The effect of parenting experience in childhood on the awareness of children’s rights: The mediating effects of self-esteem and emotional intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Literature has been well documented on the study and shown the close relationships between parents’ parenting attitudes and their parenting experiences in their childhood. However, it is hard to find both theoretical and empirical studies explaining why and how such close relationships develop. This study was carried out to fill this black box. To do so, it reviews extensively the related theories and suggests a hypothesis that mothers’ parenting experiences in their childhood affect the current awareness level of children’s rights through the mediation effects of two psychological factors: self-esteem and emotional intelligence. Applying structural equation modeling to a vast dataset acquired by surveying 1,011 Korean mothers, it finds the evidence that strongly supports the main hypothesis. It also finds that this relationship holds in a roundabout way: while there is no found direct relationship between mothers’ parenting experiences and their current awareness level of children’s rights, the effects of the former to the latter turn out to be indirectly mediated by self-esteem and emotional intelligence. These findings may imply that, in order to improve the practice of children’s rights, one would recommend psychological programs for parents that could improve their emotional intelligence and self-esteem, since the psychological factors could change over lifetime.

Key words: Parenting attitudes, parenting experiences, children’s rights, emotional intelligence, Self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of abuses or crimes against children occurring nowadays, so it has become imperative to take measures to prevent such crime. Subsequent punishment for child abuse or crime would not be an ideal solution. The most desirable countermeasures should be prevention of such crime. The most effective precautionary measure would be to raise public’s awareness of children’s rights. The purpose of this study is to provide fundamental research results which is critical to help prevent child abuse and to develop policies to promote children’s rights. It did so by investigating psychological factors that are affected by parenting experiences in people’s early childhood, and that in turn affect the awareness of children’s rights, and consequently parent attitudes.

It has been very well documented that the parenting experience in childhood serves as an important factor in determining the attitude towards their family and children when the children become parents (Crowell and Feldman 1988; Fincham 1994). Parents with positive parenting experiences in their childhood tend to have a positive attitude toward their own children and family. Reflecting these previous studies, it seems to be believed that the attitudes and values of family and children are inherited over generations. Unfortunately, however, the internal working logic still remains as a black box: that is, studies that ‘explain’ why and how such a relationship works has been extremely limited worldwide. The lack of explanation should in turn limit the applications of the valuable research findings in practice. This study is to fill this gap.

In psychological studies, it is well-known that the major part of the following: (1) the self-esteem of adults (for comprehensive surveys for this subject see Orth, 2017; Orth and Robins, 2014; Robins and Trzesniewski, 2005; Trzesniewskiet al., 2013)
(2) emotional intelligence (Allemand et al., 2015; Grühn et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 2002) are formed in childhood and have a strong tendency to remain in their adulthood.

The extensive psychology studies also shows that self-esteem and emotional intelligence could be considered as the most important factors that affect social attitudes and behaviors (Chakraborty and Chlup, 2016; Craig, 2006; Orth, 2017, 2018; Pizarro, 2000; Pizarro and Salovey, 2002). Given that the social attitude includes the awareness of children's rights, it is plausible to suggest that the parenting experiences could affect the development of the awareness of children's rights through the two psychological factors of self-esteem and emotional intelligence. Unfortunately, however, research on the influence of such psychological development on the attitude toward children's rights has not yet been actively conducted. This study theoretically suggests that childhood parenting experience affects psychological development, which in turn affect building social attitudes including the awareness level of children's rights.

To empirically verify the theoretical hypotheses suggested here, the study surveyed and analyzed a wide range of data from more than 1,000 Korean mothers with 5-7 years old children. By examining the link between their perceived childhood experience and current self-esteem and emotional intelligence, the study empirically verifies whether the childhood parenting experience affects the mother's self-esteem and emotional intelligence. It also analyses whether such self-esteem and emotional intelligence influence the awareness level of children's rights.

The study is organized as follows. It lays out a solid theoretical background, from which our hypotheses develop; Here, it examined how the childhood experience of adults affects the development of their self-esteem and emotional intelligence. In addition, we can infer from the review of these theoretical studies that these two psychological factors in adulthood may affect the awareness of children's rights; it also describes the research methods and measurement variables used in the study; it presents the estimation results of the structural equation model for the dataset surveyed for this study; and Finally summarizes the findings of this study and suggestions that can be drawn from the result.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Parenting Experience, Self-esteem, and Awareness of Children's Rights

Since James' pioneering study (1890), self-esteem has been studied from various perspectives. Despite its diversity of the definition of self-esteem, recent trends of research are converging to a definition of 'self-evaluation of their own values and abilities' (Cooley, 1902; Coopersmith, 1967; Rogenberg, 1979; Holland and Andre, 1994; Brandler, 1995).

