

THE ENDURING INFLUENCE OF MOTHERHOOD: EMOTIONAL PATTERNS ACROSS GENERATIONS

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Abstract: Motherhood serves as a critical foundation in shaping emotional development and relational skills that extend well beyond early childhood. Emotional patterns are not only learned but transmitted across generations through maternal behavior, attachment style, and cultural expectations. This study investigates the intergenerational influence of motherhood on emotional regulation and expression among three generations of women worldwide. A mixed-method design was used to analyze 50 family triads, including grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. Quantitative analysis revealed significant correlations in emotional regulation styles across generations, while qualitative interviews highlighted the importance of maternal warmth and cultural expectations. Findings support the notion that mothers act as primary emotional architects within families, establishing behaviors and coping strategies that endure through generations. Implications include developing maternal-focused mental health interventions that support long-term emotional well-being.

Keywords: motherhood, emotional regulation, intergenerational transmission, attachment, maternal warmth, family psychology

1. Introduction

Motherhood is a universal yet culturally shaped role that has profound emotional significance. Emotional socialization — the process by which children learn how to perceive, express, and regulate emotions — is predominantly influenced by maternal behavior (Morris et al., 2007). Through daily interactions, mothers model emotion expression, coping strategies, communication patterns, and relational bonds (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). These behaviors become embedded in the child's emotional repertoire, influencing their mental health and social outcomes into adulthood.

Attachment theory provides a foundational explanation for these processes. Bowlby (1982) argued that early maternal attachment forms internal working models that guide future interpersonal relationships, while Ainsworth (1989) demonstrated that maternal sensitivity predicts healthier emotional adjustment. Intergenerational studies further show that daughters often adopt their mothers' emotional coping mechanisms, including both adaptive and maladaptive behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2001).

Despite extensive knowledge of early childhood outcomes, less is understood about how these emotional patterns persist through **multiple generations**. As global migration, technology, and evolving gender roles reshape motherhood, exploring the enduring influence of maternal emotional behaviors remains crucial. This research examines how emotional characteristics travel across generations, identifying universal and culturally shaped elements of maternal emotional influence.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

A mixed-method approach combined quantitative emotional assessments with qualitative thematic interviews. This design enabled measurement of emotional similarities and exploration of personal experiences as complementary forms of evidence.

2.2 Participants

Fifty families (150 female participants) were recruited across diverse cultural regions — Central Asia, Europe, North America, East Asia, and Africa. Each family included:

- **Grandmother (G1):** age 55–80
- **Mother (G2):** age 30–50
- **Daughter (G3):** age 18–25

Purposive sampling ensured representation of both individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

2.3 Instruments

Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

Measures:

- **Cognitive reappraisal** (adaptive strategy)
- **Expressive suppression** (avoidant strategy) (Gross & John, 2003)

Semi-structured interviews

Topics:

- Maternal affection and communication style
- Emotional coping strategies
- Memories of “learning emotions” from mother

2.4 Data Analysis

- **Quantitative data** analyzed using Pearson correlations (SPSS v.25)
- **Qualitative responses** coded using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants gave informed consent. Identities were anonymized. The study received approval from an independent ethical review board.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Results

Strong intergenerational patterns were found.

Emotional Variable	G1–G2 r	G2–G3 r	Significance
Cognitive Reappraisal	.54	.62	p < .01
Expressive Suppression	.39	.48	p < .05

Emotional Variable	G1–G2 r	G2–G3 r	Significance
Emotional Warmth (self-rated)	.57	.68	$p < .01$

Table 1. Intergenerational correlations in emotional regulation.

These results show:

- Emotional strategies are **highly similar** between mothers and daughters
- Warmth is **more strongly transmitted** than suppression
- Grandmothers' behaviors continue shaping emotional styles indirectly through daughters

3.2 Qualitative Themes

Theme 1 — Emotional Modeling

Participants often described “copying” their mothers' reactions to anger, disappointment, or stress:

“When my mom tried to stay strong in silence, I learned silence too.”

Theme 2 — Maternal Warmth Builds Resilience

Higher affection was linked to healthier emotion management and stronger bonding.

Theme 3 — Cultural Expectations Reinforce Emotional Roles

In collectivistic societies, mothers were expected to act as **primary emotional managers**, intensifying transmission effects.

4. Discussion

Findings provide strong evidence that motherhood shapes emotional behavior through biological, behavioral, and cultural processes. The correlations confirm that emotional strategies are **not random**, but transmitted in measurable patterns — mothers pass down emotional scripts that daughters internalize during development.

This aligns with previous studies demonstrating intergenerational continuity in emotional regulation (Morris et al., 2007; Yap et al., 2014). Families expressing more warmth tended to foster secure attachment and adaptive coping — improving stress resilience and social competence (Brennan et al., 2010). In contrast, suppression reinforced emotional avoidance, sometimes linked to anxiety or strained communication.

Cultural context influences **how motherhood shapes emotional patterns**:

- **Collectivistic cultures** emphasize harmony → suppression more accepted
- **Individualistic cultures** encourage self-expression → reappraisal emphasized

Yet, maternal warmth was universally beneficial — a consistent predictor of well-being across all regions studied.

Implications

- **Maternal mental health support** can improve emotional outcomes for future generations
- Parenting programs should include **emotional-competence training**
- Cross-cultural family research should consider cultural values shaping maternal behavior

Limitations

- Sample size modest; future research should expand country-level comparisons
- Male family members not included, limiting understanding of paternal influence
- Self-reported data may reflect social-desirability bias

Future Directions

- Longitudinal research following families through major life transitions
- Neurobiological studies analyzing epigenetic emotional transmission
- Social policy development supporting maternal caregivers globally

5. Conclusion

Motherhood remains a powerful determinant of emotional development across generations. Emotional regulation strategies, attachment styles, and maternal warmth transfer from grandmothers to mothers and daughters, reflecting both inherited tendencies and cultural expectations. Supporting mothers — emotionally and socially — is therefore not only a benefit to the present generation but an investment in the emotional stability of future families.

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