

GENDER  
EMOTION  
*and the* FAMILY



LESLIE BRODY

# Gender, Emotion, and the Family

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Leslie Brody

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*For my family*

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## Introduction

When I get upset, I can't express myself at all, but if my wife's upset, you'd think you were hearing poetry. She can express exactly what she's feeling inside.

—James, age 47<sup>1</sup>

When my friends ask me what I'm writing about, I invariably reply, "the development of gender differences in emotional expression." And just as invariably, my answer is met with blank stares. So I try to elaborate: "You know, how when they're upset, women say they feel sad and hurt, while men say they feel mad." My friends' eyes light up and their heads nod. "Oh, yes, now we understand. How interesting," they say. I continue, "Yes, and I'm writing about why that happens, a developmental model." My friends query expectantly, "So, what's the model?" "Well," I reply, "it's complicated. There are all kinds of reasons: biological differences, cultural pressures, family relationships, peer interactions . . ." My voice trails off at this point. "Well, it would take me a long time to tell you about everything." And I usually end lamely with, "Maybe you should read my book."

My attempt to encapsulate this complex and burgeoning field for my friends by linking the expression of sadness with women and the expression of anger with men does capture some ubiquitous stereotypes about emotional expression in the two sexes. It is also rooted in data showing that in some anger-inducing situations, both young girls and women express more hurt, disappointment and sadness than do their male counterparts (Brody 1993). For example, in a study I conducted of American middle-aged married couples, women and men said that they would feel equally angry, but women said that they would feel more hurt, disappointed, and sad than men in response to the following story: "You



always do favors for Bill. One day you ask Bill to mail an important package for you, and he forgets" (Brody 1993).

But as with any single example, my response belies the complexity of gender differences in emotional expressiveness. In fact, there are many situations, such as marital conflict, in which women actually express more anger than men express. And men respond to anger-inducing situations with a multiplicity of reactions, including cardiovascular reactivity and voice intonation patterns not seen in women (Gottman and Levenson 1992; Siegman 1993). The quality of women's and men's emotional expressiveness depends on a host of interacting factors, including the nature of the situation they find themselves in, who the participants are, what culture they are from, what ages they are, and what social roles they play. Moreover, whether or not there are gender differences in emotion depends on the aspect of emotional expressiveness considered: words, voice intonation, behaviors, physiological arousal, facial expressiveness, or some combination of these.

The idea that gender differences may vary in different situations and as a function of different individual and cultural characteristics is neither a popular nor an easy idea to convey. Generalized stereotypes about women's and men's emotional expressivity tend to be ubiquitous. Yet, understanding the conditions under which gender differences appear and disappear is a valuable enterprise in its own right, one that allows us to transcend our gender stereotypes, affording both women and men their due measure of respect. Perhaps more important, by trying to understand the complexity of how such gender differences emerge and develop we may gain some freedom over the power these often unconscious processes play in our lives and in our relationships.

This book is both a synthesis and an interpretation of the existing literature on gender and emotion. I explore the nature and extent of gender differences in emotional expression, as well as the fascinating question of how gender differences in emotional expression come about. Although there is an inseparable interaction among biological, social, and cultural processes that contributes to gender differences in emotional expressiveness, the current evidence points more confidently to the contributions made by cultural and social processes than to biological ones. Biological sex differences contribute to gender differences in emotion only insofar as representatives of the culture, in the form of parents, peers, teachers, and the media, respond to these biological dif-

ferences in dissimilar ways, in accordance with cultural values and stereotypes. In fact, we never can be certain if biological differences are the result, not the cause, of different environmental or social stimulation that the two sexes receive (see Dawson et al. 1992, 1997; Shatz 1992). This may be true even when very young infants are studied, since males and females may receive different types of environmental inputs as soon as they are born.

I take a functionalist approach to the study of emotional expression, arguing that the expression of emotions is useful and adaptive for accomplishing our social roles as well as for communicating our needs and goals to ourselves and to others. For example, expressing anger lets us and the people around us know that something is not going well, that something needs to be changed. It may even provide the energy needed to effect change (Campos et al. 1994; Campos, Campos, and Barnett 1989).

Taking a functionalist approach leads me to ask and answer two critical questions. First, how do the social roles, needs, and goals of the two sexes differ? I include in my conception of social roles how power, status, and intimacy differ for men and women, since these processes are fundamental to human social interaction across cultures (Fiske 1991). The sources of power are many, including: social rules that dictate who has power (known as legitimate power); concrete resources, such as money or physical strength; expertise or knowledge; and feelings of confidence. Women have less access than men to most of these bases of power (Hacker 1951; Johnson 1978). Women also have less power than men because they have lower status and prestige. Status is culturally defined by characteristics such as appearance, the insignia of office or rank, clothing, education, sex, age, religion, or race (Winter 1973; Kemper 1978).