For this study, two issues are particularly pertinent (for comprehensive reviews see Orth (2017); Orth and Robins, (2014); Robins and Trzesniewski, (2005); Trzesniewskiet al, 2013). The first one is concerned with its determinant factors and development. According to the latest findings of behavioral genetic studies, self-esteem is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors, but the latter effect is reported to be significantly greater (McGuire et al., 1994; Neiss et al., 2002; Neiss et al., 2005). Among the latter factors, parents' parenting attitude has been particularly pointed out as the crucial factor for the formation of childhood self-esteem. In other words, the child's self-esteem can vary greatly depending on the parent's attitude towards the child. They also proposed that the psychological state of self-esteem is clearly formed in childhood and a large portion of this is transferred to their later life. For example, recent studies using large-scale longitudinal datasets show that the level of self-esteem varies throughout the entire lifespan, plotting a trajectory of an inverted U shape (Orth, 2018; Orth et al., 2010; Orth et al., 2012; Orth et al., 2015, and references therein). It is particularly important for the purpose of this study, to note that self-esteem is already established in childhood as a factor that constitutes individual personalities and individual differences are fixed then (Cole et al., 2001; Donnellan et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2016). This could imply that a large portion of the present self-esteem of the research participants (mothers with children) has been formed in their childhood.

Secondly, the present study also carefully takes on the effects of self-esteem on social behaviors and attitudes. The traditional view has posited that self-esteem could contain anti-social behaviors such as violence, crime, drugs or smoking (Craig, 2006; Orth, 2017, 2018). If the awareness of children's rights is considers to be included as one of these 'social attitudes', it is expected that the higher the self-esteem, the higher the awareness of children's rights. However, the skeptical view on the role of self-esteem has also emerged (Baumeister and Vohs, 2018; Baumeister et al., 2003; Baumeister et al., 1996; Crocker and Park 2004; Emler, 2001). They argued that high self-esteem does not necessarily constrain anti-social behavior or delinquency. For example, reviewing vast literature published until recently, Baumeister and Vohs (2018) demonstrates that there has been no evidence to support the alleged its positive effects, implying that self-esteem has little to do with social behavior and attitudes. Similarly, reviewing a large number of existing studies, Emler (2001) argues that there is no empirical evidence for the common belief that child abuse is committed by parents with low self-esteem, although it is widespread among clinical professionals (also see Baumeister et al., 1996). All of these discussions and debates implies that the relationship between self-esteem and the awareness level on children's rights are at least
opens and can be an interesting research subject.

Following up these debates, the present study is to contribute to the field in two ways. First, it empirically examines the effects of parenting experiences on the level of self-esteem of mothers with children. Second, it also empirically investigates the alleged positive association between self-esteem and the awareness level on children’s rights.

Parenting experience in childhood, emotional intelligence and awareness of children’s rights

The psychological suggestion that human intelligence has various domains and each intelligence domain should be defined accordingly, has long been recognized since the early 20th century (Thorndike, 1920; Wechsler, 1958; Gardner, 1983). Among them, the emotional intelligence has taken the central stage of research and most popular in public (Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Goleman 1995, 1998, 2006), and a wide range of formal models has been proposed and applied to practices. However, the diversity of the models has also caused theoretical controversies on its definition and substance (Cherniss, 2010; Daus and Ashkanasy, 2003; Locke, 2005; Mathews et al., 2006; Murphy, 2006). In spite of this theoretical diversity and controversy, it would be possible to extract common factors from various emotional intelligence models and establish a practical concept relevant to this study. We defined it as the intelligence that is responsible for the ‘social function’ à la Salovey and Mayer (1990).

