臺北市立教育大學學報
民 98，第 40 卷第二期　1-32 頁

Maternal Perspectives on Comforting Children's Distress

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Abstract

This study explored how mothers attributed children's distress and its relation to maternal comforting behavior. The participants were forty-three mothers and their second-grade children recruited from an elementary school in Taipei. Children's weekly journals were collected for three months. The distressing events cited more frequently in the journals were selected for excerpts of hypothetical situations. The mothers were interviewed individually and asked to reflect on their comforting practices in general and under those situations. The interview data were analyzed inductively.

The results revealed that maternal attribution was related to their judgment of children's responsibility in the distressing events. The child's responsibility was judged by two dimensions: controllability and duty. Controllability referred to the extent to which the child was able to alter or ameliorate the events. The degree of controllability was a continuum ranging from uncontrollable to controllable. Mothers tended to comfort their children under uncontrollable conditions, whereas they were more likely to reason things out under the controllable ones.

Duty included the rules that were agreed upon in the family and social obligations. Once the child has learned the rules, his/her wishes to violate rules were conceived to be unjustified and irresponsible. School-related obligations such as doing homework and being earnest in learning were highly valued by Asian parents

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as the child's mission in childhood. Apart from controllability and duty, there were idiosyncratic frames to which mothers referred as they made attribution. The findings were discussed in light of cultural values and the impact on parenting practices.

Key words: parental attribution, comforting, children's distress

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I. Introduction

Coping with children's distress is a daily task for most of parents. The importance of parental reactions, including how they react and/or don't react, has been considered as a mechanism involved in emotional socialization (Denham, 1998). Fabes and his colleagues (Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002) have investigated types of parental reactions to children's negative emotions or distress and how they related to children's social-emotional outcomes. Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, and Blair (1997) suggested that parental supportive reactions may motivate children to go over experiences and gain insights about their emotions. Parental reactions to children's negative emotions thus have great implications for developmental outcomes.

Being emotionally supportive has been defined in different ways (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Burleson and Kunkel, 1996). Under the rubric of emotional support, comforting was one of the related activities. Burleson (1994) defined that comforting was intended message behavior serving the function of alleviating or lessoning the emotional distress experienced by others. The parental comforting behaviors may require a more emotionally expressive environment, in which sensitive comfort must be implicitly instructed to the child and sometimes accompanied by emotion talk (Burleson & Kunkel, 1996). Emotion talk, as suggested by theorists, can foster the development of emotion knowledge of the child (see Denham, 1998 for a review). In the study of Eisenberg, Fabes, Carlo, Speer, Switzer, Karbon, & Troyer (1993), they found that maternal emphasis on problem solving and the exploration of feelings

while comforting their children was related to the amount of verbal comfort their children directed at a crying infant. In addition, researchers have suggested that the sophistication of maternal comforting messages be related to the person-centered quality of the comforting messages their children produced in a laboratory peer-comforting situation (Applegate, Burleson, & Delia, 1992; Burleson and Kunkel, 2002). In a word, the way in which parents convey comfort to their children exerts a powerful influence on children's ability to empathize with others' distress and their capacity to produce appropriate responses to the distressed others. Therefore, maternal comforting behaviors facilitate the development of the child's social-emotional skills.

However, parents do not always react positively and supportively as expected, especially in negative childrearing contexts. Parents go through the information processes that guide their reactive behaviors. Parental attribution of the child's behavior mediates how and what parents respond (Dopke & Milner, 2000; Wilson & White, 2006; Wilson, Calam, & White, 2007). Literature has documented how parental attribution may be differently related to children's negative behaviors (Coplan, Hastins, Lagace-Sequin, & Moulton, 2002). However, little attention has been paid to how parents attribute the affective aspects of children's behaviors. Following the line of research inquiry in parental attribution, this study was attempted to explore the maternal attribution of the child's distress and its relation to comforting practices. Furthermore, attribution itself is a value-laden cognitive activity. The cultural influence would also be addressed in the study.

II. Literature Review

A. Parental attributions and childrearing behaviors

Parenting research provided evidence that parenting practices be shaped by parental beliefs (Dix, 1993; Coplan et al., 2002; Chiang, Barrett, & Nunez, 2000). Belief systems have subtle impact on parents' interpretation, which in turn influence

their actions with children. Among a wide range of parental belief systems, parental attributions made to explain their children's behaviors are very influential and accountable for parenting behaviors.

