. I have various mental health disorders for which I take medication: depression, anxiety, and Depersonalization-Derealization Disorder (DPDR). I was raised as a Christian (Catholic on my mom's side and Methodist on my dad's side), though I now confidently and happily identify as agnostic. I have been married to a White, able-bodied, cisgender man for 10 years in a monogamous relationship. At the time of this writing, I am in the third trimester of my first pregnancy. I was born in the United States and was the third of 11 children. My family of origin was mid- to lower-SES and lived in the Midwest; both of my parents divorced when I was an infant and remarried very early on. My husband's family of origin was much higher-SES and lived in a much different geographic location in the United States, leading to some initial culture shock on both our parts. We both hold the privilege of higher education; my husband holds two master's degrees from Kansas State University while I hold a master's from Kansas State University and am currently pursuing my PhD. Education was something that was often encouraged within our families of origin. I understand that there are myriad privileges I hold that I can never fully appreciate; however, I am never done trying to learn and advocate to the best of my ability.

I was raised with various messages regarding emotions; these messages sometimes came in the form of overt conversations or subtle comments but were often communicated nonverbally. These messages typically revolved around which emotions were "better" (e.g., happiness) or "worse" (e.g., anger, sadness) as well as which ways were considered "acceptable"

to demonstrate and/or experience them. I believe that my various identities—such as gender and birth order—contributed to many of these messages. The most apparent and memorable of these came from my caregivers during childhood. It was not until I was an adult myself that I truly had the opportunity to examine these messages; the more I did so, the more I felt pulled to scrutinize these messages and beliefs. Later, I realized that many of the ideas my own caregivers held about emotions had been informed by their own caregivers. Based on research, conversations, and experiences with my own therapy clients, it became clear that many of these messages and meanings around emotions were strong, often implicit, and that an intergenerational pattern was quick to emerge. I am interested in understanding how to create environments in which no one is punished for the human experience of having emotions and in which we learn healthy, helpful, and accurate messages around all emotions. Further, I believe it is important to better understand how we communicate these ideas and beliefs within our families so that we can be more intentional in what we are teaching our children.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in research seeking to better understand emotions, including what they are (e.g., Barrett, 2012; Gross & Jazaieri, 2014; Ortony, 2022), their impact (e.g., Kleef & Côte, 2022; Zhu et al., 2023), and how we might interpret them (e.g., Raval & Walker, 2019; Thomassin et al., 2019; Wang, 2023). While this increase in exploration is encouraging, there is still much work to be done for researchers to fully understand the unique process of formation of emotional schemas. Furthermore, it is imperative to take sociohistorical context into account when considering any type of development of social script. Given how unique each individual's emotional schema and/or the process of forming these may be, one way in which to better understand emotional schemas is through qualitative methodologies. Use of a qualitative methodology will help us gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of belief systems among families and individuals within ecological contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Since the formation of emotional schema can be such a deeply personal experience, a narrative approach will allow us to gain deeper insight and understanding around how this occurs through life stories and experiences as they pertain to emotional schema formation. This information can prove instrumental when discovering more about emotional schema formation in practice, how these are socialized within families, how they may be impacted by intersectional identities, how they shift over time, and how this impacts later parenting decisions around messages pertaining to their child's emotions. Perhaps most importantly, the implications related to the formation of emotional schemas as they relate to one's culture and/or identity could potentially have far-reaching and long-lasting impacts. There are myriad domains that may be influenced by these findings (e.g., education, mental health, parenting, legislation). As they relate to intersectional

identities, recommendations related to emotional skills may look very individualized and may need to shift to address current stereotypes and/or harmful messages. To this end, I used a qualitative narrative approach to gain deeper insight and understanding around emotional schema with several families, including how they are impacted by intersectional identities, within-family dynamics, and through intergenerational patterns.

Literature Review

Emotions are a universal human experience; however, much work remains to be done in terms of understanding the formation of emotions, cognitions, and beliefs related to them, and how one's culture and/or identity may impact them (Hochschild, 2012). In recent years, there has been an increase in research seeking to better understand emotions, including what they are (e.g., Barrett, 2012; Gross & Jazaieri, 2014; Ortony, 2022), their impact (e.g., Kleef & Côte, 2022; Zhu et al., 2023), and how we might interpret them (e.g., Lazarus, 2006; Leahy, 2002; Siemer et al., 2007). While this increase in exploration is encouraging, there is still much work to be done for researchers to fully understand the unique process of developing emotional schemas. Further still, it is imperative to take sociohistorical context into account when considering any type of development of social script.

While research has been conducted regarding emotional regulation and emotional reactions (e.g., Aznar & Battams, 2022; Bariola et al., 2011; Boldt et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2007; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Gross & John, 2003; Keller & Otto, 2009; Mitmansgruber et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2017; Peisch et al., 2019; Siemer et al., 2007), a deeper exploration into the processes regarding our core beliefs about emotions (i.e., emotional schemas) is necessary to bridge a gap in the existing literature. Specifically, little is known about how individuals develop the meanings they hold

around emotions, how these meanings shift over time, and how these meanings impact their own socialization they pass to their children. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine this process to aid individuals in determining what beliefs and messages around emotions fit for them, to determine what meanings around emotions they would want their children to have, and aiding caregivers in being both intentional and effective in how they help their own children develop their emotional schema.

Emotional Schemas

Emotional schemas are defined as an individual's core beliefs about emotions and emotional processes (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019; Leahy, 2002; Manser et al., 2012; Mitmansgruber et al., 2009; Norman & Furnes, 2016). Emotional schemas are often conceptualized through a metacognitive lens (that people hold relatively stable beliefs and thoughts around emotions) and/or metaemotional lens (focusing on the secondary reactions one has to emotional experiences; Edwards & Wupperman, 2019). This latter concept is similar to Gottman's work around meta-emotions (i.e., emotions about emotions; Gottman et al., 1997), but emotional schema differs in its increased emphasis on the role society and context play in one's beliefs around emotions (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019). Regardless of the framework theorists use, researchers tend to agree that emotional schema are specific to the individual. They may, however, differ or shift depending on historical context and culture within our society (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019; Stearns, 2008).

Historical Context

Descriptions of emotional experience are likely to shift along with historical contexts (Stearns, 2008). Examples of these may include how American families have been characterized over the years (e.g., cold and aloof during difficult times vs. warm and loving during more

prosperous times). Further, it is important to consider the historical impact of societal priorities and norms on emotional schemas. As shifts occur on a societal level, so too do our understandings, expectations, and emotions. While previous generations may have focused more on avoidance or suppression of various emotional experiences, modern emotional schemas tend to lean toward an increase in abilities to express, accept, and cope with them (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019). A specific example of this can be found in the concept of marriage. While this act was once considered more of a business proposition, the shift to marrying for things like passion, love, and romance became more commonplace; as such, so too did the societal acceptance—and even expectation—of expressing love (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019). Factors like affection and aggression are constantly shifting and evolving on a societal level; it stands to reason, then, that our beliefs and socialization around these emotional demonstrations would similarly evolve.

Culture

Several studies have suggested that culture and cultural stereotypes (often across shared demographics) impact emotional schema (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1998; Friedlmeier et al., 2011; Keller & Otto, 2009; Raval & Walker, 2019; Thomassin et al., 2019; Wang, 2023). A broader example of this can be seen in schemas related to emotional expression versus suppression that are closely tied to cultural values of individualism and collectivism (Butler et al., 2007; Edwards & Wupperman, 2019). Some of the demographic factors that have thus far been considered include gender, socioeconomic status (SES), race, and ethnicity; however, very few—if any—researchers have explored the intersectional impact of culture and the way(s) this may shape emotional schema. Further, a majority of research related to emotional schema has been conducted from a Eurocentric perspective; participants tend to be relatively homogenous—

primarily White, middle-class mothers from the United States (Breux et al., 2022; Edwards & Wupperman, 2019; Raval & Walker, 2019; Thompson et al., 2020). Again, this homogeneity is especially troubling when considering how emotional schema may be created and interpreted from a sociohistorical and contextual lens since they are inherently embedded within a social context (Butler et al., 2007; Eisenberg et al., 1998; Hajal & Paley, 2020).

Socialization within Family

Parents are often one of the first socializers around emotions in a child's life and therefore play a crucial role in their children's emotional and social development (Aznar & Battams, 2022; Bariola et al., 2011; Boldt et al., 2020; Breux et al., 2022; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Morris et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2017). Given this information, Eisenberg et al. (1998) suggested the theory of "parent socialization of emotion" to better understand the role that caregivers play in their children's development of emotion-related skills. This theory states that caregivers play a critical role in helping their children's "understanding, experience, expression, and regulation of emotion" (Eisenberg et al., 1998, p. 241) through socialization behaviors. Such behaviors may include how caregivers react to children's emotions, how they talk about emotions, and how they experience and express their own emotions. Further, this theory posits that one of the primary ways in which children learn about emotions is through parental response to child emotion, related to gaining mastery of emotion-related skills (Boldt et al., 2020; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Peisch et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2020). This theory both supports and is supported by symbolic interactionism theory (Stryker, 2008) in that it mirrors the process of learning through socialization, only, in this case, it is specific to socialization between child and parent(s) in regard to emotions.

Theories

Symbolic Interactionism

At its foundation, the theory of symbolic interactionism explores individuals' behaviors through the lens of their meaning-making (Stryker, 2008); it manages to emphasize both social action and social process (Allen & Henderson, 2016; Chen et al., 2024; Hamon & Smith, 2017; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019). Given its focus on both of these processes, symbolic interactionism as a theory is uniquely suited to examine the meanings—or schemas—we have created around certain topics, how these schemas impact our behaviors around said topics, and how these interact from a social perspective. Symbolic interactionism helps us move from a view of emotion as remaining stagnant and/or developing in isolation to a view of our meanings developing through socialization and influencing our behaviors through an ever-evolving process (Stryker, 2008).

Symbolic interactionism makes three core assumptions: (1) meaning is a central element of human behavior, (2) humans develop and have a sense of self, and (3) individuals are born into environments that impact their interpretations and meaning-making (Allen & Henderson, 2016; Hamon & Smith, 2017; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003; Stryker, 2008; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019). This suggests that while behaviors are important, the meanings an individual has created that influence such behaviors are perhaps the most important element of understanding various behaviors (Hamon & Smith, 2017; White et al., 2019). Further, it explains the tendency for behaviors to evolve over time since our meanings and definitions likewise shift based on factors like changes in meanings, symbols, norms, environments, and/or cultural expectations (Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019). This can be

particularly helpful when considering various schema/social scripts, how they are formed, and how they might shift.

