

ABSTRACT

We conducted a qualitative study to explore parental beliefs about emotions in the family across three cultures (African American, European American, and Lumbee American Indian), using the underutilized yet powerful methodology of focus groups. The main goal of this monograph is to understand parents' beliefs about the role of emotions in the family and how cultural or ethnic background may influence those beliefs. Based on philosophical traditions and previous research, three dimensions of parental beliefs were predicted: Value of Emotion, Socialization of Emotion, and Controllability of Emotion. We expected new themes to emerge during the focus groups. Twelve focus groups were conducted with 87 parents from the three cultural groups mentioned above. Groups met for two sessions scheduled 2 weeks apart. Focus group discussions were led by same-ethnicity moderators. An inductive analysis was conducted; key themes and subthemes were identified. All three theoretically derived dimensions were well represented in each focus group. Cultural similarities in themes within these dimensions included children's appropriate expression of negative emotions, role of emotion in the home, children's capacity for controlling emotions, and parents' role in socialization of emotion. Cultural variations included concern about parents' expression of negative emotion, children's modulation of positive emotion, the role emotions play in behavior, and choice in emotional experience. Two new dimensions also emerged: Relational Nature of Emotions and Changeability of Emotions. Cultural similarities in themes within these dimensions included emphasis on emotional connections with children, emotional contagion in families, developmental change in children's emotions, and intergenerational change in emotion socialization. Cultural variation included discussion of emotions as guides for action and children's emotional privacy. Dimensions and the themes and subthemes within them are presented with supporting evidence and sources. Implications of parental beliefs for emotion socialization theory and future research, as well as limitations, are discussed.