Viewed through this angle, it is suggested that the higher the emotional intelligence, the more awareness and empathy of other’s feelings and the more effective social activities such as the formation of desirable interpersonal relations (Lopes et al., 2004; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence is the ability to better understand the minds of oneself and others and at the same time to control their attitudes and behaviors appropriately. If one can make good use of it, then one is likely to have pro-social attitude and behavior( for case studies see Davis et al., 1999; Eisenberg et al., 2009; McDonald and Messinger, 2011; Wilhelm and Bekkers, 2010).

In the similar vein, it can be argued that emotional intelligence is closely related to social justice or moral judgment (Chakraborty and Chlup 2016; Pizarro, 2000; Pizarro and Salovey, 2012). Pizarro (2000), Pizarro and Salovey (2012) demonstrates convincingly that emotion plays a critical role in moral development, judgment, and behavior. The ability to deal with emotion can be regarded as the ability to be a morally “good person” (Allemand et al., 2015; Gerdet et al., 2011; Pizarro and Salovey, 2012). In this sense, Salovey and Mayer (1990), who are considered to be modern progenitor of emotional intelligence, proposed emotional intelligence as providing the ability to do the right “social functioning”.

Reflecting these, this study suggests that, if the role of emotional intelligence is to induce pro-social awareness, attitude, and behavior, it is expected that there should be a positive correlation between the awareness of children’s rights and emotional intelligence, since emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and sympathize with the feelings and thoughts of others, and the unique needs of children.

This study is particular to two relevant issues of emotional intelligence. First, the literature on how emotional intelligence in adults is formed and changed have discovered that parenting experiences in childhood have a great influence on childhood emotional intelligence. Second, the emotional intelligence formed in childhood tends to be preserved even when grown up as in adulthood. Although there are not many systematic studies exclusively focusing on parenting style and emotional intelligence (Alegre, 2011), it is true that positive parenting attitudes are reported to produce favorable outcomes for childhood and adolescent emotions and behaviors. (Bennet et al., 2005; Alegre and Benson, 2007; Eisenberg, Fabes., 2000; Eigenberg., et al. 1999; Gottman et al., 1997). This new and creative interpretation of the literature of the emotional intelligence in terms of its social function implies that it can significantly influence parents’ awareness of the children’s rights and parenting attitude toward their children. In this study, parenting attitudes were classified into an acceptive attitude (positive) and a rejective attitude (negative) and the effect of these on the development of emotional intelligence is empirically verified.

It is also reported that the emotional intelligence formed through interaction with parents in childhood can be conveyed to that even in their adulthood. To my best knowledge, this has not been examined in the literature of emotional intelligence. However, the evidence is often found in the studies on ‘empathy’, which can be regarded as a proxy variable of emotional intelligence (Allemand et al., 2015; Grühn et al., 2008; Helson et al., 2002). The term empathy utilized in the studies dealing with the psychological persistence is defined as ‘an ability to perceive, understand, and share the feelings of others’ (Cox et al., 2012; Davis 2007; Grühn et al., 2008; Helson et al., 2002; Pizarro, 2000). It would be safe to say that these are matched up with the sub-branches for standard models of emotional intelligence: emotional perception, emotional expression, and empathy, which are measured and analyzed in this study. Therefore, we can infer from this literature some theoretical intuitions useful in our own understanding of the properties of emotional intelligence. Recent longitudinal studies( Allemand et al., 2015; Grühn et al., 2008; Helson et al., 2002, and some more studies cited therein) on the development trajectory of the empathy over entire life have commonly found that: first, the basis of empathy is mainly formed in the early years of life (from infancy to adolescence). Second, empathy formed in the early years has a strong tendency to be preserved until
These findings pave a solid ground for this study. First, they could enable us to empirically analyze the relationship between the childhood experiences of mothers and their current emotional intelligence simultaneously. Second, they also make it legitimate to investigate the effect of emotional intelligence on the awareness level of children’s rights. If it works as a ‘social function’ and the latter is considered to be a kind of social attitude as discussed above, the more the experience that mothers have on positive parenting, the higher the emotional intelligence and the higher the awareness level of children’s rights are expected.

MODEL, MEASUREMENTS AND DATA

Model and hypothesis development

Based on the theoretical background that reflects our new ideas discussed above, the present study builds a operable model shown in Figure 1. The model is based on structural equation modelling approach, which implies that all conventions in the analyses of structural equation model apply. It is designed to capture the idea that parenting experiences affect the awareness of children’s rights both directly and indirectly (mediated) through psychological factors. Note also that the parenting experiences are divided into acceptive (positive) and rejective (negative) experiences. The arrows connecting between variables in ovals can be interpreted as causal relationships representing various hypotheses implied.