Parents' attributions, defined as the causal explanations that parents provide to account for children's behaviors or characteristics, could be categorized in different dimensions: internal v.s. external, stable v.s. age-related, and typical v.s. exceptional (Hastings & Rubin, 1999). The internal attributions reflected the perceptions of children's behaviors as dispositional and intentional, whereas external ones as provoked and transitory. Weiner (1985) also proposed three-dimensional taxonomy of perceived causality, including locus (internal v.s. external), stability (stable v.s. unstable causes), and controllability (controllable v.s. uncontrollable causes). The locus referred to the influential factors that reside within the person versus within the environment. The causes that remained more constant as opposed to fluctuated explicated the dimension of stability. Controllability was identified as the causes subject to volitional control or operational control.

The attributions that parents make about children's behaviors have direct impact on their responses. Literature has pointed that the internal attributions made for the child's misbehaviors, such as that acts were intentional, free from external influence, and typical of behavior, can be the judgmental basis for parents to assign children responsibility for their own actions (Dix & Grusec, 1985). As a result, parents tended to display negative emotions, appeal to power-assertive and punitive responses (Dix, Ruble, and Zambarano, 1989; Miller, 1995). On the other hand, should parents perceive their children's behaviors as provoked, accidental or subject to change with age, those external attributions made the problematic behaviors less threatening and more amenable to parental intervention. Therefore, the impacts of parental attributions on parenting are not only associated with disciplinary behaviors, but also with affective responses.

B. Variability in parental attributions

There has been evidence that parents' attributions vary in association with children's social behaviors. For example, mothers attributed positive or desired acts as internally caused, whereas negative or undesired acts as externally caused (Miller, 1995). For negative behaviors, mothers made more external attributions in response to their child's transgressions (e.g. stealing or fighting) than to failure to be helpful (Dix, Ruble, Grusec, & Nixon, 1986). Mills and Rubin (1990) indicated that parents of preschoolers considered both aggression and social withdrawal as transient states. Moreover, the age-related factors were more often attributed to preschoolers' aggression than to social withdrawal. Similarly, Coplan et al. (2002) found that parents attributed children's aggressive and shy behaviors to more external causes than prosocial behaviors. Hastings & Coplan (1999) found that parents evaluated aggression as less stable, less dispositional, and less typical than defiance.

Two points should be noted from the above findings: first, children's negative behaviors (such as aggression and social withdrawal) were more likely to be attributed as externally caused and age-related than positive ones. Secondly, literature has suggested that this kind of parental attributional bias has its protective function that leads parents to believe they can exert influence on managing their child's behaviors (Hastings & Coplan, 1999). In line with the reasoning above, it was speculated that parents would differentially react to children's negative behaviors as well as distress.

The literature has documented parental attributions on children's behaviors. However, few studies have extended the investigation of parental attributions about children's distress. In light of these studies, the researcher intended to explore the explanations mothers provide to account for children's distress and how that reasoning influenced their comforting responses.

C. Cultural factors that shape parental attributions

Cultural differences should certainly be noted in such research endeavors. In the past literature, cross-cultural comparisons on parental attributions were more about children's academic performance or achievement (Holloway & Hess, 1985; Stevenson & Lee, 1990). For example, Stevenson and Lee found that Japanese and especially Taiwanese mothers emphasized effort (external and controllable factor) more than American counterparts.

Regarding to social behaviors, Kurachi (1987) compared Japanese and American mothers' attributions of problematic situations. It was found that American mothers blamed their child's teacher for school problems, whereas Japanese mothers blamed themselves. Chiang, Barrett, and Nunez (2000) compared American and Taiwanese mothers' attributions for toddlers' misdeeds and found that American mothers attributed their child's breaking objects and hurting people to accidents more frequently than did Taiwanese mothers. On the other hand, Taiwanese mothers blamed the child's internal, unstable anger/aggression for the child's breaking objects. In terms of children's failure, Taiwanese mothers made attributions more frequently to incompetence than did American mothers. In a word, Taiwanese mothers appeared to be more likely to blame their children for misdeeds than Americans.

Literature reviewed above suggests that there are fundamental differences in maternal attributions toward children's performance and behaviors. Western mothers tended to make external and unstable attributions toward children's misbehaviors (e.g. environmental influence, situations, accident) and internal attributions toward success and good performance. These attributions reflected individualistic view of personal contributions to own success and the emphasis on self-esteem.