The beliefs and relationships one develops over time with emotions (i.e., emotional schema) is a topic of research that has long been lacking. When exploring the work that has been done around understanding emotions and emotional processes, most commonly, researchers have focused on the link between emotion and behavior, particularly externalizing behaviors (e.g., emotional regulation and dysregulation) and/or what we *do* with emotions (Hochschild, 2012) but do so without the research also acknowledging contextual factors. It is neither accurate nor helpful to think of emotional schema—the meanings we make about emotions—without also considering the impact of society, symbols, and behavior. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that there are myriad factors influencing the meanings we make regarding emotion (Hochschild, 2012; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). We as humans are able—and likely—to observe when our peers are praised, ignored, or reprimanded for exhibiting certain emotions and/or exhibiting them in ways that may be considered “better” or “worse.” It is not unreasonable to assume that the various emotion-tied messages we interact with through observation or interaction may leave a lasting impact. We quickly learn if our siblings are punished for crying in a store that we likely will be too; if we are praised for being happy so often, we may begin to internalize that this is a “better” emotion; if our peers are given the silent treatment for yelling, we may believe that similar treatment awaits us should we yell in the future. Further, if we consider the values-laden messages around emotions that can be found in children’s books, toys, movies, shows, and even clothing, it becomes even more apparent how important considering the process of social learning is on emotion schema development for gaining a truly accurate picture. From this perspective, it is clear that the meanings we make around various emotions—like *all*

meanings—are impacted by norms, expectations, and socialization. Considering how integral they are to the socialization process (both in terms of power and timing), an obvious first consideration for the development of these would be the family (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). In conjunction with “parent socialization of emotion,” these theories further reinforce the necessity of examining the social impact around emotions (e.g., defining and shaping emotional experience) that family members may have on one another. One remaining question, though, is whether this process is impacted in any way by a family and/or individual’s cultural identities.

Family Influences on Meaning-making. One of the more steadfast tenets of symbolic interactionists is the belief that the family can be seen as an institution of sorts (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). That is to say that families are studied both as a collection of individuals living together (intimately interconnected) as well as a shifting, living form within their communities (socially situated). Families tend to share meanings and definitions that are developed within the family unit, though these are largely seen as being influenced and developed within the broader social context since families themselves are deeply embedded within their surrounding cultural context (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). This means that the roles and social norms individuals possess are largely shaped by their families, though they do not exist as a perfect nor direct inheritance since the family institution is also not seen as a closed system.

In addition to considering the role of the family institution on emotional schema formation, symbolic interactionism is a particularly beneficial theory for examining the role of intersectionality. This is because it strongly considers the role that dominant society plays in the meanings individuals and the family unit make (Allen & Henderson, 2016; Chen et al., 2024; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019). Factors

such as culture, the self, symbols, society, identity, roles, race and ethnic relations, gender, social movements, and social problems are all important considerations when it comes to studying the process of symbolic interactionism (Chen et al., 2024; Hamon & Smith, 2017; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020), and should be considered with both critical feminist and intersectional lenses.

Critical Feminist Lens

By utilizing a critical feminist lens, researchers are not only given permission but are actually tasked with noting specific areas of individual context and identity as well as how these might interact within our society (Speight et al., 1991; Sue & Sue, 2003; Sue et al., 2019). This framework acknowledges and celebrates the importance that such identities and traits may possess. This is especially important to note when one considers the criticism family science has received for ignoring the important influences that historical, social, and economic contexts tend to have on both the individual and families (Goldner, 1985; James & McIntyre, 1983; Patterson et al., 2018; Taggart, 1985). By applying a critical feminist lens to concepts such as the development of emotional schema, we will be better able to understand how multiple layers of a person's identity may impact the messages they receive and those that they choose to believe. Further, this can be helpful when considering how emotional schema may become socialized among families and peers and within groups based on various identities. For instance, one might consider the transmission of emotional schemas from parent(s) to child.

When we speak of individual context and identity, it is imperative to also consider the importance of intersectionality. Intersectionality can be understood as the myriad identities and experiences one holds and how they interact with one another (Carastathis, 2014; Davis, 2008). Some of these may come from a place of power or privilege, while some will be more akin to

oppression. Intersectionality is incredibly helpful for examining the relation between systems of oppression as well as how they may interact with our identities, social locations, and privileges (Biana, 2020; Carastathis, 2014). As one might imagine, this concept works in perfect synchrony with feminist theory; in fact, the introduction and emphasis of intersectionality is considered to be one of the most important contributions of feminist scholarship (Davis, 2008). Feminist theory states that researchers must acknowledge and attend to the social constructions that guide their work (Chibucos, 2005) and that to act out of complete neutrality is a myth, considering that our identities are an inherent part of us that we can never get rid of or entirely ignore (McDowell et al., 2018). It can be argued that a person is never fully removed from their specific social location; nor, one might posit, are they ever fully free from the specific messages, expectations, and beliefs that are pushed on and/or promoted within various contexts. Hence, considering emotional schema without also taking the impact that intersectional identity may have on it is missing a big piece of the picture and may be considered ill-informed if not wholly inaccurate.

Feminist theory encourages researchers to evaluate and explore the context around the decisions that individuals make and behaviors they exhibit regarding gender inequality as well as inequity across all disenfranchised groups (Chibucos, 2005). Because of this, feminist theory places a heavy emphasis on the individual as well as on the experiences of minoritized groups. In short, utilizing a feminist lens in this study will provide sensitivity and responsiveness to the experiences of individuals as they present within families and society as a whole and can help us understand how many processes may look different based on one's intersectional identity, especially as it relates to privilege and oppression. By utilizing feminist theory—specifically an intersectional lens—to the proposed study, we will be better able to understand more of the process of socialization around emotional schema, such as what messages are common among

certain groups of people, where these come from, how they are communicated, what happens when a person may come into contact with conflicting messages based on two or more of their identities, and how families that share similar identities may choose to socialize with such schema (e.g., challenging messages, attending to them, sharing them).

Chapter 2 - Current Study

As it currently stands, much work remains to be done regarding the formation and socialization of emotional schema. Much of the current research only focuses on one emotion at a time—typically anger or sadness—and if a person’s identity is taken into consideration during such studies, it is almost always viewed through an isolated lens of one aspect of identity (e.g., gender or ethnicity) rather than considering their possible impacts on each other and/or if certain identity-specific messages may conflict with each other. Existing literature already suggests the importance of factors such as ethnicity as when discussing emotional schema (e.g., Chan, 2021; Friedlmeier et al., 2011; Keller & Otto, 2009; Parker et al., 2012; Raval & Walker, 2019; Wang, 2023) as different cultures have been found to have an impact on one’s beliefs and reactions related to various emotions; however, when research *has* examined the impact of culture on caregivers’ socialization of emotion, it is typically conducted within a single culture rather than considering cross-cultural comparisons (Eisenberg, 2020; Raval & Walker, 2019). Further, this largely ignores the unique interplay that two or more identities (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) can have upon one another. It is important to consider multiple contextual factors (i.e., intersectional identity) rather than merely one aspect of a person’s identity at a time. Yet another important missing piece of understanding and study in the current literature is related to emotional messages and schema, since many of our current studies focus primarily on the experience of emotion regulation and expression rather than internal beliefs.

Another trend that seems to emerge among the limited existing emotional schema research is an emphasis on guiding parents on what they should *do* around emotions (e.g., reacting to emotions) and/or with their existing emotional beliefs (e.g., parental meta-emotion philosophy work) rather than exploring how emotional beliefs, thoughts, and feelings were

initially formed, how they shifted over time, and how these carried over multiple generations (Gottman & DeClaire, 1998; Gottman et al., 1997; Jespersen et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2012). Further, while limited research related to the socialization of said beliefs in families *does* exist (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1998; Gottman et al., 1997; Morris et al., 2017), it is typically written about from either the perspective of only mothers (e.g., Bariola et al., 2011; Chan, 2021) or as if multiple caregivers share the same emotional schema, beliefs around how to communicate these, and utilize the same approaches to similar levels of effectiveness, and/or strictly examines the impact of parental socialization around emotions on children's emotional regulation (e.g., Aznar & Battams, 2022; Bariola et al., 2011; Breaux et al., 2022; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020) rather than exploring the *process* of emotional schema socialization in depth.

The majority of family research has been done using quantitative methods. However, qualitative approaches to understanding family can provide additional important insights into the *what* and *why* of emotional development and schemas. For instance, many of the social scripts we create are often subconscious as they are steeped in the societal contexts we also find ourselves in. We often believe things without thinking about or questioning them or even realizing we do (until later prompted). This means that measuring through numbers or other quantitative means may be missing the whole picture, whereas utilizing a qualitative approach may expand the existing knowledge of both interviewer and participant. For instance, asking participants about their emotional schema in an interview setting could help to uncover some of the beliefs they did not even realize they held. This feels especially pertinent as both our intersectional identities and our emotional schema (and the process of their formation) are so incredibly unique and diverse. Further, utilizing symbolic interactionism will allow us to better

understand the natural ways that emotional schemas are developed, communicated, preserved, shifted, and/or challenged over time. By engaging in a narrative approach through several case studies, we will be able to gain rich insight into the deeply personal and unique ways that this occurs.

Utilizing a qualitative approach may prove especially helpful when considering the role of more than one caregiver at a time. By conducting both individual and dyadic interviews, I was better able to understand the development and progression of emotional schema over both an individual's life as well as within the couple themselves. Considering shared parenting emotional schemas is an important addition to the current literature not only because of the dearth of focus in current literature, but also because it is inaccurate to view parents as sharing one emotional schema and style of emotional socialization. This is important for researchers to better understand the impact of possessing both similarities and differences in parenting emotional schemas as well as beginning to explore how parents and caregivers navigate these discrepancies.

When considering how meaning-making, intersectionality, and one's role as a parent have impacted emotional schema, I would argue that it is possible to consider all of these aspects in conjunction with one another to gain a fuller, richer, and more accurate picture. Thus, guided by a symbolic interactionist (Stryker, 2008) and critical feminist lens (Biana, 2020), this study will address the following research questions through a narrative analysis approach to better understand the development of emotional schemas within families.

Research Question 1

What socializing messages did participants receive about emotions across their childhood?

Research Question 2

How did the meaning(s) change as they took on a new identity and roles as parents?

Research Question 3

What meaning(s) do they want their child to develop around emotions?

Chapter 3 - Method

Sample

Following IRB approval, six partnered participants were recruited to participate in qualitative interviews. In order to participate, interviewees needed to (a) be in a partnered relationship with one another, (b) live in the same household, (c) have at least one child in their care between 3- and 5-years-old, (d) speak English, (e) currently live in the U.S., (f) be at least 18 years or older, and (g) be willing to speak about their experiences regarding emotions throughout their lives. Most of the selected criteria supported consistency in measurement. The final criterion was selected to ensure that I would be allowed to explore participants' socialization experiences and meaning-making around emotions from early childhood to the present.

The participants in this study included partnered caregivers from three different families. For this initial study, it was decided that all family members should reside within the same household, though the status of their partnership could differ (e.g., dating vs. married). All of the caregivers in this study needed to share at least one child between the ages of 3 and 5. This age range was selected because it is considered a rich period of socio-emotional development and to keep all developmental levels of children relatively similar. For this study, only parents were interviewed as opposed to children since the shift in meaning-making across their lived experiences and the impact of intersectionality were of special interest to this study. Further, several families were selected to better understand the process of developing and communicating/socializing emotional schemas from both a uniquely intra-familial perspective.

The aim of this study was to interview all participants and then to look for shared and unique themes that were experienced across the different participants. Essentially, the goal of

engaging in purposive sampling of several families with diverse social locations and cultural experiences was to gain deeper and more accurate understanding across social locations and to be able to compare and contrast answers, especially among participants with different intersectional identities. Participants ranged in gender, sexual orientation, age, SES, education level, race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, disability status, country of origin, number and age of children living at home, family of origin (e.g., birth order, number of siblings), and life experiences. It was determined that utilizing a combination of individual and dyadic interviews would prove more effective in capturing information that was more unique to the individual as well as experiences and beliefs that were formed as partners and joint parents.