Addressing sex differences in power leads to another question: How do the emotions men and women express help them to adapt to their differing levels of power, to the differing circumstances in their lives? For example, the lower power that most women have may contribute to their minimization of expressions of contempt, since contempt may alienate others, and men, who often have higher power, may respond to contemptuous behaviors by potentially hurting or harming women.

Boys' and girls' emotional expressiveness is ultimately (and probably unconsciously) shaped to prepare them for successful completion of

their future gender roles, with roles for women emphasizing affiliation and caretaking and roles for men emphasizing competition, power, control, and protecting others. In accordance with these roles, boys are shaped to minimize emotional expressions with some important exceptions: notably anger, pride, and contempt. Girls are shaped to maximize emotions that promote affiliation and restore social bonding, such as warmth, empathic distress, respect, and shame, as well as those that promote helplessness and lower power, such as fear and sadness. The expression of these emotions enables the two sexes to successfully accomplish their future gender roles as well as to maintain the existing power and status differences between the two sexes.

I emphasize family processes, played out within a particular cultural context and within a particular set of cultural values, as formative for gender differences in emotion. I have been strongly influenced by Sara Ruddick's (1982) ideas that one of the primary goals for parents is to raise children who are socially acceptable and well liked by others in the culture. Very few parents want to raise children who don't "fit in," who are isolated or outcast, identified as "different" by teachers and peers. Evidence suggests that when children express emotions in accordance with cultural norms, they are better liked. Some cultural norms, or display rules, dictate that females may express vulnerability and sadness but males may not, while males may express aggression, but females may not. Parents reward their children (both unconsciously and consciously) in subtle and not so subtle ways to conform to the cultural norms and values surrounding gender and emotional expression. Research, for example, shows that in the same setting, some parents minimize the extent to which they refer to "angry" feelings when talking to their preschool daughters, but not to their sons (Fivush 1989, 1993).

I will further emphasize that cultural values surrounding gender and emotion are transmitted not only by parents, but also by other socialization agents, such as peers, with whom being popular comes from expressing emotions in gender stereotypic ways. For American boys, this means acting invulnerable, tough, and "cool"; for girls, it means almost the direct opposite: expressing vulnerable feelings and behaving unaggressively. Gender images in the media also foster prescriptive stereotypes in powerful ways.

Parents and other socialization agents may be driven to respond differ-

ently to male and female infants not only because of cultural values, but also because of differing characteristics of female and male infants themselves. I will analyze considerable evidence that boys and girls differ in subtle ways at birth, which may evoke different reactions from their parents. I focus on gender differences in temperament, a construct that refers to relatively stable biologically based behavioral tendencies that are extant early in life (Bates 1989). Commonly studied indices of temperament include the extent to which infants become physically or emotionally aroused in response to stimulation, and the extent to which they can facilitate, inhibit, or minimize their arousal, using such processes as self-soothing, attending, approaching, withdrawing, or attacking (Rothbart 1989). Gender differences in several aspects of infant temperament, such as activity and arousal levels, may evoke different responses from parents, and both parents' and children's temperaments become transformed over time as a result of their repeated interactions with each other. This transformative process is one that developmental psychologists have called a transactional relationship (Sameroff 1975), and I will argue that it gradually shapes the nature and extent of gender differences in emotional expressiveness.

That parents and children exert mutual influences on each others' development is consistent with family systems theories of development, which hold that there are nonlinear influences among cultural processes, parents, and their children. Moreover, family systems theories maintain that the family unit as a whole needs to be taken into account in order to understand how and why gender differences emerge. What this means, for example, is that the effects of mother-child relationships on children's emotional expressiveness cannot be isolated from, and are influenced by, other coexisting family relationships, such as the quality of sibling relationships, or mother-father relationships.

Differing family socialization experiences may have long-term consequences for the kinds of emotions that daughters and sons express toward people outside of the family. This is a perspective emphasized by object relations theorists, such as Fairbairn (1952). Children's early emotional reactions to their parents' behaviors, such as warmth in response to a parent's acceptance, or anger in response to a parent's rejection, are hypothesized to become internalized as templates or models for future emotional responses. Expressing anger may be a way of signalling to the parent that the parent-child relationship is not satisfying, and in fact may

be an adaptive communication, perhaps serving to create distance from the parent. For better or for worse, the expression of anger and distress then become habitual and generalized to subsequent social relationships. In fact, people tend to re-create repeatedly the quality of early parental relationships when they become adults, by continuing to respond to their current partners in ways that were characteristic of their early relationships. In doing so, they evoke familiar responses from their partners. For example, they may make mistakes (perhaps unconsciously) in order to evoke criticism from a partner, because they were raised by a critical parent. By re-creating the quality of previous relationships, people reexperience and rework their previous relationships, avoiding the pain of loss and seeking the comfort of well-known feelings (Sandler and Sandler 1986).