On the contrary, Asian mothers appeared to attribute children's good performance to external and controllable factors (e.g. luck, effort), and problematic behaviors to internal (e.g. ability) and unstable (e.g. internal anger) factors. This

attributional pattern of less willing to take credits for good performance and more to external factors reflected the collectivistic view that personal accomplishment and one's own contributions should be less emphasized and valuable. On the other hand, the internal attributions of children's misdeeds led children to take responsibilities for their own behaviors (Chiang et al., 2000).

In addition, in a collectivistic culture, individuals are expected to fit in the group, fulfill obligations, conform to social norm, and become interdependent with interpersonal relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, parent-child interpersonal dependence was stressed. Wang, Wiley and Zhou (2007) suggested that parent-child relationships in Asia are like a naturalistic symbiosis, by which the mutual obligations are highly valued. Following this perspective, parental attributions made about children's interpersonal distress, either parent-child or peer relationships, should be addressed in light of mutual obligations and harmony relationships.

In summary, the cross-cultural comparison of parental attributions shed lights on how Asia parents may explain children's behaviors differently than Western counterparts. The internal and unstable factors were attributed for children's negative social behaviors or misdeeds, whereas mutual obligations and group-oriented considerations may be stressed while dealing with interpersonal issues. Whether Taiwanese mothers explain children's distress elicited by these matters in a similar approach remain unanswered and deserve further exploration.

The purposes of the study were thus to explore how mothers perceived and attributed children's distress and its relation to maternal comforting behavior.

III. Method

The participants were forty-three mothers and their second-grade children recruited from an elementary school in Taipei. Children's weekly journals were

collected over two months. The distressing events cited frequently in the journals were selected for excerpts of hypothetical situations. The twelve hypothetical distressing situations included: fighting with best friend, finding no partner when grouping, fighting over objects and being blamed, being pushed by peers, embarrassed by failure to answer questions, and losing school supply, getting-off-bed upset, bad test scores, unable to get the promised reward, wishing extra time for computer play, getting school notice for taking peers' belongings, and not wanting to go school.

The mothers were interviewed individually and asked to reflect on their comforting practices in general and under those situations. They were then encouraged to recall the similar events occurring recently and describe their reactions as detailed as possible. The verbatim of interviews were transcribed.

The key constructs for maternal explanations given for children's distress was first developed. The links between maternal attributions, the context of events and comforting-related practices were discerned. The attributional constructs and the links to practices were then compared across situations. The related constructs and links were grouped together and the core ideas were extracted and formulated. The researcher invited an Early Childhood Education faculty to code fourteen (about one third) maternal interviews and further compare the constructs and the links developed. The eighty-six percent of the constructs and links reached an agreement. The disagreement was further discussed until reaching consensus. The coding result and study findings were again confirmed through peer debriefing.

Ⅳ. Results

The interview data revealed that mothers' attribution was related to their judgment of the child's responsibility for occurring of the distressing events. The more responsibility the child should have taken, the less comfort and the more

dictation s/he would receive from mothers. There were two dimensions by which mothers make their judgments: controllability and duty.

A. Controllability

Controllability referred to the extent to which the child was able to alter or ameliorate conditions of the events. The distressing events varying in controllability ranged from less, some degree of, to more controllable ones.

1. Less controllability

The distressing events related to physiological arousals, the child's naïve nature, encountering task difficulty, and being victimized were usually attributed as lack of uncontrollability on the child's part by mothers.

a. Children's distress associated with physiological reactions such as tiredness and nervousness was more acceptable to parents. The physiological and emotional arousals were acknowledged and empathized, and the associated problematic behaviors were pardoned. For example,

M5, "Last time the teacher of supplementary class complained that he was distracted all the time in class. I knew that the child was vulnerable to be blamed. On the way home, I told him, 'I am not blaming you, I am discussing with you'. I said, 'You can't do it next time. I know you are sleepy, yet you should do what has to be done. No more, O.K.?"

M7, "Getting-off-bed anger? I would ask her, 'didn't you sleep well or what? You had a bad dream?'. I would listen and comfort, then pointed out the bad habitual behavior".

b. The children's naivety

Parents were more ready to empathize with children's naivety, especially related to sudden changes in family lives or adult world.

M8, "When grandma was taken cared in ICU, the child cried and wondered what happened to grandma. I told him, 'oh, it (ICU) is aseptic and good for grandma's health'. I comforted him and gave him a hug".

c. Encountering task difficulty

School performance was a major distressing event for grade children. When children lost points and felt upset, mothers would comfort the child by minimizing the importance of test scores and emphasizing the value of learning through experience.