The final sample consisted of six individuals making up three dyadic partners. Half of the participants identified as 25-34 years old ($n = 3$; 50%) while the other half identified as 35-44 years old ($n = 3$; 50%). Participants were likewise equally split in their ethnicity, with a third identifying as White ($n = 2$; 33%), a third identifying as Asian ($n = 2$; 33%), and a third identifying as Hispanic or Latino ($n = 2$; 33%). All individuals identified themselves as married ($n = 6$; 100%). The largest portion of participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual ($n = 5$; 83%) followed by bisexual ($n = 1$; 17%). All participants identified as cisgender ($n = 6$; 100%). A majority of participants had two children currently living at home ($n = 4$; 67%), followed by one child ($n = 2$; 33%). In regard to religiosity, participants identified as Hindu ($n = 2$; 33%) or as Unknown ($n = 2$; 33%), followed by Nondenominational Christian ($n = 1$; 17%) or Unitarian Universalist ($n = 1$; 17%). See Table 1 for full demographic details.

Recruitment

For this study, I partnered with the university-based childcare center (the CCD) for recruitment. Recruitment material (see Appendix D for recruitment flyer) was sent to parents to

determine if they were in a two-parent household and would be willing and able to participate in the interviews. I interviewed a total of three families (two parents per family for a total of six people). Each participant completed a demographic survey (see Appendix A for questions) prior to their interviews. Following this, I conducted one-on-one interviews. Participants were given the option to complete their interviews in person or via Zoom. Most interviews were completed in person on the university campus, though two were conducted solely on Zoom. The offer for either option was determined to be the best way to increase participant convenience and comfort. The location of K-State's campus was chosen for neutrality's sake.

Procedure

Data were collected through two main sources: (a) demographic questionnaires (see Appendix A) and (b) semi-structured interviews. The interviewer had several grounding questions to use (see Appendix B for interview protocol), but largely encouraged participants to speak about their stories and emotional schema in their own words. Further, a narrative approach was utilized throughout the interview and analysis process. The goal of this approach was for participants to share the stories of how they were socialized toward emotions across their lives. This was important when considering how their experiences may have changed throughout their lives, how they were able to reach the conclusions they have, and how these experiences impacted how they choose to approach parenting, especially when it comes to the question of emotional messages and schema. Using a narrative approach was thought to further prove helpful in exploring how participants dealt with conflicting messages and/or experiences, as well as how partners navigated and negotiated emotion socialization with their own children when the participants held different emotional schemas.

Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participants were all asked to review and sign informed consent documents. Informed consent was obtained along with the assurance that data would be treated ethically and with the utmost confidentiality. Next, the participants were asked to fill out a demographic survey. This survey would be used to help the coding team be able to compare differences in emotional schema, how these are formed, and the process of socializing these beliefs based on various intersectional identities.

Three interviews were conducted per family unit: one for each partner and a conjoint interview with both partners. Each interview took approximately one hour. The questions in the one-on-one interview centered on participants' experiences with emotions and emotion socialization (see Appendix B for interview protocol). They were meant to be largely conversational and conducted through a narrative lens. This was chosen as a way to better understand the specific stories of how participants were socialized toward emotions across their lives. Following the initial individual interview, a second dyadic interview was conducted with both partners present. Of special note was how each parent felt toward specific emotions, what messages they wanted their child to take away relative to emotions, how they approached these topics from a parenting perspective, and how they navigated disagreements (e.g., parenting decisions, emotional schema, how to approach specific topics). While questions and anecdotes regarding the past were still present, the focus was centered much more on the present and the child(ren) in question. This interview also took approximately one hour and was offered to be conducted via Zoom or in-person. All participants chose to meet in-person on K-State's campus for the partnered interviews. Participants received \$50 each for a total of \$100 per family unit. Interviews were recorded for transcription purposes (with participants' consent).

Given the sensitivity of the narratives and data collected, special attention was paid to how data would be stored in order to keep information safe and protected. All data were uploaded to a K-State affiliated One-Drive account that was only accessible via a link shared by the lead coder. This applied not only to the lead interviewer but to anyone who may be coding as well. Further, special care was paid to de-identify participants in order to maintain confidentiality (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Coder Positionality Statements

The lead coder, L, identifies as White, married and expecting their first child, bisexual, demigender (she/they), early 30's, Agnostic, raised lower-SES, and a PhD student with an emphasis on research regarding emotional schema. They remembered a lot of unspoken rules and messages being communicated from caregivers and other adults about emotions, specifically in terms of which were “better” (i.e., contentment) or “worse” (i.e., anger and sadness) and often received the message that they should carry the responsibility of the emotions of those around them (e.g., “Go calm down your stepfather,” “Don’t let your siblings see you cry”).

Coder A identifies as White, single with no children, heterosexual, cisgender male, late 20's, Christian, raised upper-middle-class, and a PhD student with an emphasis on research related to male emotional expression. Coder A was raised by two heterosexual parents who encouraged emotions “minimally” but did not understand much about them. His father was a Danish immigrant, while his mother was a Navy brat.

Coder M identifies as White and Latino, single with no children, heterosexual, cisgender female, late 20's, Christian, raised upper-middle class, and a PhD student with emphasis on research related to social support surrounding eating disorders and behaviors. Coder M was raised by two heterosexual parents and identified her father as displaying minimal emotions and

refraining from naming emotions, something she attributes in part to his job as a Kansas Bureau of Investigation special agent.

All three coders share various identities and have similar experiences (e.g., level of education) while also being unique from one another in certain ways (e.g., history with parents). All three coders recognize how their privileges may impact the work they are doing, such as having the time and opportunity to learn more about emotions and engage in a higher level of self-reflection, especially since they all received their master's degrees in therapy programs. Similarly, the coding team was overt about how their own experiences with their parents—specifically around emotions—may potentially impact their interpretation of the transcripts. Because of this, the coders were very intentional about discussing participants' experiences with their parents, such as reflecting on similarities and differences among participants as well as the coders' experiences.

Analysis

Once semi-structured interviews were completed, interviews were transcribed with identifying information (e.g., names) removed to protect participants. The data were analyzed through a thematic narrative analysis in which the coding team focused on important content and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). The coding team paid special attention to reviewing and identifying overarching themes and subthemes throughout participants' responses. This team was selected based on qualitative experience, research experience, and diversity of intersectional identities. Specifically, three coders trained in qualitative research used an iterative process in which we met to discuss potential codes within the data, identify and code, and meet to make appropriate changes to the codes as needed to reach coder agreement.

This study utilized a thematic analysis on narratives approach to better understand and describe patterns around emotional schema and how these are formed across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This narrative approach was determined to be especially useful considering the importance of the stories and experiences of the families who participated. Further, this allowed the research team to identify patterns and themes based on contextual factors *across* participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In other words, one of the goals of this study was to better understand themes across the participants' stories to more clearly comprehend the general socialization and meaning-making of emotions as well as their impacts on parent-child socialization. After the interviews were collected, data analysis was conducted in themes such as beliefs around emotions; the process of creating, learning, and communicating these beliefs; the impact of both privilege and oppression on these beliefs (i.e., intersectionality); how these beliefs serve participants; how these beliefs harm participants; if these beliefs are shared within-family or intergenerationally; and if participants were cognizant of the beliefs they previously held (and, further, if they agree with them or not). Given this interest in themes across different interviews, the coding team engaged in a thematic analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022) when reviewing the transcripts. The thematic analysis was reflexive in nature, allowing for theme development to be both inductive and deductive (being informed by symbolic interactionist theory), while highlighting participants' specific and shared experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The coding team utilized a mix of personal notes, participants' specific quotes, and collaborative discussion while going over the data to identify initial thoughts. This was done in six phases: (a) *familiarizing selves with the data*, (b) *generating initial codes*, (c) *searching for themes*, (d) *reviewing themes*, (e) *defining and naming themes*, and (f) *producing the report*

(Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). All of the coders read through the nine transcripts in their entirety while creating memos (i.e., *phase a*); they then met to discuss their notes and to begin identifying possible codes (i.e., *phase b*). During this phase, coders sought to identify similarities, differences, and possible themes among the different transcripts (i.e., *phase c*) before reviewing them again to determine which were relevant, could be combined, or should be removed (i.e., *phase d*). Once satisfied with initial codes, the coding team then searched for and developed themes that captured the participants' voices and addressed the aforementioned research questions. Given the narrative nature of the study, specific words, phrases, and experiences were given special note to better understand how the interviewee experienced things. The main goal of this phase of analysis was interpreting the core content from the narratives and life stories of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Coders utilized a dialogic engagement throughout the process, including discussing a final decision on relevant themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The coding team spoke about what they might call a theme and/or how they might define it as both its own phase (i.e., *phase e*) and as a helpful tool for narrowing down and reviewing themes. Based on their work, a report in the form of an initial thematic map (see Appendix E for initial thematic map) was created to be applied to the transcripts (i.e., *phase f*). The coding team then independently coded the same transcripts to determine if coder agreement had been met and/or if the report needed to be adjusted. It was determined in follow-up discussion that some adjustments needed to be made to the report, especially in terms of redundancy and being too complicated (see Appendix F for final thematic map). Upon completion, it was determined that the same codes were being found across coders and that coder agreement had been met. Throughout this process, the understanding of themes as patterns of meaning anchored by a

shared concept as defined by Braun and Clarke (2022) was utilized to identify relevant information.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<i>Code Name</i>	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
<i>Age Range</i>	25-34	25-34	35-44	35-44	25-34	35-44
<i>Relationship Status</i>	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
<i>Number of Children</i>	1	1	2	2	2	2
<i>Age(s) of Children</i>	3.5	3.5	3, 12	3.5, 12	3, 5	3, 5
<i>Living at Home</i>	3	3	4	4	4	4
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	White/ Caucasian	White/ Caucasian	Asian	Asian	Hispanic or Latino	Hispanic or Latino
<i>Language(s) Spoken at Home</i>	English	English	English, Tamil	English, Tamil	English, Spanish	English, Spanish
<i>Sex</i>	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male
<i>Gender</i>	Man	Woman	Woman	Man	Woman	Man
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	Hetero	Bisexual	Hetero	Hetero	Hetero	Hetero
<i>Gender Diverse</i>	No	No	No	No	No	No
<i>Religion</i>	Christian, Nondenominational	Unsure	Hinduism	Hinduism	Unsure	Unitarian Universalist
<i>Employment</i>	Full-time, part-time	Student, part-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
<i>Income</i>	\$60,000- \$89,999	\$60,000- \$89,999	\$60,000- \$89,999	\$30,000- \$59,999	\$90,000- \$119,999	\$120,000+
<i>Education</i>	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	PhD	Master's	Master's	PhD
<i>Other (self-report)</i>	Christian, Nondenominational	Have a disability	N/A	N/A	Important identity as oldest sister	N/A

Chapter 4 - Results

From our analyses, the research team constructed five themes related to individuals' meaning-making around emotions: (a) *Culture/context*, (b) *Changes over time*, (c) *Intentionality*, (d) *Parenting as a practice*, and (e) *Emotion-specific*. These themes all referred to important features of their narratives and emotional socialization that strongly influenced the meaning parents made around emotions, what meanings they wanted their children to make around emotions, and how these were communicated.