Feminist object relations theorists such as Chodorow (1978), Fast (1984), and Benjamin (1988) have argued that girls and boys internalize and experience different kinds of early family relationships because both sexes are parented primarily by women. As a result, their emotional functioning develops differently. By virtue of being the same sex as their primary caretakers, girls identify with them and are hypothesized to internalize a sense of connection to others and of shared and reciprocal emotional experiences. It is only with the onset of adolescence that girls are pressured to become more autonomous. It is hypothesized that girls may use expressions of hostility and distress at this time to facilitate separation from their mothers (Chodorow 1978).

In contrast, boys de-identify with their mothers from a very early age in order to develop a male gender identity. Boys are hypothesized to internalize a sense of being disconnected from others, of becoming different in emotional expressiveness from their mothers.

Feminist object relations theorists also hypothesize that the unequal power and status that men and women wield, both in the family and in the culture, impact the quality of the emotions that boys and girls experience and internalize. One example—the gendered nature of the traditional family structure, in which mothers do more child care and have less power than do fathers, may set into play differing dynamics for mother-child as opposed to father-child relationships.

I question and elaborate the view that the different roles played by mothers and fathers in the family may set into motion different patterns of emotional expression for daughters versus sons (Benjamin 1988; Cho-

dorow 1978; Fast 1984). I explore current data that focus on whether, in fact, early mother-daughter relationships are qualitatively different from early mother-son relationships. In turn, I also review how these relationships relate to daughters' and sons' emotional expressiveness. In particular, I focus on the counter-intuitive idea that the same maternal behavior, for example empathy, may be responded to differently by daughters and sons because the two sexes are under pressure to identify with different gender roles. Current data relevant to these feminist object relations theories are limited but encouraging, suggesting that these theories warrant further attention by researchers.

My research confirms the critical role that fathers play in the emergence of their children's emotional expressiveness. Among others, Nancy Chodorow (1978) has theorized that if fathers play a major role in child care *and* if mothers have valued roles and higher status and power in the culture, then both sons and daughters should develop positive characteristics typical of both their own and the opposite sex, including becoming emotionally expressive, interpersonally oriented, and also goal directed.

My data show this prediction to be correct: when the traditional structure of the family is changed, and fathers play an active role in child rearing, there are shifts in the degree to which their children's emotional expressiveness is gender-stereotyped. Sons in nontraditional families become more emotionally expressive than do their male counterparts from traditional families; daughters in nontraditional families express more competitive themes and less vulnerability, sadness, and fear relative to daughters from traditional families (Brody 1997). Involved fathers may enable sons to learn that masculinity and emotional expression are not necessarily incompatible. Involved fathers may also help daughters to differentiate their emotional expressiveness from that of their mothers, facilitating their expressions of aggression and competition while minimizing their expressions of dysphoric emotions.

I also suggest that boys' and girls' emotional expressiveness may be affected by their parents' stereotypes about emotional functioning in the same and opposite sex. Compared to noninvolved fathers, involved fathers may be less likely to gender stereotype their children, inducing fewer self-fulfilling prophecies in their children's emotional development. Insights gleaned from social psychology research show that people

are less likely to stereotype members of their own sex, who constitute an “in-group,” than members of the opposite sex, who constitute an “out-group” (see Fiske 1993; Swim 1994). Mothers’ stereotypes about their sons’ emotional expressiveness may be more distorted than they are about their daughters’, while the reverse patterns may be true for fathers. These stereotypes may insidiously affect the development of emotional expressivity in sons and daughters and may also change the quality of family interactions.

The observation that changing the traditional structure of the family affects gender differences in children’s emotional expression indicates that social factors construct these differences. This remains true even after acknowledging that at least some formative social factors originate in response to biological gender differences. Although Freud’s oft-quoted expression that “anatomy is destiny” has been interpreted to mean that the anatomical differences between males and females determine their differing social roles and fates, I argue that anatomical processes merely contribute to destiny, along with complex social and cultural processes, including the structure of the family itself. Gender differences in emotional expression clearly vary in different social and cultural contexts.