M23, "When the child couldn't answer the questions on the test, I assured her that it was OK and encouraged her to do work in her own pace".

M7, "I would tell her that scores were not important. To keep notes of mistakes, try harder and achieve mastery were much more important. Don't get so upset".

d. When the child appeared to be the victim rather than the transgressor, mothers would deliver comforting messages first.

M2, "When being pushed by peers, I comforted and checked him first. I asked him, 'How do you do? Do you get hurt?' He replied, 'no, but it hurts'. I said, 'OK, let's check first'I listened to him first and asked if he would do the same to others. This was not dictation".

M4, "I empathized with her. I said, 'how come this child (pushing one) act like this? It's very impolite. It's OK. Be careful next time'.

Especially when the transgressor was the younger children, the child was comforted first and expected to let go of distress.

M24, "When my girl was bothered by her younger brother, I would comfort, 'your brother is wrong. And he is too young to control himself'. Especially

when her face was scratched by her brother, I would hug her and comfort her".

Children's distress, when attributed as caused by uncontrollable factors, was more likely to elicit maternal comforting responses. The uncontrollable factors were related to children's developmental constrains, such as naivety and incompetent. Besides, children were emotionally supported if they were victimized by their sibling or peers. Under these situations, mothers were more empathetic with children's distress.

2. Some degree of controllability—interpersonal issue and group matter

Interpersonal relationships were usually influenced by interactive patterns between two parties, not fully subjective to the child's control. Therefore, the issue of "right or wrong" came into play in the attributional process. If the cause of the distressing event was elicited by the child, mothers tended to reason with the child as to the consequences of his/her conduct.

M2: "When my child had a fight with his friend, I usually asked for the reason. If he was victimized, I would listen to him and gave him a hug. If he was the one who committed wrongdoing and felt bad being blamed, I wouldn't comfort him but explained the cause and consequence.

On the other hand, if the child appeared to be victims or feeling hurt, maternal comforting would be characterized by pep talk. The talk often taught the child how to assume a different perspective towards the other and the dos and don'ts in terms of social relationship.

M35, "when he complained about being pushed in the school, I would tell him, 'you know, the pushing child may not be intentional, he does not know. Yet, next time if you happen to be in the same situation and he is intentional, he means to push you, you must feel very bad…' I usually talk empathetically and have my child reflect on experience or take the other's role and think".

M5, "When she talked about disliking someone…that sort of stuff, I would comfort her by saying, 'it's possible that they like you. They intentionally say something irritating in order to get your attention. They probably like you so that doing something irritating would be able to be close to you'. I would say so to her.

M42, "When fighting with the best friend, I would hug and ask him what had happened. Then I asked him to reflect what he had done and said, and talked about the philosophy of making friends. Say, stuff between friends was mostly tiny and unimportant. If you have done something wrong, you should apologize. If the mistake was done by others, you should think it over and decide whether to fuss it about. Let go if there was no big deal".

M33, "When my child disliked his classmate, I told him, 'you dislike him and he dislikes you in return. You may show you kindness by looking at his bright sides'. At first, my suggestion was not acceptable. Later on, he was so good that he started to treat him nicely by sharing food…."

The above excerpts showed that the comforting messages stressed issues of intentionality, value of friendship, and the mutuality in relationship. The important aspects and cultural values embedded in terms of social relationships were addressed.

Similar maternal responses to the child's distress were related to group matters in class, such as being left out by peers or not being elected as class leader. Mothers would usually acknowledge the child's frustration by listening to the story. Maternal pep talk came next.

M11, "When nobody wanted to be his partner in class, I comforted him first, listened to him, and found out his problems by discussing with teachers. I would take the opportunity to talk about his problematic behavior committed at home, and make him understand the discomfort that peers may feel. Let him understand the reason why he couldn't find a partner".

M10, “Last time he lost the election of student model and was upset all night. I said, ‘it’s O.K. The model was elected by students, not teachers. Losing the election does not mean that you are not good. You’ll have opportunity for next election”.

Maternal pep talk was usually aimed to encourage the child to think over the event from a different perspective, including others’ intentionality, the bright sides of unwanted results, the reframed meaning or importance of the event, and reflection on the child’s own shortcomings. To alleviate the child’s distress and to learn from experience were the shared goals of maternal comforting messages.