Culture/context

The theme of culture/context focuses largely on intersectional identities (e.g., gender, race, disability status, religion) as well as certain events that would have an impact on historic norms and expectations (e.g., COVID-19). This theme was multifaceted within participants' responses and included a multitude of identified and surprising socializing factors. For example, when it came to identities, many of the participants hinted toward the impact of these, though they often did so without outright stating and/or recognizing their importance. When the interviewer asked for further clarification or to expand on these, there was often a level of surprise as if the participant had not fully considered it before. One example of this was the use of the term "dramatic" for a specific participant. This term was often used when she demonstrated what her parents deemed to be "too much" emotion (e.g., "You can be sad, but you had to be sad about *certain* things...but, you couldn't be *dramatic* about it"). As the interview progressed, a relationship between the participant's health disorder, gender, and her family's religious status emerged. When the interviewer touched on this connection, the participant seemed surprised, though she agreed that they did seem to be intertwined.

In terms of events such as COVID-19, a great deal of grief, disappointment, and the necessity of making unexpected changes were expressed. One parent stated of her expectations during that time, “Because of COVID, I would say probably it [the message she received during that time] was ‘deal.’ Let’s just hold on tight and not let go because there was really no room for anything else. That’s what everyone’s doing. Yep. Surviving. I feel like we’re supposed to be thriving, but I was like...I’m still surviving.” One parent did touch on how the seriousness and timing of the pandemic helped with developing and enforcing boundaries, stating, “Even as a parent...it helped a little, like I stood my ground, especially with COVID because [son] was born during COVID.” Two of the three couples had their first child during the pandemic and expressed levels of ambiguous loss about experiencing this important role transition during such unprecedented and isolating times. One mother explained that period of time by stating: “We’re trying to bookend this pandemic with a young infant, trying to figure out childcare, trying to figure out how we’re going to pay for two in diapers, all this other stuff, right? And so, I’m still surviving. But yeah, I think it was just more of the deal with what you have...probably a lot of the messages I was getting was like grieve what you wish you had.”

A common socialization and code that was identified within this theme was related to gender. This was captured well in one participant’s sentiment: “You get a lot of culture around testosterone.” Every participant spoke to the importance of gender when it came to messages they had received from their parents. In the case of two participants who identified as Latinx, they also expressed the impact that gender and ethnicity had on one another such as one participant stating, “But yeah, so, you know, and gender and sexuality and ethnicity kind of all are intertwined there with *machismo*” whereas another stated “I refuse to let the Latino gender stereotypes come into play or the eldest boy stereotypes that Latino families tend to have.”

Overall, gendered messages often took the form of rules for how to conduct oneself, whether it was related to “better” emotions and/or ways to demonstrate them, or if these gendered messages had more to do with rules relating to how to conduct oneself, as one participant demonstrated this by stating, “There are things which are specific to gender, like how boys should be and how girls should be and that’s how we were taught.” Most—if not all—of the messages around gender centered on masculinity and were found to be misogynistic in meaning/tone. These centered on things such as anger and sadness and included messages on who is allowed to feel these, and how they are supposed to demonstrate these emotions. Specifically, anger was associated more with males, and sadness was associated more with females. Anger was often seen as more controlled, reasonable, righteous, and/or valid, whereas crying was often seen as less valid, silly, or unreasonable, something that happens *to* a person, and an action that could be perceived as a sign of weakness and/or being out of control. One female participant described a male friend/colleague trying to “help” the women in their workplace by stating:

So, he was giving...I don’t know whether it’s advice or what it is. But he told me...like, he said, ‘I don’t want to see any girls crying. Whatever it is, you should not cry. You should try to overcome that. And I don’t want to see my friends like that. Don’t cry for each and everything, you have to show you are strong. So crying is not the solution to it.’

Something like that. But even after then, I could not control that.

This participant shared other examples of being told not to cry in order to appear stronger but expressed frustration at having difficulty controlling her tears when upset. She reported that these messages came from a variety of sources, such as her coworker as well as friends and her spouse.

Additionally, participants discussed how they would often use harmful language/stereotypes to promote their messages. A commonly repeated message was associating crying with girls, such as when one participant shared, “But when you’re a kid, they used to say that boys don’t cry. If you are crying, you are a girl. While you’re crying like this, they will say things like that.” For some of the cisgender female participants, these gendered messages often included terms like “dramatic” or “weak.” Other examples included differentiating “boy tasks” from “girl tasks”: “It’s like there are certain things which only boys should do, only girls should do. Like that vibe.” “Whereas in our household there was always that gender difference too of who got sent to do what because of ability assumptions, assuming one of us couldn’t do something or could or whatever because of girls and boys.” For some of the cisgender male participants, these included sexist, homophobic, and/or transphobic messages related to one's gender or sexual orientation based on tendency to cry. Examples of these included: “You end up getting called like a mama’s boy.” “You were also being called slurs, you know, sexuality slurs. And it didn’t matter if you were straight or whatever.” “Boys will be boys, girls will be girls.” “Don’t show weakness.” “My boy cousins if we cried, like if we got in trouble for running around or someone was just like being a bully or anything, they would threaten to put us in a dress. You’re going to cry like a girl, then you dress like a girl.”

Interestingly, all of the participants spoke far more about their fathers’ emotional expression and the meanings they made from these than they did their own mothers. Fathers tended to come across as more aggressive and with less emotional accountability, while mothers tended to be perceived as enabling their spouses, rug sweeping, and/or crying more when feeling uncomfortable about difficult emotions. An example of this can be seen in the quote,

I think part of it also is my dad...I feel like a lot of our childhood was learning to manage his emotions. It's kind of similar to feeling responsible for my mom. So, we felt responsible for my dad. I'm remembering and going back to the messaging about emotions when my dad would be really verbally and emotionally abusive toward us. My mom would always tell us, you know, he just has bad bedside manner. And that was her way of trying to comfort or soothe us. He didn't mean it. Your dad loves y'all. He just has bad bedside manner. And so, again, it's like that message that we're responsible for managing how we receive the message rather than him being responsible for how he delivers it.

One participant explained about his father,

I think my dad would misunderstand because my dad has very low emotional intelligence. So, if he couldn't understand *why* we were experiencing an emotion, it would almost disorient him and then he would get frustrated and then that's when he would kind of lash out at us.

He further compared this to his mother,

My mom was one of those people that she—she was a very sensitive person, and so honestly, we kind of almost felt like we were responsible for her emotions sometimes. If we hurt her feelings or if we did something like acted out, she would break down. She would end up just kind of shutting down and then like going to her room and crying.

Finally, many of the participants described feeling a level of emotional responsibility for their parents and/or siblings. In the case of two of the participants who both shared the identity of being the oldest daughter, taking care of their siblings' emotions was a message that was communicated both outright and tacitly. One participant described this by stating:

I think that was a lot of my childhood and, especially as the older sibling, it almost felt like I was responsible for their emotions. So, I had to teach them not to show their emotions so that way we didn't all get punished. Because, like, that would happen too. The other participant similarly stated that when growing difficult times as a child, "I don't really want to talk to my siblings about it. They're younger, and they don't deserve that pressure because I—you're the oldest. I'm the oldest. I need to take on that responsibility, and *they* shouldn't."

Changes over time

The theme of changes over time refers to shifts in both personal life as well as historic/cultural shifts and events. This was to reflect participants' tendencies to speak about changes over time from a more historic/generational context (see above for examples) and from a more personal lens, focusing on the life course of the individual with a special focus on their shifting roles. During the analysis phase, the research team agreed upon the codes of shifting away from their parents' emotional schema and the importance of participants' changing role as new parents. These were both found to have a big impact on the likelihood of one scrutinizing their preexisting emotional schema/messaging.

All participants were quick to recognize the role their own caregivers played in forming emotional schema/meanings as children. Most participants expressed a natural shift over time of beginning to question and doubt what they were learning from their parents but expressed that this was too difficult to do when young and/or did not occur to them to explore. One participant captured this well, stating: "Well, as a child, I kind of just believed, because if...if my parents were wrong, that's like a cognitive dissonance that you, like—they just couldn't be. You give your childhood self an existential crisis!" Whereas another described beginning to question their

parents as “And so, it was kind of that almost realization and what made it scary was like, I don’t think *anybody* knows. I don’t think *anybody* knows how to deal with this!” Sometimes participants attributed this transition to their peers, sometimes to observing others (especially other families and adults), while other times this practice was associated with recognizing inconsistencies in what their parents might say and do (“I got to the point where I realized my dad didn’t know what he was talking about”). This practice of beginning to doubt and question their previously held emotional beliefs was self-reported to take place most often during late childhood/adolescence when asked for clarification from the interviewer.

Another trend shared across most participants was the advancement of questioning their previously held emotional schema once the participants moved out of their parents’ home upon becoming young adults. This is when most participants expressed exploring what fit for them or not and what they might want to change regarding their emotional schema in earnest:

I think I grew a lot when it came to college, and I think a lot of that was getting out.

When we got to college, I started to find good friends, friends that are still my friends now thousands of miles away. Finding friends that were supports and finding things that I enjoyed in my life and pushing myself to do things...I think I grew during that time the most.

When pressed on this timing, some attributed it to freedom/independence, to new groups of friends with vastly different life experiences, to different classes and learning experiences, or to giving oneself permission to finally push back. One participant described this period by stating,

Friends helped. I made a lot of friends in college, and we would talk as you do with friends and compare horror stories, but there would be times where I would be talking and you would think something is normal and they’re like, ‘Hey, that’s *not* normal.’ But

living at home, it was like I was one person at school and one person at home. I was still going to church, and I was still super religious. But the spark had been lit. Yeah, it didn't really change, and I didn't really start being who I was until I moved out.

All participants adopted the new role of spouse during this time as well, and all touched on the support of their partner during this transitional phase to varying degrees; however, by far the biggest shift was seen among all participants when they found out they were going to become parents themselves. Taking on this new role was identified as the greatest motivator or agent of change. One mother shared, "There was a complete 180 when I had [son]. Yeah, he's the catalyst for change. He's the reason I do everything." All participants touched on a feeling that might be identified as similar to pressure or viewing parenthood as a deadline of sorts; this was not shared in a negative way, but rather as a wakeup call of sorts. One participant captured this sentiment well when they stated,

It's not just us dealing with our own emotions or communicating with each other. It is...I now have to teach this person how to behave appropriately, so we need to be able to not only know how to do it in ourselves, but show [son] that you can do that with other people, so I think it's more just...we had a purpose now to do it. It was more of like we had a timeline. It's like we *have* to figure it out.

Intentionality

The theme of intentionality refers to how purposeful participants were in their pursuit of change. One of the patterns that was identified within the data was the role of therapy in increasing emotional reflection and in intentionally developing emotional schema/messages that felt like a more appropriate fit for participants. Of the six caregivers interviewed, four discussed the role of therapy in this pursuit. As an example, one participant stated,

In group therapy, one of the questions that was asked that we were supposed to mull over for the week was what would you want—because most of us were parents—would you want your child to have your childhood? And that was it. That was my “aha” moment.