Throughout the book, I draw on a research study I conducted, funded by a Gender Roles Grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, that involved 95 families, with each family including a mother, a father, and at least one school-aged child, aged 6 through 12. Fifty-one of the families in the study had a participating daughter; 44 had a participating son. All of the parents in the study had been married or living together for at least three years prior to the start of the study. The parents in the study ranged in age from 27 to 62, were predominantly European-American, and ranged from lower to upper class, with the majority of the participants being middle-level administrators or white-collar workers. Their education ranged from sixth grade to completion of graduate school with the average educational level being one year of college.<sup>2</sup>

I was interested in the emotional expressiveness as well as in the gender roles of each family member. To measure their gender roles, each member of these families was asked about their participation in household tasks and child care. For example, both mothers and fathers were asked how many hours they were employed per week, as well as how often they and their spouses got their children ready for school in the morning, or went to parent-teacher conferences, or did the laundry or

car repairs.<sup>3</sup> All family members were also asked about their attitudes toward women's roles using the Attitudes toward Women Scale (Spence and Helmreich 1972),<sup>4</sup> which included items such as the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "Women should never ask men out on a date." Further, parents were asked about their child rearing practices, including how nurturing or restrictive they were, using the Block Child Rearing Practices Report (Block 1965).

Patterns of emotional expression in family members were measured in two different ways. The first involved asking family members how they would feel in response to stories such as the following: "You're sitting in your room and suddenly you see someone looking in your window." The second involved asking children and parents to write their own stories in response to three pictures. The pictures are displayed in Figure 1 and depict a same-sexed person looking in the mirror, two same-sexed people facing each other, and two opposite-sexed people facing each other. Parents and children were independently asked the following questions about the pictures:

"What's happening in this picture?"

"What's going to happen?"

"How are the people feeling?"

"What are the people thinking?"

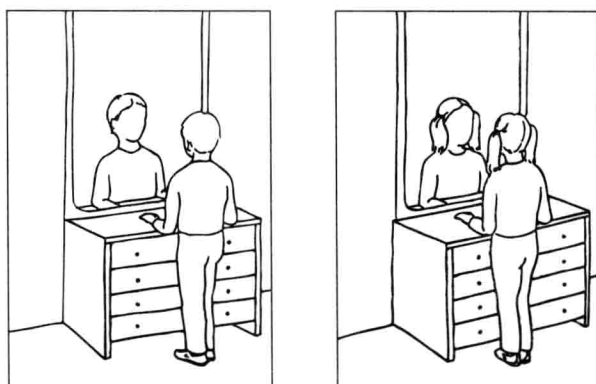
Stories were coded for the frequency with which family members used various emotion words, such as sad or happy; portrayed physical aggression or competition themes, such as "Bill and Harry were arguing over who was the better ball player"; and portrayed interpersonal affiliation themes, such as two people discussing something in a positive way. Not only were emotions coded in these stories, but also the identity of the story characters. Did children choose to include mothers, fathers, or themselves and their peers in their stories? These measures were used to explore the quality of family members' relationships to others.

Along with in-depth interviews that were given to sixteen randomly selected families, the analyses of these measures provided some key findings that inform the conclusions I draw about gender differences in emotional expression. I often quote stories written by the participants, as well as the evocative statements they made, which depict some kernel of truth about gender differences in emotional expression. These data are synthesized with other relevant research throughout the book, in an

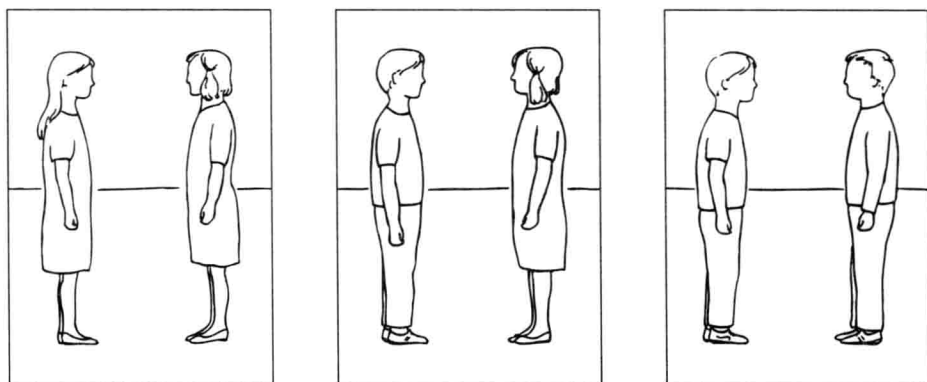


attempt to evaluate what is currently known about gender differences in emotional expression and to understand how such differences come about.

OVERVIEW. This book explores the existence and emergence of gender differences in emotional expression from a feminist empiricist perspective. I believe that careful research that attends to the experiences of both men and women, and that particularly highlights the cultural and situ-



*Same-sex character looking in a mirror*



*Same- and opposite-sex peers*

Fig. 1. Pictures that research participants wrote stories about