3. More controllability

Children were assumed to be responsible in performing personal chores, such as taking care of personal belongings and bringing school supplies. When children’s stuff was missing, forgotten, or taken away, negligence was attributed and their distress was considered unjustified by mothers.

M13, “About the school stuff, first, one has to develop sense of responsibility. One should protect his/her belongings. You lost your stuff by your negligence. Nowadays children have live prosperous lives, easy to get what they wanted. The sense of responsibility is needed to build up”.

M41, “When he lost something, he used to say ‘somebody took away!’. I did believe some stuff could be taken away. I always say to him, ‘your stuff should be taken good cared of. It’s your responsibility and you shall take the responsibility if lost or taken away. It’s your business, not mine’.

M15, “When the child forgot to bring stuff to school, I surely blamed her. This is your job. You should take responsibility and straight things out”.

However, negligence was not necessary to elicit maternal dictation, for example missing points in the school exam. Only was negligence further attributed to the

child's mindset, such as absent-minded or not earnest enough, mothers would not engage in comforting.

M33, "For class exam, when he failed to read test items carefully, I told him that he was not working mindfully.

To sum up, whether children's distress would elicit maternal comfort would depend on maternal judgment of the child's controllability in the occurrence of the event. If mothers attributed the distressing event to being subject to the child's control, maternal dictation or teaching, rather than comforting, followed. The child's developmental constrains, the issue of right or wrong in interpersonal matters, mutuality in the relationship, and personal responsibility in daily chores were attributed in the process of weighing the child's controllability.

B. Duty

On the other hand, mothers were not ready to comfort the child's distress related to his/her duties. The duties referred to those obligations assigned (or agreed upon) by rules or destined to a young member via cultural norms.

1. A rule is rule

a. Children's distress as caused by failure to fulfill his against-rule wishes would not receive maternal comfort at the first place.

M35, "If the child watched TV too long to postpone what should be done, I would get angry with him and turn off TV immediately".

M41, "We made one-hour computer agreement. Sometimes the child got immersed with the fun of playing computer. I would extend some time. When time was up and he showed disappointed, I would say, 'this is our agreement. This is it. No second word'.

M22, "As long as rules are set, I will pay no attention to his whining, especially

when he has full knowledge of what shouldn't be done…."

Only was the rule of thumb "play follows finishing what should be done" obeyed, some exceptions became negotiable.

M32, "We need to follow the rule, i.e. if you (the child) finish homework and have good grades, I can accept extra time for computer games. 'Finish what should be done and then play'.

Rules set for children's behavioral codes were usually simultaneously setting constrains on emotional expressions. Emotions resulted from failure to observe rules were not considered justifiable.

b. Transgression of behavioral rules was forbidden.

Violation of cultural normative behaviors was not allowed in its own right. Children's distress elicited was certainly not justified as a result.

M3, "Fighting over stuff, I would tell her, 'fighting over stuff itself is wrong. You cannot do that'. I would not comfort and become more serious in dealing with this issue. I put more emphasis on this kind of matters".

M15, "Taking someone's belongings away is not right. Discipline is needed".

M28, "For those misconducts committed in school, I usually asked him to explicate the wrongdoing first and neglect him if he's emotional. I usually questioned him, 'what do you do in school? You speak for yourself about what you have been wrong and what you should do next time'. I won't give my dictation unless no explication given".

Mothers appeared to be firm with the rules set upon mutual agreement. The violation of the rule itself was not so detrimental, yet the unjustified emotion was not allowed. The child's distresses elicited by own transgression and misconduct that diverted from cultural norms were certainly not justifiable in any case.

2. Destined obligations for children

Doing homework and being studious were destined obligations for children. In the previous section, maternal reference of "what should be done" was mostly about doing homework.

> M19, "….If the child whined about playing computer, postponed doing homework, and appealed to irrational means, I would speak in a strict tone, 'if I do not see you doing your homework in 30 minutes, I will punish you'.

> M29, "When the child failed to solve questions in class, I would tell him, 'you should develop guilt in face of your teacher, because your teacher tried hard in teaching and you were lack of efforts in learning. You should try harder, otherwise your teacher is too pitiable'.

These excerpts reflected that mothers construed learning as the job of the school-aged children. Punitive responses would be elicited, letting alone comfort, when failing to perform the destined duty of doing homework. Guilt, rather than distress, was considered more reasonable.

C. Idiosyncratic referent frame

Mothers had different referential frames in the attribution of their child's distress. The idiosyncratic frames included the child's characteristics, the dynamics of family interaction, maternal past experience, and the manner in which the child's distress was expressed.