These were also the four participants who expressed the most necessity when it came to examining, challenging, and shifting their previous emotional schema. Sometimes therapy was a direct pursuit of this goal, but in other cases something else (i.e., post-partum depression, depression) brought the participant into therapy initially, and a shift in emotional schema occurred as an unintended pleasant consequence of sorts by stating the following:

I went through a depression...and so all of these things are kind of converging. So, I finally went to therapy. I got my ADHD diagnosis as well as depression, anxiety, and PTSD...*all* the fun things. Yes, and I think through really kind of being able to understand where, like, where was I feeling triggered...which I hadn't realized that that's what I was experiencing. Or like having panic attacks. I didn't realize that *that's* what I was experiencing. And so, being able to kind of work through those things together helped us to really lean on each other's strengths and be able to kind of step in for each other where the other needed more support.

All of the participants highlighted the necessity of being intentional in the pursuit of both shifting their own emotional schema as well as in how they deal with and talk about emotions with their own children. All participants—regardless of experience with therapy—spoke about this both when it came to parenting and the message(s) they may send to their children, such as when one participant stated:

No, there's going to be no room for that here. I'm changing the story here on that. That responsibility shouldn't land on kids. The parents should have been the ones responsible.

I had no business taking care of children when I was 10. Yeah. So, a lot of that is ensuring that I'm also not unconsciously falling into that when I'm just normal everyday parenting. What messages am I sending to my children?

In line with the concept of intentionality among participants was learning in conjunction with their children. All participants recognized that they did not have all the answers. While they were able to recognize how much they had already learned and grown since becoming parents, they also spoke to how difficult it can be to feel like you need to have all the answers while knowing that this is an impossible feat:

It's really hard for me to accept I did something wrong. It's not my favorite because I'm supposed to be all-knowing. I'm *supposed* to have it together. I'm supposed to have it all together, so letting go of that part of my identity...it's really like undoing some of that parenting that I got. That's hard, very much. It's hard to part with that part of myself.

When discussing this concept, the question of owning up to mistakes as a parent and apologizing to one's children came up:

As children, we weren't apologized to. And so, it's okay to admit you're wrong, even if you're a grown-up. And [children] understand that too. So, then it's okay for you to apologize too when you need to. Because we don't force apologies. We like them to feel empathy before, you know? So, I was like, what do you think you were feeling? And then let them say sorry when they're ready. But we can model that.

It seemed that all participants grappled with this, and most felt that it was important (to differing degrees), reflecting upon their parents' apology-related practices and commenting on what they would have preferred as a child. In the case of one participant, they were able to acknowledge that their dad buying favorite snacks for them after a fight was his way of trying to smooth things

over, but admitted, “It’s just, I think I would have—that’s just not my love language. And so, it didn’t necessarily feel resolved to me. Like it just felt like we didn’t deal with it.”

In certain cases, this cast uncertainty around the appropriateness or necessity of admitting shortcomings and/or modeling certain emotions (e.g., anger) to a child and whether or not that felt developmentally appropriate. One participant captured the concern for balancing this well when they stated:

So we need to keep in mind how we are reacting to [their children]. So that is what they will get from us. They will learn from us, and they will get things from whatever you’re doing. So, we should keep in mind that we have to be very careful, even if you are not in a good mood. Yeah, we should be very careful.

Yet another stated,

I didn’t grow up with apologies from adults. And so, it’s important to me that my kids see me really apologize. I’m not justifying but recognizing we can have all of this emotional intelligence and be able to try to regulate ourselves if we’re imperfect. And so how do we respond to those moments? So, I’ll take my time to process. And then we’ll come back, and we’ll apologize.

As stated, a major reason that the question of apologies came up was because participants expanded upon the process of learning alongside their children when it came to emotional schema. Participants were able to recognize that much of their self-reflection and learning occurred since—and due to—becoming parents. This meant that much of this process of scrutinizing emotion-related messages, meanings, and practices was taking place while participants were adjusting to their new role as parents for the first time; a period of transition that is already understood to be difficult. A majority of participants commented on feeling

“behind” or like they were “starting from ground zero” in terms of emotional schema changes since learning that they would become parents (e.g., “I was already in such a bad state, it was kind of like I’m starting from ground zero at 15- or 16-years-old”). Given how strange, new, and clumsy it might feel to engage in this new practice while adopting a new identity/role (i.e., parent), recognizing that mistakes would be made and that practices and standards toward apologizing should probably be established could be considered both wise and practical.

Parenting as a practice

The theme of parenting as a practice refers to what participants described actually *doing* as a parent and their cognitions related to these practices. Two major codes were identified among participants when it came to emotional schema. These were (1) solutions and techniques and (2) uncertainty. A focus on both of these elements was shared across participants. Solutions and techniques centered around specific ways that parents approached different emotional experiences:

But you’re really good with her solution-oriented things because she knows that you could fix it. Yeah, she needs that. And she’s in an emotional state where, like, this needs to be fixed. So yeah, that’s probably what we do. But we both deal with the high-intensity emotions for the most part from either kid.

Participants spoke about different tools, toys, approaches, books, and/or lessons they had noticed from the childcare center that were found to be helpful. When asked for further clarification, each participant could expand on the tool/technique they had used, how and why it was helpful, and how they used it. Some examples of these included feelings bottles, the television show Bluey, specific books, a sensory swing, the childcare center helping children recognize and name different emotions, and parents snuggling or cuddling with their child. While this list is by no

means exhaustive, many of the solutions provided by participants focused on active techniques that could be used in the moment.

A major code that was identified within participants' responses was a level of uncertainty. This uncertainty was related to how to handle certain emotions/situations, what to say or do, if they were doing a good job, and what specific emotion-related messages/meanings they would want their children to have. It became clear that it was easier for participants to focus on what they did *not* want rather than what they might want to replace the message/behavior with, especially when it was related to their own childhood:

I think in the journey of like when you're deciding you're going to be a parent, you start reflecting almost unconsciously about like how you were parented and the immediate is I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to do that, right? And so, then it's like, okay, that's cool. But then, what are you going to do? If you're not going to do that, what's the other side of that?

This could sometimes cause participants to freeze in the moment:

My dad was very aggressive, very angry. So, I have a lot of fear towards that. And so, when [son] gets angry, I tend to kind of take on that emotion, too. And I start to kind of not do *anything*. Like I'm trying to help him, but it's hard for me, because I'm still learning myself how to emotionally regulate all the time with that. Even though I've gotten 1,000 times better than where I was, it still is difficult, because I grew up in an environment where everything's always tense.

There was a level of difficulty expressed surrounding how to proceed with certain topics or emotions when it had not been modeled—or they felt it had been modeled poorly—by their own parents. One participant captured this sentiment by stating, “Yeah, I can validate. I can hold

space for you. But I don't know what to *do* about that” in terms of her feelings of helplessness during her child’s high emotional state.

Emotion-specific

The emotion-specific theme refers to when a participant would speak very specifically about emotions (e.g., when speaking about different emotions, comfort with different emotional experiences). When critically analyzing all of the data, all of the participants spoke about emotional demonstration/expression versus emotional experiences very distinctly (e.g., “You can’t hit them. Like the behavior is not okay, but you can be angry about it.” “You’re allowed to have all of your emotions. They’re valid. But not every behavior is.”). Essentially, only the internal or external process was considered or spoken about, one at a time. Several participants spoke at length about their solutions and techniques when it came to the experience of internally processing certain emotions (see above), but most would simply state, “not all behaviors are acceptable” in terms of the external process. When pushed for clarification, participants gave examples of not wanting their children to harm others (both humans and animals) or break things, with one participant stating emotions should be “utilized for your betterment.” During the interview, several participants acknowledged differing levels of comfort with certain emotions. As an example, one participant stated that anger had been the main emotion in their household growing up, but that now: “I don’t think I’m comfortable with the anger anymore. I definitely think that one is...I’m probably, like, *over-vigilant* of that one. I’m very vigilant when it comes to emotions, but I’m very, like, *extra* vigilant when it comes to anger.” All parents expressed wanting their children to feel safe experiencing emotions but spoke to the distinction between all *feelings* being safe and all *behaviors* being acceptable (e.g., “Validating the emotional experience while addressing the behavioral reaction.”).

Another noticeable trend emerged in the data: focusing almost solely on anger or sadness and happiness to a lesser degree:

I mean, sadness is probably more straightforward. Like [parents] listen, but there'd be a point where it's like, alright, you've been sad long enough. You know, just move on.

Anger was a little bit different. I think it would depend on the situation, I think.

One pair of participants commented near the end of their dyadic interview that they had neglected to speak about emotions like happiness before expanding on how happy their children tend to be. Another participant stated that his son knew “the big three: happy, mad, and sad.” Other emotions were ignored altogether or only touched on very briefly. This focus on said emotions applied to both the emotional schema the participants created as children, what they noticed most about their own parents when they were children, what they wanted to do as parents, and the emotional schema/meanings they wanted their own children to take away around emotions. Most participants summarized what they wanted for their children to be some form of safety, acceptance, and/or comfort:

I'd say at the end of the day, the important thing is just that [son] feels comfortable and feels safe. I want him to experience life to the fullest, and that's everything, from emotions to thoughts to religion, to everything. I just...I want him to know that it's all in there.

The final main code the researchers identified within this theme was the idea of parents operating as partners. Each participant was able to recognize that there were certain emotions and/or behaviors that they felt more equipped or less prepared to help their child with than their partner as well as different strengths each partner might bring to the table, such as when one couple explained,

But, you know, I think it's just one of those things where you know that you're never always gonna agree on everything, and I think that we've learned that we can do our best. But there are strengths that [partner] has that I don't. And so, I just have to trust when [partner] is dealing with [son]'s emotions in a certain way, I know that they're going to do it. They're not going to invalidate his emotions. They're not gonna make him feel like he can't have them.

During the dyadic interviews, all participants agreed with one another regarding their strengths and weaknesses in this matter. An interesting point, however, was the lack of communication and intentionality around this technique. While all partners could identify who was better at handling an emotion or topic, they all expressed not really sitting down to talk about this. All partners tended to do what they felt "better" at. When pressed on whether this was the result of an intentional conversation regarding these moments or how best to proceed, none of the participants remembered sitting down to establish that this would be their strategy. Rather, it seemed that all participants felt it was natural to do what they felt better at, such as when one participant explained, "So, when it's anxiety, you're good at helping him through the anxiety, and I'm really good at helping him through other emotions, like anger or sadness." A few participants also pointed out that their child might take more of the lead and ask for a specific parent; in these cases, the parents always tried to take the child's lead rather than ask their partner to jump in. This was true even if the caregiver felt less equipped to help with that particular topic and/or in that specific moment, such as the example:

It depends on why [daughter] is sad. It depends on what she needs at that particular time. So, if it's her mom, she'll directly go to her mom...during some situations, she'll come directly to me. Yeah, it totally depends on the situation.

Finally, many of the dyadic interviews also touched on the topic of working together when it came to recognizing when their partner was too tired or overwhelmed and encouraging them to take a break. Examples of this included one couple saying,

And I think we pick up pretty easily where the other leaves off. That's one of our strengths as a couple and as parents, is that even if we can't say like I'm tapping out (which we usually do like 'your turn') we notice that in each other. Like, you need to...you gotta go. Yeah, go do something else.