Participants and dataset

To empirically test the validity of the hypotheses, this study surveyed and collected a dataset from mothers with 3-5 years old children in Korea, all of whom participated voluntarily in survey through the Naver.com poll platform. A total of 1,011 participants completed the questionnaires designed to measure the related variables. By deleting incomplete samples, 906 samples were analyzed, which is considered to be enough to guarantee the reliability of the model estimation.¹

Measurement Instruments

The instruments for measuring the latent variables are as follows. To measure parenting experiences in participants’ childhood, this study employs the modified Mother-Father-Peer Scale (MFPS), which was originally proposed by Epstein (1983) and revised by Jeun (1997) to reflect Korean-specific characteristics. This instrument consists of 9 items for acceptive and rejective experiences from their

¹ For the discussion on appropriate numbers of samples in estimating a structural equation model that this study relies on, see Jöreskog and Sörbom(1989), Mitchell(1993), Stevens(1996).
Table 1: Convergence Validity Tests by CFA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed Variables</th>
<th>Latent Variables</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Non-Std</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>C.R.</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>CR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptive1</td>
<td>← Rejective Experience</td>
<td>0.747</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptive2</td>
<td>← Rejective Experience</td>
<td>0.821</td>
<td>1.032</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>22.133</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptive3</td>
<td>← Rejective Experience</td>
<td>0.709</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>19.712</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejective1</td>
<td>← Acceptive Experience</td>
<td>0.694</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejective2</td>
<td>← Acceptive Experience</td>
<td>0.778</td>
<td>1.102</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>19.157</td>
<td>0.489</td>
<td>0.742</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rejective3</td>
<td>← Acceptive Experience</td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>18.673</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Denial</td>
<td>← Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.803</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relations</td>
<td>← Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.686</td>
<td>0.828</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>20.316</td>
<td>0.706</td>
<td>0.877</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
<td>← Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.854</td>
<td>1.149</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>23.819</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>← Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>0.624</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Expression</td>
<td>← Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>0.654</td>
<td>1.067</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>0.745</td>
<td>0.897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Perception</td>
<td>← Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>0.736</td>
<td>1.069</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating</td>
<td>← Child Right Awareness</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>← Child Right Awareness</td>
<td>0.957</td>
<td>1.004</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>69.388</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>← Child Right Awareness</td>
<td>0.954</td>
<td>1.037</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>68.171</td>
<td>0.862</td>
<td>0.962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>← Child Right Awareness</td>
<td>0.923</td>
<td>0.948</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>57.714</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Estimation of Model Fit Indexes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indexes</th>
<th>$\chi^2/df$</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RMR</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.885</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.914</td>
<td>0.962</td>
<td>0.962</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

parents. As for measuring self-esteem, we used a Korean version of the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) for adults proposed by Kang (1986) by revising Coopersmith (1967). Our shortened version of SEI includes 25 items which are grouped into four sub-constructs including interpersonal relationship (5 items), self-denial (4 items), leadership (4 items), and self-assertiveness and disrespect (5 items). For measuring emotional intelligence, we employed the emotional intelligence inventory for Korean adults developed by Moon (1998), which was based on the emotional intelligence model by Salovey and Mayer (1990). The instrument originally consists of five sub-constructs of emotional intelligence, including emotional perception, emotional expression, empathy, emotion regulation, and emotional utilization. In order to measure its social functions that are most relevant to the awareness on children’s rights, this study employed the questions for the first three sub-constructs (see the theoretical discussions above). Finally, as for the awareness of Children’s Rights, it used Korean version of Hart and Zeidner (1993) questionnaires which was based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. The questionnaire consists of 40 items reflecting the UNCRC’s three principles of children’s rights. However, the questions were rearranged and grouped into four operational sub-scales of the right of survival, the right of protection, the right of development, and the right of participation. All questionnaires were measured using the 5 point Likert scale. This scale is composed of the following:

1) Very Important (have a lot) – 5 point
2) Somewhat Important (have somewhat) – 4 point
3) Neutral (have as usual) – 3 point
4) Less Important (have less) – 2 point
5) Not Important (have nothing) – 1 point. All the instruments were verified for relevance and validity by a professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education, and 3 doctorate holders.