1. The child's characteristics and maternal related-expectations

For the child's distress relating to the child's characteristics considered deficient and divergent from maternal expectations, the mother would be less likely to comfort.

M10, “When my child was blamed by the teacher for fighting over stuff with peers, well, she deserved! It’s because she was too withdrawn to get bullied easily. To stand up for herself was the lesson to be learned. When her stuff was taken away by others, I said, ‘You should make your move quickly enough. You should protect your own rights and stand up for yourself’. I would blame her for their deficiency in a more strict way”.

2. Maternal politics—comforting the one who yields rights

For children’s distress resulted from sibling conflicts, mothers were more likely to comfort the child who yielded to his/her sibling.

M24, “When sisters fought, I dissolved the conflicts by comforting the younger. I told her that the elder sister was more stubborn and seldom home. Let’s yield to her a little bit”.

3. The issue of “timing” for resipiscence

Children’s distress if mixed with their regret for own negligence were often considered as having resipiscence and thus pardonable to mothers.

M28, “When they lost points out of negligence, they were also regretful. They were not allowed to get the promised stuff. However, it’s a pity that one regretted for missing points. My heart was broken and I would still fulfill their wishes”.

M19, “When she forgot to have parents sign and got a bad mark on the parent book, she felt so embarrassed. ‘Remember to have me sign next time”, I just reminded her, ‘otherwise, I felt embarrassed too in front of the teacher’.

On the other hand, when children did not express the emotion as expected, mothers were more likely to consider the emotionless reaction as a reflection of the child’s inappropriate mindset. It turned out to be an attitude issue.

M14, "Lost stuff in school…She did not show any sad feeling. However, I would blame her because I think she failed to take care of their belongings or getting stuff lost."

4. The belief in "trying one's best"

Mothers would comfort the child if they believed that the child had tried his/her best. How do mothers judge if the invested efforts were enough? The rule of thumb was how the child's effortful behaviors performed beforehand and the child's affect showed afterwards.

M1, "The child's upset events? If he had tried his best, I would comfort him. Say, missing points in exam. I knew that he had prepared a lot, but missed the points by negligence. I would let go. I would hug him and tell him no more next time".

M15, "I didn't really care about the exam scores, as long as he tried his best efforts. I cared about his learning attitude and if he's seriously doing what should be done".

5. The mother's past experience

Maternal own experience of the distressful event in the past would influence how they reacted to the child. There was a mother reflecting on her own experience, which shaped maternal beliefs for dealing with the child's distress.

M3, "When the child couldn't find stuff, go find it! There was no need to blame the child. When I was young, I was so nervous if I lost something; I was in a state of nerves, as if the worst thing of the world had occurred to me. It's no big deal. Just talked to them. All things can be solved if spoken out".

6. The justification of the wanted rewards

The justification of the child's frustration related to obtaining rewards was influential in determining whether mothers would comfort and fulfill the child's

wishes or not. The child's frustration caused by not gaining the rewards as promised would not be justified, if the reward was not a necessity or the requesting manner was too demanding.

M16, "When she wanted to buy something for the reward for good school performance, we worked with the bonus system. If the stuff she desired was the necessity, say school supply, I would have it ready for her. However, if she wanted something considered extra, say something she already had and wanted more, I would not buy it. She could have it by sacrificing her bonus points.

M35, "When the exam was finished, I promised to give him rewards. Yet, we did not go out. He then kept complaining About no rewards. I told him, 'the reward is for encouragement, I want to award you. It's not that I deserve to give you any reward. It is because your school performance is good, and I want to award you. I can choose not to Actually performing well is your business, not mine'.

In sum, maternal attribution of the child's distress were subject to differential considerations over the issues of the child's characteristics, maternal past experience, reinforcement of valued behaviors (e.g. yielding to siblings and trying one's best), and the timing and justification for distress. It appeared that mothers were eclectic in terms of referential frames upon which their attributions were made.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study suggested that controllability by which children ameliorate the occurring of the distressing events was the most important dimension for maternal attribution. The controllable-uncontrollable continuum was congruent with Weiner's (1985) assertion. Furthermore, aspects of the less controllable events reflected maternal view of the child's nature as incompetent, naive, and

physiologically-driven. The distress caused by the child's developmental constrains should be comforted. The perception of children as naïve and protection-needed has its origin in the Ancient books of "Guideline of Children's Discipline" by Yang-Ming Wang dated back in the fifteen century. Children were considered as naïve and weak as the seedlings of plants, and thus deserved being nurtured (Hsiung, 2000). Maternal comforting may represent the provision of nurture based on the understanding of inherent constrain in controlling their world.