While another couple shared, "I think we both have different strengths. So, [partner] is really good at the in-the-moment emotional regulation. So, when my anger is elevated, [partner] will kind of give me a compassionate invitation to take a step back or to kind of talk."

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The development of emotional schema is believed to be strongly influenced by early socialization with caregivers in childhood (Aznar & Battams, 2022; Bariola et al., 2011; Boldt et al., 2020; Breaux et al., 2022; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; Eisenberg et al., 1998; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003; Thompson et al., 2020). During this period, children tend to learn about emotions by observing several things: How caregivers react to their children's emotions, how caregivers talk about emotions, and how they experience and express their own emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). Consistent with previous research, my findings suggest that many early beliefs around emotions are impacted by the messages, reactions, and observations between caregiver(s) and their children. Further, my research supports existing literature that points to emotional schema often being impacted by norms imbedded within our society and historical context (e.g., gendered messages; Hochschild, 2012; Thomassin et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2023).

Raval and Walker (2019) reviewed research related to caregivers' socialization of emotion among diverse families and cultures; much of the research reviewed was conducted within a single culture rather than considering cross-cultural comparisons. My research extends previous literature by utilizing an intersectional lens, exploring the lifelong process of emotional schema formation, more closely examining the *process* of said formation, and considering the impact of participants' own parents as well as how participants may impact their own children (i.e., exploring emotional schema through an intergenerational lens). Hajal and Paley (2020) proposed that future research should seek to improve the field's understanding of caregivers' own experiences related to emotions and emotional regulation. The interviews conducted for this

study sought to do so by asking about experiences throughout participants' lifespans. It also addresses the dearth of research related to emotion socialization of both mother-child and father-child relationships (Boldt et al., 2020) by interviewing both partners. Such research is typically conducted from an individual perspective, missing out on the valuable dynamics and information that dyadic interviews may provide.

After conducting a total of nine interviews with six caregivers of preschool-aged children, the research team identified five key themes that contributed to participants' meaning-making around emotions: (a) *Culture/context*, (b) *Changes over time*, (c) *Intentionality*, (d) *Parenting as a practice*, and (e) *Emotion-specific*. These themes highlighted the shared importance of these topics in initial emotional schema formation, changes to said schema over time, and what emotional meanings parents would want their own children to make. Consistent with symbolic interaction theory (Allen & Henderson, 2016; Chen et al., 2024; Hamon & Smith, 2017; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019), participants' stories emphasized the meanings they made around emotions, especially from a socialized perspective. While a great many subthemes and codes were identified within the data, a surprising majority of these were found to be shared among all participants. This was initially surprising considering the different circumstances, cultures, and life events of the participants; however, it may speak to the universality of said themes and the shared process of forming, shifting, and communicating emotional schema.

Based on the participants' described life experiences, messages involving aspects of one's identity were prevalent, most noticeably messages steeped in misogyny and homophobia. This was at least partially supported by previous studies' focus on gender (e.g., Hochschild, 2012; Thomassin et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2023), though the exploration of homophobia could certainly

stand to be expanded upon in future research. The impact of social context on one's experience is supported by feminist theory (Taggart, 1985), as is the push to adopt a more pluralistic view of identity (i.e., intersectionality) to gain a more accurate picture (Biana, 2020; Carastathis, 2014; Davis, 2008). The connection between identity and specific messages was not always as clear to the participants; this may be explained by how internalized and culturally embedded both our identities and beliefs related to them can be (Davis, 2008; Friedlmeier et al., 2011; Lazarus, 2006; Raval & Walker, 2019; Wang, 2022).

Socialization with caregivers, especially in early childhood, was attributed by interviewees as the most important source of information when it came to emotions. This is supported by previous literature, which has pointed to the powerful role the family—specifically caregivers—can have when it comes to children's emotional and social development (e.g., Aznar & Battams, 2022; Bariola et al., 2011; Boldt et al., 2020; Breaux et al., 2022; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; Eisenberg et al., 1998; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Morris et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2017; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). Finally, becoming a parent was seen as the biggest motivator for change when it came to being more intentional about emotional schema and messages. This is promising since emotion regulation patterns are often seen as shaped by caregivers in early childhood (see England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020 for a review of various parent intervention frameworks).

Participants were most likely to use personal experiences, memories, and interactions with their caregivers to inform how they would like to approach messages and situations involving emotions. While this process had been explored before in terms of emotional and social development as a *child* (e.g., Aznar & Battams, 2022; Bariola et al., 2011; Breaux et al., 2022; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; Morris et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2017; Raval & Walker,

2019), less is known about this process and how it translates to how a parent would want to approach such topics with their own children years later (i.e., less focus on the longitudinal process of family emotional socialization). To this end, therapy was deemed to be helpful in increasing understanding of emotions and related practices by all (4) participants who had gone to therapy. This suggests that therapy may be a helpful tool for those attempting to create and/or intentionally explore the new meanings they hold around recently becoming parents (Hamon & Smith, 2017; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019). Yet another commonality that was shared throughout the interviews is that participants all felt a level of responsibility and accountability toward their family members' emotions when they were children (more specifically toward their caregivers and siblings). All participants expressed a desire for their children not to feel this same burden. This is not a topic that the lead researcher had necessarily sought to explore, nor was it something identified when reading through existing literature; thus, this inductive finding warrants further examination of the burden of family members' emotions on children as well as a more thorough exploration of such topics as emotional responsibility/accountability and how these expectations are socialized within the family. It is also worth considering how such experiences may have influenced participant responses.

Through the process of my study, it became clear that all three research questions (RQ1) *What socializing messages did participants receive about emotions across their childhood?*, (RQ2) *How did the meaning(s) change as they took on a new identity and roles as parents?*, and (RQ3) *What meaning(s) do they want their child to develop around emotions?* were related to one another in notably congruous ways. Perhaps the most striking was the role of children as agents of change in their parents' stories. Every participant spoke about becoming a parent as their biggest motivator to develop a more intentional relationship with their own emotional

schema. The awareness of this process differed among participants, but all responses were consistent with this code. Many of these emotion-based messages seemed to be deliberately different than those with which the participants had been raised, though a few remained fairly similar to the ideas with which they were brought up. This aligns well with symbolic interactionism since the meanings participants held would likely evolve and shift when factors such as their norms and cultural expectations adjusted in conjunction with their newly acquired role/identity as parents (Hamon & Smith, 2017; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019). This changing role did not merely influence the participants, however; rather, many noticed a shift in their own parents as well. While this shift was recognized as necessary and welcome, there was a level of anger and/or grief expressed with this shift among a few participants as well. Several acknowledged the benefits of their parents learning and growing as they adopted the new role of grandparents, while directly stating that they still felt unresolved anger and/or wondered why their parents could not have shifted for them in similar ways when the participants were children.

Most participants also described being faced with a certain level of responsibility and/or accountability for the emotions of their parents and siblings when they were children. They reported feeling pressure to “rug sweep” or to “bottle up” their own emotions for the comfort and peace of their family unit. The pressure to show little to no anger or sadness was especially present in participants who identified as cisgender females. In some cases, participants described the burden of feeling the need to take care of and/or soothe the emotions of family members around them, especially when the family member was seen as angrier than the other family members. Some of these messages were presented overtly by their parents, while others were not explicitly spoken, yet were still picked up on. This process of learning such messages was

similar to what literature around parental socialization of emotion suggests in that learning takes place through observation (implicit socialization) and conversation (explicit interactions) (De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; Eisenberg et al., 1998; Gottman et al., 1997; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Morris et al., 2007; 2017). These same participants spoke about this responsibility for others' emotions in a negative light, stating that it should not have fallen on them—especially as children—and that they would like to avoid their children feeling responsible for others' emotions in the future. All participants spoke about intentionality when it came to monitoring their own emotions and not allowing this burden to fall to their children. This generational difference in appropriateness around perceived emotional accountability suggests a stark shift in meanings that participants hold around the practice of engaging in emotional responsibility; since meanings can be considered the driving force behind behaviors, it is of little surprise that the participants sought so strongly and intentionally to change this behavior within their own parenting approaches (Allen & Henderson, 2016; Hamon & Smith, 2017; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003; Stryker, 2008; Van den Scott & Lisa-Jo, 2020; White et al., 2019). While this focus on emotional responsibility/accountability was consistent across participants, so too was their children's role in motivating them to make said change. Given this fact, special attention should be paid to recognizing children as change agents for their parents—and sometimes grandparents—while avoiding pushing or allowing emotional responsibility to fall on them. Essentially, it is important to recognize the function that shifting into the new role of “parent” has on one's emotional schema and behavioral motivations while working hard to ensure that this remains distinct from the child's role within the family unit.

Implications

My findings have numerous implications for those who may have an impact on the formation of emotional schema and those who may help with the communication of emotion-related messages, especially toward children (e.g., caregivers, therapists, educators, authors, television writers). For one, findings from this study highlight how it is imperative for anyone hoping to communicate messages around emotions to children and/or their parents to first recognize the importance of interactions between caregivers and children since all participants described their parents as their main socializers/teachers around emotion in childhood. Likewise, being cognizant of the learning process itself will be helpful; rather than primarily/solely learning through explicit conversations between caregivers and children, much of this learning actually occurs through observation and paying attention to subtle comments and reactions to emotions in addition to overt discussions. This indicates that intervening with parents in a way that increases their intentionality of comments and reactions may be more effective than merely focusing on what a parent “should” say to a child about different emotions. Most of the messages that participants reported receiving from their parents had less to do with *what* was said but was rather learned through observation. Thus, professionals can aid caregivers by first introducing them to this knowledge. They may intervene in several ways, such as encouraging caregivers to note their physical reactions (e.g., smiling, laughing, rolling eyes, sighing) to instances of others’ emotional expression, working with caregivers on comments they may make around their children (e.g., increasing awareness through tracking/observation or video recordings), and direct parent coaching (i.e., pointing out which reactions to emotions may be unintentionally sending harmful messages, discussing which messages caregivers would rather communicate, and practicing more effective/beneficial ways to communicate these).

Knowing the different key themes that contribute to the process of emotional schema formation and communication for parents will be helpful for parents in terms of reflection but also for other helping professionals in how they choose to proceed when it comes to intervening with both children and parents. This knowledge will also be important as this research highlighted how caregivers can possess differing experiences related to emotions, that they may hold different beliefs from one another, and that their emotional schema will have an impact on the messages and approaches they may choose to take with their children. This points to the importance of better understanding one's own emotional schema, including how they are initially formed and may change over time. This is especially true when considering parenting partners so that they can communicate with one another effectively in deciding what their *family's* emotional beliefs and related approaches will be. Finally, this study adds to existing literature by illustrating and highlighting the importance of taking on shifting roles (i.e., parents, grandparents) in the process of scrutinizing, shifting, and communicating messages tied to emotions in earnest. This suggests that intervening with caregivers as they adopt these new roles may be especially beneficial considering their increased openness to change during this transitional time. Thus, intervening through attempts to increase emotional intelligence, awareness, and skills related to emotional expression (i.e., reactions) may be especially productive during this time. Many parenting programs that focus on emotion regulation are primarily utilized by families whose children are already experiencing significant dysregulation (Hajal & Paley, 2020); however, intervening during this earlier period of caregiver transition would allow both practitioners and therapists to focus on *prevention* rather than rehabilitation.