RESULTS

Having secured the validities and reliabilities, the SEM was estimated. Table 2 shows that the representative indexes for SEM model fitness are fairly high, implying that the estimation results are reliable. Figure 1 presents graphically the final estimation results on which we draw conclusions and Table 3 summarizes them numerically.

Tables 1 and 3 provides estimated coefficients for all paths and the results of statistical test. Table 1 shows that all coefficients for measured variables are significant at 1% level. However, as Table 3 shows, not all path coefficients among latent variables were significant. Acceptive childhood experiences had a statistically significant effect on emotional intelligence, but not on self-esteem, while rejective childhood experiences had a statistically significant effect on self-esteem, but not on emotional intelligence. Therefore, it would be predicted that acceptive childhood experiences mainly affect the awareness of...
children’s right via emotional intelligence, while rejective childhood experiences affect it via the self-esteem.

Although the individual coefficients may provide some insights on how the model works, the total effects of the mediators cannot be separately estimated and inferred, but should be estimated as a whole. This is done by a decomposition analysis that estimates and tests the total effects as a whole, and then decompose them into direct and indirect effects, with those effects being tested by bootstrapping method. Table 4 presents the results of this decomposition analysis. It finds that first, the total and indirect effect of the acceptive experience on the awareness of children’s rights turns out to be significantly and negatively associated with self-esteem with the standardized path coefficient of \(-0.517\). Combining this with the facts that the indirect effect of rejective parenting experiences on the awareness on children’s right is small and the fact that there is found minor and not significant negative association between self-esteem and the awareness, we could safely infer that self-esteem could be at best neutral on the awareness of children’s rights. This may be considered to be supportive evidence for the theory which argues that self-esteem has no necessary implication for social behavior and attitudes.

To sum it all, the estimation result shows that parenting experiences in childhood could affect the formation and development of the psychological factors of emotional intelligence and self-esteem. It also demonstrates asymmetric mediation effects of the two psychological factors: that is, the positive parenting experiences have a
significant indirect effects on the awareness of children’s rights via emotional intelligence, while the negative parenting experiences have a more prominent direct effect rather than indirect (mediating) effect.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to give an explanation on the well-documented close relationship between parenting experience in one’s childhood and parenting attitude in her/his adulthood, which has long remained as a black box. Given the lack of knowledge on the phenomenon, it is contributable to explore the possible channels through which the relationship could be realized. Combining the results from psychological investigations with those from studies on early childhood, the present study suggests the mediation effects of two psychological factors on the awareness of children’s rights, in which the psychological development is supposed to be affected by parenting experience in childhood. If this is the case then one can assume a positive association between the awareness of children’s right and parenting attitudes, the black box could be at least partially explained. These findings are in agreement with the previous findings in that parenting experience in childhood is related to one of the parenting attitudes to the child, the awareness of children’s rights. However, the contribution of this study is to show that it is related through the psychological development.

The results of this study have important policy implications and suggestions on how to raise awareness of children’s rights, thereby preventing child abuses. First, in order to raise the awareness of children’s rights, it is imperative to promote psychological factors, especially emotional intelligence since a mother’s emotional intelligence appears to have positive and greater influence on the awareness of children’s rights. In a practical perspective, emotional intelligence can be learned and developed in the process of socialization rather than from genetic factors over the entire life. We suggest programs for all including adults that aim to enhance emotional intelligence.

Second, it should be noted that the psychological development that has been formed through childhood experiences has a strong tendency to be preserved even as an adult. In particular, self-esteem and emotional intelligence are formed and developed rapidly from early childhood and a big part of them will be transferred as they grow up. Thus, the psychological development in childhood can be considered to affect the whole life afterwards. Therefore, having a stable and positive psychological development in childhood is the very important first step in improving the awareness of children’s rights among adults.

Finally, but not least important, the factors that have the greatest influence on the psychological development in childhood are the parent’s parenting attitude. This is because the greatest part of social interaction for children and adolescents is parenting. The psychological factors formed at this time are factors that have strong influence even after they become adults. These developments and consequential social competence will not only improve the awareness of children’s rights for better family life, but also serve as the crucial factor determining the quality of life through their entire life by facilitating interpersonal relationships, job satisfaction, self-esteem, willpower and resilience to suffering.

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