Interestingly, the child's frustration or distress occurred in friendship or social issues were perceived to be controllable to some degree. The responsibility attributed on the child's part determined the manner of maternal talk. If more responsibility assumed, reasoning talk on the cause-effect of the child's conduct was followed; if less assumed, pep talk that encouraged reflection on others' intention, the value of friendship, and the mutuality of relationship was elicited. The different manner in maternal talk was in line with Miller's (1995) finding that parents displayed less positive responses when children were assigned responsibilities for their own actions. The child's culpability in interpersonal difficulties and problems was weighed, which determined what and how mothers addressed to their children.

While looking into the maternal comforting messages, it appeared that mothers tended to have children exposed to reflective thinking, either on others' intention, others' feelings towards the child's conduct, the child's own feeling if others acted in return, and the rationale for the action from generalized others' position. This finding echoed with the Western literature that social interaction was beneficial to children's understanding of others' mind (Ruffman, Perner, & Parkin, 1999; Racine, Carpendale, & Turnbull, 2006). Ruffman et al. (1999) found that mothers who would ask children to reflect on the feelings of others had children having better false-belief understanding. Racine et al. (2006) explicated that explanatory talk characterized as directing attention to the conflict-eliciting actions, rather than non-explanatory talk such as making up or saying sorry, facilitated preschool children's understanding of

the mental world. Therefore, future studies may pursue this line of research to investigate the child's outcome of maternal reflective approach of comforting.

Furthermore, mothers had children not only make inferences about the other's mind, but also think in reference to generalized others and in a cursive way. This phenomenon supported Liao and Chin's (2009) finding that second-grade children's persuasive strategy displayed a reflective approach, such as having the persuadee think in a reversed way (e.g. what if it's you who want to play next time and we don't clean up) and from the third person's perspective (e.g. what your parent would suggest you when you were allowed to play only if you clean up). The parallel practices in perspective-taking skills in maternal comforting and children's persuasion strategy deserved further research on the transactional relationship.

Last but foremost point about the comforting messages related to interpersonal distress was that the core features of interpersonal relationship, i.e. reciprocity and mutuality, were valued and transmitted through the reflective practices. According to Chin (1980), *renqing*（人情）was the golden rule in Chinese interpersonal relationships. The core concept of *renqing* was the reciprocation. Yang (2000) further explicated that, since Chinese people need to rely on others to fulfill personal wishes or attain own gains, the expectancy of repay became the informal politics in daily interpersonal exchanges. One who offered help to the other upheld the expectation that the person would repay in the future. Therefore, thinking the other's mind benignly and reacting in positive way would render others' good reflection on my intentions and better relationship.

For those events with more controllability, children's omissions and/or negligence were more likely to be attributed by mothers. Furthermore, transgressions of behavioral or family rules would elicit no comfort but exhortations. These finding were consistent with Asian parenting literature. Lin and Wang (1995) pointed out that Chinese parents generally assume a disciplinary approach in parenting. The five types of children's behaviors, including disobeying rules, engaging immoral conducts,

having bad habits, killing lives, and acting defiantly to elderly persons, should be disciplined. Parents would appeal to corporal punishment if children committed moral transgressions or misconducts intentionally. For those misdeeds due to negligence, accident, and learning-related misses, parents would exhort their child not to commit again (Chiang et al, 2000). Therefore, rules, both conventional (i.e. culturally prescribed normative conducts) and agreed upon, were to observe with few exceptions.

This study also suggested that children learn to take responsibility in performing duty destined to young cultural members. Going to school and trying hard in school were emphasized in daily socialization encounters. The child's distress caused by failure to conform would not be comforted. This finding supported the similar cognition found in literature exploring children's emotional development. In Stein, Trabasso, Liwag's study (2000), they found that children as young as three-year-old could talk about their obligations (e.g. go to school) they had to uphold when recalled emotional events. The congruency in social cognition of parents and children was supported.

The study revealed that there was a school of learning-related belief system that influenced maternal comforting behaviors. The maternal attribution of missing points in tests pivoted on the judgment that the child's best efforts have been paid or not. If missing out of negligence with best efforts presumed, children's distress would be comforted. In addition, negligence was not necessary leading to maternal dictation if children's distress were interpreted as regretful responses and resipiscence. When maternal attributions related to task difficulty, their comforting message focused on learning with strategy and though experiences. The above findings supported that effort be the widely noted value in Chinese culture placed on learning (Biggs, 1996; Kwok & Lytton, 1996).