This study further suggests several implications specific to therapists. The first of these is the importance of intentionally exploring emotional schema with clients, including what beliefs

clients may currently hold, how these were formed, how these shifted over time, if these schema are currently serving the client, and how the client's social location may have an impact on these beliefs. A general increase in emotional intelligence and emotion-related skills through interventions such as promoting psycho-education throughout the course of therapy and/or utilizing interventions (e.g., feelings wheels, sculpting) and therapeutic modalities (e.g., Emotionally Focused Therapy, Attachment, Cognitive-Behavioral) related to emotions will likely prove very helpful in exploration related to emotional schema. For clients who are parents or hoping to become parents, this exploration may take on the added layer of what they would wish for their child(ren) in terms of emotion-related beliefs. Direct parent coaching and intervention may be beneficial in learning how to effectively communicate the messages clients want their child(ren) to gain related to emotions. This is especially important since children are constantly learning from their parents through observation. Therapists who work with couples would do well to encourage intentionality around how to approach specific emotions and emotion-related messages and skills. This will hopefully aid couples in feeling like they are on the same page, introducing such conversations, and lessening feelings of one partner unduly taking on more of the mental/emotional load when it comes to emotions. Given the impact of participants' childhood socialization experiences in their emotional schema formation, therapists may also wish to highlight the importance of childhood experiences and family of origin beliefs in current beliefs. While this may help to inspire understanding, therapists could also choose to use this as a jumping off point in having conversations about differences in emotional schema and preferred approaches to different emotions.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the importance of these narratives and the findings from this study, there are some important limitations that should be considered. First, despite the focus on collecting diverse identity information, there were some identities that were not captured within the demographic survey. Two very clear examples of this were disability status and birth order. During the interviews, these factors were revealed to play a huge role in messages received; however, neither of these identities were asked to be expanded upon outside of the interview or the open-ended question on the demographic survey. This is especially salient for identities that may be considered more invisible in nature.

All research could benefit from including a more diverse sample. While the participants in this study each possessed distinct identities, future research could do more to examine further intersectional identities. Based on how implicit many socializing messages are, especially when they are connected to identity, it can be difficult to fully capture many of these through an interview alone. There were several instances during the interviews where a participant shared that they took for granted certain messages and/or assumed that they were obvious, even if they disagreed with the message itself. Future research might benefit from creating measures to illuminate some of these more dormant messages, essentially examining which ideas are more latent versus explicit as well as why specific messages fall into each category. It may be important to examine if there is a difference in latent versus explicit emotion-related messages, especially to determine various differences in emotional schema related to each type of message (e.g., differing processes of formation, styles of communication, levels of rigidity).

Another example of how increasing diversity would be helpful is in terms of types of family make-up. For this study, six married biological parents were interviewed. It would be important to consider other forms of families. For example, it is important to consider how a

parent in a single-parent household may approach certain emotion-related situations. Further, it would be important to consider diverse family structures (e.g., stepparents, foster parents, adoptive parents, or caregivers who are other family members such as aunts, uncles, grandparents) and differences in their experiences with emotional schemas and socialization. It would be important to consider, as well, a change among caregivers during early childhood. While data concerning single parents and/or blended families would have been no doubt rich (and important research for the future), it was determined that consistency would be helpful for this initial study.

Further, it quickly became clear that specific demographic factors related to family of origin play a *much* bigger role than initially expected. This emerged as a pattern of sorts during the interviews; examples of important considerations of the participants' parents included political affiliation, religion, geographic location (and contextually-specific norms), job, birth order, number of children, ability status, influence of other family members (i.e., grandparents, aunts, uncles), languages spoken, and more. Future research would do well to take more of an intergenerational lens and intentionally ask questions related to life experiences, demographic factors, and emotional schema of the participants' caregivers as well. This seems like a natural next step considering the importance of our caregivers on the meanings we make (Aznar & Battams, 2022; Bariola et al., 2011; Boldt et al., 2020; Breaux et al., 2022; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; Eisenberg et al., 1998; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Morris et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2017). Future research would similarly do well to examine the perception of children in cases such as these. Are they perceiving the messages their caregivers intend?

Finally, although the findings from this study highlighted important socialization and meaning-making around emotions broadly, future research would benefit from examining specific emotions more extensively. Much of the current research focuses on happiness, sadness, and anger without considering other, more nuanced emotions (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019; Ortony, 2022) or focusing primarily on *behaviors* related to emotions (Hochschild, 2012) rather than considering both the internal and external processes of various emotions. This pattern likewise emerged during many of the interviews in this study. While these emotions and their connection to specific behaviors are no doubt important to research, we would be remiss to only consider these to the point of excluding others. In addition to focusing on more emotions, exploring the difference in emotional experience versus demonstration may provide valuable insight, especially in terms of things considered contextually appropriate/normative.

Conclusion

This research explores the process of forming, shifting, and communicating emotional schema across one's life. It further highlights the importance of socialization with caregivers when forming meaning around emotions as a child. Children were found to learn through observation as well as direct messages communicated through overt conversation, subtle comments, and perceived parental reactions. They were able to learn from both things they agreed with and appreciated, as well as essentially what *not* to do from their parents. Becoming parents themselves was the biggest motivator for change among research participants. These factors are all important for caregivers to consider for themselves, but they also provide promising direction for those working with children, parents, and families in the hope that they can offer more effective and impactful support. Much work has already been done between even two generations (i.e., caregivers and their parents) to promote healthier and more fitting

emotional schemas; one can hope that with more intentionality and better understanding, our ideas, beliefs, and practices related to emotions will only continue to improve.

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Appendix A - Demographic Survey

Parent/Caregiver Age:

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24 years old
- ☐ 25-34 years old
- ☐ 35-44 years old
- ☐ 45-54 years old
- ☐ 55-64 years old
- ☐ 65+ years old

Age(s) of Child/Children:

Family and dependents at home (including yourself):

- ☐ None
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3+ (please specify exact number): _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

How many adults currently live in the home: _____

What is your relationship to them? _____

How many children currently live in the home: _____

What is your relationship to them? _____

Relationship status (select all that currently apply):

- ☐ Married
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Single

- ☐ Dating
☐ Engaged
☐ Long-term partnership
☐ Monogamous
☐ Polyamorous
☐ Open relationship(s)
☐ Other (please specify): _____
☐ Prefer not to say

Employment (select all that apply):

- ☐ Full-time
☐ Part-time
☐ Contract or temporary
☐ Retired
☐ Unemployed
☐ Unable to work
☐ Full-time stay-at-home parent
☐ Other (please specify): _____
☐ Prefer not to say

Annual household income:

- ☐ \$0 - \$29,999
☐ \$30,000 - \$59,999
☐ \$60,000 - \$89,999
☐ \$90,000 - \$119,999
☐ \$120,000 +
☐ Prefer not to say

Highest level of education completed:

- ☐ Less than High School
☐ High school (including GED)

- ☐ Some college (no degree)
- ☐ Technical certification
- ☐ Associate's degree (2-year)
- ☐ Bachelor's degree (4-year)
- ☐ Master's degree (MS, MA, MPH)
- ☐ Doctoral degree (PhD, EdD)
- ☐ Professional degree (JD, MD)
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Race/Ethnicity (select all that apply):

- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Black or African-American
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Unknown
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Language(s) spoken at home (select all that apply):

- ☐ English
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ French
- ☐ Italian
- ☐ Portuguese
- ☐ Mandarin
- ☐ Arabic
- ☐ Urdu
- ☐ American Sign Language (ASL)

___ Other (please specify): _____
___ Prefer not to say

Religion:

___ Christian (please specify denomination): _____
___ Judaism
___ Islam
___ Buddhism
___ Hinduism
___ Atheism
___ Agnostic
___ Other (please specify): _____
___ Don't know
___ Prefer not to say

Sex assigned at birth:

___ Male
___ Female
___ Intersex
___ Prefer not to disclose

Gender identity (select all that apply):

___ Agender
___ Demigender
___ Genderqueer or genderfluid
___ Man
___ Non-binary
___ Questioning or unsure
___ Two-spirit
___ Woman
___ Prefer not to disclose

____ Additional category/identity not listed (please specify below):

Gender Identity _____

A. Do you identify as transgender?

____ Yes

____ No

____ Prefer not to disclose

C. Do you identify as otherwise gender-diverse?

____ Yes

____ No

____ Prefer not to disclose

Sexual Identity/Sexual Orientation (select all that apply):

____ Aromantic

____ Asexual

____ Bisexual

____ Demisexual

____ Fluid

____ Gay

____ Lesbian

____ Pansexual

____ Queer

____ Questioning or unsure

____ Same-gender-loving

____ Straight (Heterosexual)

____ Prefer not to disclose

____ Additional category/identity not listed (please specify below):

Sexual Identity/Sexual Orientation _____

[illegible]

Appendix B - Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol Draft – Solo Caregiver

Introduction

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this interview! I truly do appreciate it.

My name is Lindey Schmechel, and I am a 3rd year PhD student at Kansas State University working on my dissertation. The goal of this interview is to better understand how people—specifically parents—think about and feel about emotions. I would like to gain further understanding into how these thoughts and feelings were formed, how they may have shifted over time, how their identities/cultures may influence these, and how this all may impact parenting approaches. My hope is that this interview will give me insight into what this process was like for you.

I have several questions to this end that I'll ask regarding messages you've received about emotions. All of your answers will be confidential. Following this interview, I will transcribe what you said and remove any identifying information.

My goal is for this interview to take about an hour. If at any point in the interview you have questions or wish to stop, please let me know. Likewise, if there are any questions you would prefer not to answer, that is perfectly fine.

With that, I wanted to confirm again that you're willing and able to take part in this interview. Specifically, to be able to review and identify main takeaways from what you said, it will help to record the interview. To help keep the recording confidential, I ask that you do not state your name, your partner's name, or your children's names. If you do accidentally say a name, it will be removed from the transcription of this recording. Additionally, once I have transcribed what you've said today, the recording will be deleted. Based on this information, do I have your consent to ask the questions and record this session?

Thank you again!

Interview Protocol

RQ1 and RQ2: Socialization of messages and relationship with emotions

1. Thinking back to as early as you can remember, what are some messages around emotions that you can remember receiving?
 - a. Where did you get these from?
 - b. How did these messages shift over time?
2. How would you navigate when you received conflicting messages around emotions?
3. Do you remember any emotions you had feeling “better” or more “comfortable” than others? Any that felt “wrong” or “uncomfortable”?
 - a. Do these still apply?
 - b. How did your parents/caregivers respond to these emotions?
4. How are the ways that you think and feel about emotions different today than they were when you were a child and how are they similar?
 - a. What about compared to other times in your life?
5. Since becoming a parent, what are some of the messages you have received around emotions?

RQ3: Transmission of emotions to children

6. What messages would you want your child/children to have about emotions?
 - a. Tell me more about how these are similar or different than the socialization you had.
 - b. What led you to wanting your child/children to have these messages?
 - c. How do you promote these with your child?
 - d. Does it feel like there are “right” or “better” ways for you or your child/children to demonstrate or deal with certain emotions? Are there “inappropriate” or “worse” ways?

Critical Feminist Lens: Intersection of identities and emotions/socialization

1. Were there any messages that should experience or express emotions differently because of something about you like your gender or ethnicity?
 - a. What are some examples of these?
 - b. Did you ever receive conflicting messages based on different aspects of your identity?
 - i. How did you navigate these?
2. Do you feel like any of these messages still apply?
3. Where do you think these messages came from?

Interview Protocol Draft – Partners

Introduction

Hello again! I really appreciate you both continuing to help me with this research.

Today should be very similar to our last interview. One major difference—as you’ve probably guessed—is that our focus today will be a bit more specific to how the messages around emotions you’ve received impact your parenting decisions and styles. This is in no way to imply that there’s a “right” or a “wrong” way when it comes to parenting; rather, I’m interested in learning how two people with presumably different life experiences and maybe even beliefs decide what the messages in their shared household are going to be.

Just like last time, my plan is to record this interview so that I can transcribe it and remove any identifying information. I would delete the recording following this. Would that still be alright with both of you?

Today’s interview should take about an hour or so. Just like last time, please feel free to stop me if you have any questions or need a break. If there are questions one—or both—of you feels uncomfortable with or you would like to stop the interview, that is perfectly fine.

Thank you again! Any questions before we begin?

Interview Protocol

RQ1 and RQ2: Socialization of messages and relationship with emotions

1. What do you think are some messages around emotions that your child/children may currently have?
 - a. Where do you think these came from?
2. How do you two navigate messages around emotions when it comes to your child?
3. Have you noticed that your child seems to feel more comfortable or less comfortable with certain emotions?
4. Have you noticed differences in comfort levels when you observe your child demonstrate different emotions?
5. Does one of you take the lead when it comes to navigating certain emotions?
 - a. If so, how did you decide on this? Was this a conversation or did it just happen?
6. Do you and your partner disagree on certain emotions, how to demonstrate them, etc.?
 - a. If so, how do you navigate these disagreements?
 - b. What led to this approach?

RQ3: Intersection of identities and emotions/socialization

7. Have you noticed any messages or ideas around emotion in your child's life that may be informed by their culture, identities, or particular characteristics of your child?
 - a. If so, do you share any of these (messages and/or identities)?
 - b. Where do you think your child learned these from?
 - c. Do you agree with these messages?
8. Based on your child's identities (such as gender, race...) is there anything that you want your child to understand about or do with particular emotions?
9. Are there any messages around emotion and identity that you really want your child to avoid?

Appendix C - Informed Consent

Emotional Schema Formation and Communication Between Caregivers and Children IRB

This project has been approved by the Kansas State University IRB #IRB-12721

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT: 12/12/2024 **EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:** 12/12/2029

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Kristin Anders

CO-INVESTIGATORS: Lindey Schmechel, Dr. Glade Topham, Meg Perez, Adam Hedelund

CONTACT FOR ANY PROBLEMS/ QUESTIONS: Kristin Anders: kanders8@ksu.edu; Lindey Schmechel: lindey@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

SPONSOR OF PROJECT: Department of Applied Human Sciences at Kansas State University

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The goal of this study is to better understand how people—specifically parents—think and feel about emotions (emotional schema). I aim to explore how these emotional schemas were formed, how they may have shifted over time, how identity/culture may influence these, and how all of this may impact parenting approaches. Information from this study will be used to develop recommendations for clinicians, early childhood educators, and parenting programs to aid in helping parents to communicate constructive and accurate messages around emotions to their children.

PROCEDURES ON METHODS TO BE USE:

Participation in this study will include two 60-minute qualitative interviews with the graduate student of this study (Lindey Schmechel). Specifically, you will be asked questions about: 1) socialization and formation of emotional schema, 2) the impact of culture and identity on these schema, 3) how emotional schema may have shifted over time, and 4) how this impacts your own parenting approaches/beliefs. Additionally, you will also be asked to complete a brief demographic survey that will include questions on: demographics (age, race, gender, sex), educational background (type of educational program completed, degree), and sexual orientation. You will earn \$50 cash for participation in this study.

STUDY PARTICIPATION:

Participation will include two 60-minute recorded qualitative interviews conducted by the graduate student (Lindey Schmechel) of this study. One interview will be conducted one-on-one between you and the graduate student while the second interview will be conducted with you and your partner. You will also be asked to complete a brief demographic survey prior to beginning the interview. You will earn \$50 cash per caregiver for participation in this study for a total of \$100 per family.

LENGTH OF STUDY: 3 hours (1 hour interview per partner, 1 hour interview for joint interview)

RISKS ANTICIPATED: There are no major risks involved in participating in this study. In general, participation will not include risks greater than participating in everyday conversations. Additionally, you may withdraw consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Although there may not be direct benefits to you as the participant in this study, information from this study will be used to inform dissertation research with the aim of informing clinicians, early childhood educators, and parenting programs. Furthermore, participants will be paid \$50 each (a total of \$100 per family).

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

All information you give us will be kept confidential unless you are in danger or are a danger to yourself or others. In regard to the recorded interviews, interviews will be recorded via an electronic recording device (audio over Zoom). Once the interview is complete, the recorded information will be uploaded to an encrypted and secured password protected computer and deleted from the electronic device. Transcription of the interview will be completed solely by the graduate student (Lindey Schmechel) and no identifying information will be included in the transcription process. We will ask you to not state your name or identifying information during the interview to help maintain confidentiality throughout the process. Should you state your name and/or identifying information of others, including protected health information of patients, this information will be deleted from the transcription to maintain confidentiality. Transcriptions will be deidentified prior to review of the interviews by any involved in the research team and project (other than the PI who will be leading these tasks).

With the demographic survey, you will be given an ID number so that no identifying information is linked to your data (i.e., demographic data and recorded interview will be kept separate). All electronic data, including the list matching participants and IDs, will be password-protected. Any physical data collection forms will be shredded. All reports will provide summary data to ensure the participants' identities cannot be discerned from the information provided. Last, all identifiable information will be destroyed after dissertation has been submitted and approved.

Identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information and, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? No

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO PARTICIPANTS? No

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION:

I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide(s) to participate in this project, I may withdraw consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I also understand that upon completion of this interview, I will be compensated with \$50 cash.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form and willingly agree that I will participate in this project under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Name

Date

Appendix D - Recruitment Flyer

PARENTS *Wanted*

This project has been approved
by K-State #IRB-12721

Interviews will be used for a PhD
student's dissertation at K-State

FROM PARENT TO CHILD: EXPLORE HOW EMOTIONAL LESSONS ARE PASSED DOWN THROUGH GENERATIONS. PARTICIPATE IN OUR RESEARCH!

Who qualifies?

- Have a preschool-aged child
- Be in a partnered relationship

What is expected?

- Two interviews lasting an hour each
 - 1st interview will be one-on-one with the interviewer
 - 2nd interview will be with both partners together
- The interviews will explore:
 - Our beliefs about emotions
 - How these developed
 - How we talk to our children about them
- Identities of interviewees will remain confidential

Why participate?

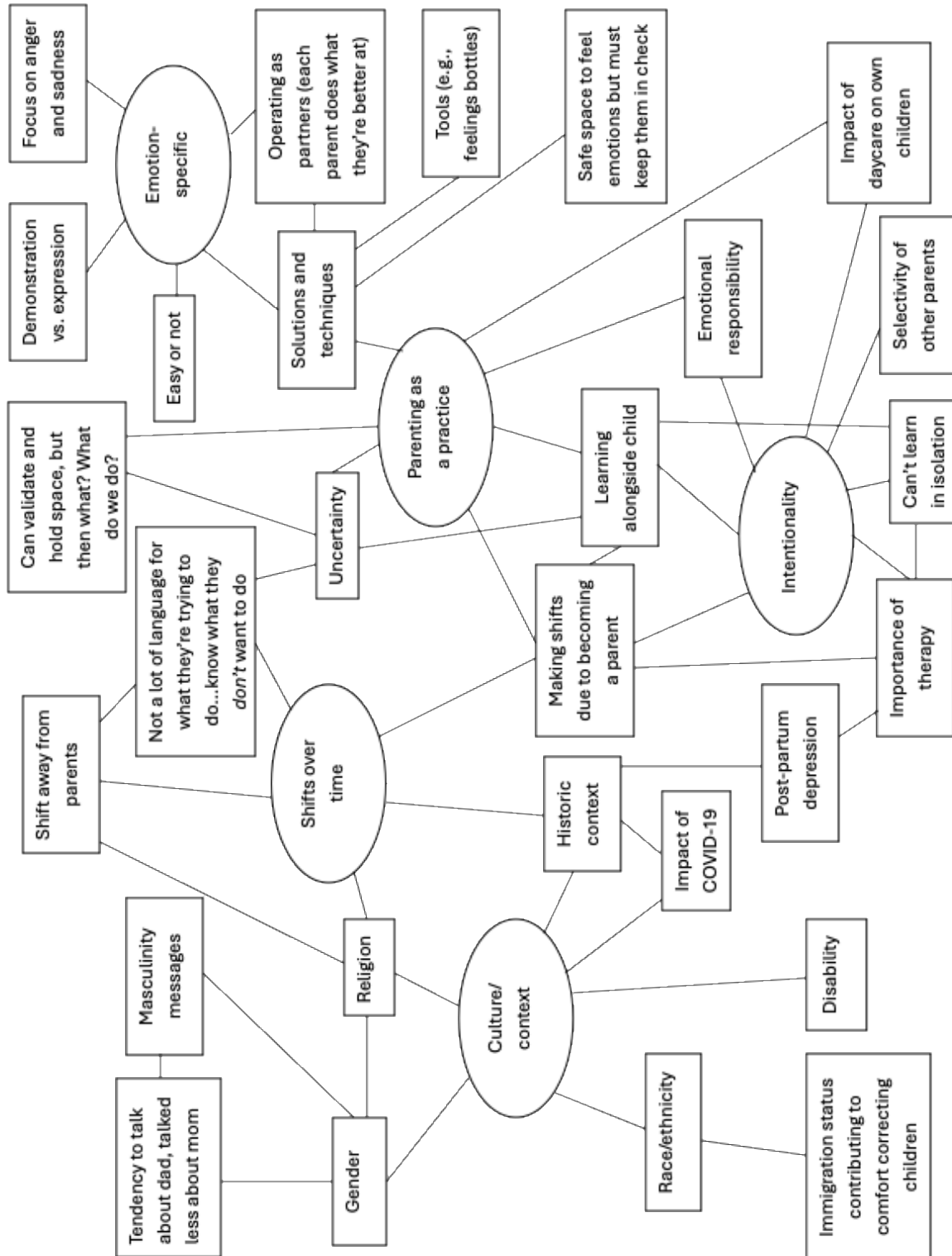
- If selected, each participant will earn **\$50**
 - A total of **\$100 per family!**
- Ensure your voice is heard!
- Your interview will help us better understand how emotions are socialized, which can be helpful for therapists, teachers, parenting programs, and more!

If interested, please contact Lindey Schmechel at lindey@ksu.edu

By emailing the researcher, you give her permission to confer with the director of the Center for Child Development for recruitment purposes about your family.



Appendix E - Initial Thematic Map



Appendix F - Final Thematic Map