Furthermore, these findings were in line with Li (2004, 2008) assertion that learning be a virtue orientation to Chinese culture. Li (2004, 2008) suggested that

Chinese children and students construe learning as to perfect oneself morally. “When succeeding, learners remain humble in order to continue self-perfecting. When experiencing failure, they feel shame and guilt, both for themselves and in reference to those who nurtured them (2008, p. 191)”. Therefore, the moral aspects of learning, such as trying hard and feeling ashamed of failure, were overweighed than negligence in making judgment over poor school performance. Mothers would comfort children when these moral responses were displayed.

The study also documented that mothers would justify their children’s distress based on the idiosyncratic referent frames, including the child’s characteristics, maternal expectations held for their children, mothers’ past experiences, and the manner in which the child’s distress was expressed. These frames served as the attributional antecedents that shaped the causal explanations reached for the actor or the observer (Kelly & Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1985).

In addition, this result was in line with the perspective that social contexts were so heterogeneous in terms of the composition of values and offered various perspectives for interpretation (Goodnow, 1997). In addition, this finding supported the assertion that effective socialization as a problem-solving activity in which parents take into account of the features of children and of the situations, and then tailor their responses to meet their socialization goals (Grusec, 2003). As a result, parental beliefs and goals were prone to contextual effects (Dix, 1992, 2003; Hastings & Rubin, 1999; Liu, 2001). Similarly, Peng and Nisbett (1999) suggested that European-American culture value consistency, whereas Chinese culture emphasizes flexibility and context sensitive. Parental beliefs become more predictive when considered as situational-dependent as opposed to trait-like characteristics (Smetana, 1994). Therefore, the results further provided evidence for various referential frames in shaping parenting goals in daily socialization encounters.

VI. Suggestions

The study findings suggested that controllability and duty be the bases for maternal attributions of the child's distress. The variability in the degree of controllability and the idiosyncratic referent frames illustrated that parenting go through different layers of information processes in reaction to their child's distress. There are four implications of the results: first, maternal expectations upheld for school-aged children are increased. Children's distresses are less likely to elicit maternal comforting behaviors at the first place. It is better for mothers to explicate the reasons for not comforting in order to help children understand the affective aspect of parenting behaviors. Secondly, mothers' pep talk following comforting may exemplify an inclusive comforting practice in that both affective and inductive components of parenting are included. Thirdly, how the child's distress is addressed in maternal pep or disciplinary talk and its relation to child outcomes deserve to be explored. Lastly, the patterns in which the different layers of information processes in maternal attributions are incorporated in relation to the distressing issues can be investigated further in the future studies.

Acknowledgement

This study was a part of the research project funded by National Science Council (NSC 94-2413-H-133-008). The author is grateful for the financial support from NSC and the participation of the mothers and their children.

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母親安慰兒童苦惱情緒的觀點

金瑞芝*

摘　要

本研究探討母親如何詮釋兒童苦惱情緒，與母親安慰行為的關連。研究參與者為四十三位母親和其二年級的孩子。資料來源為臺北市某一國小二年級，六個班級兒童為期二個月之心情週誌，進一步歸納出十二個常被兒童紀錄的難過事件，據此做為母親訪談的事件例子，接著對四十三位母親進行半結構性的訪談。本研究透過質性資料分析，結果顯示母親對兒童苦惱情緒之詮釋和歸因的主要依據為兒童在發生事件中的責任，而責任的歸因則有兩個基礎：控制性和義務。控制性指的是兒童能改變或減緩事物發生的可能性，從不可控制、某種程度的控制、到可控制等程度之差別。母親在兒童面對不可控制事件所引發的焦慮苦惱時，會傾向安慰兒童；反之，則不會安慰，而以說理勸說為主。

義務則包含家庭規則和文化價值賦予兒童的義務。兒童若因違反家庭規則受到約束後而引發苦惱情緒，母親不會同理或安慰兒童。同樣地，對於兒童應盡的義務，如寫作業和認真學習等基本學習行為和態度，若違反或未能遵守，母親也不會去同理安慰。除此之外，母親對於兒童苦惱情緒事件的歸因和詮釋，也會因為自身成長經驗、教養目標、文化信念等參照架構，而有所不同。

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