

Degree of emotional openness of mothers with children with autism spectrum disorder

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Annual Meeting of the International Society for Autism Research, May 2019



Background

Emotional openness refers to the access of someone's own emotional experience, to certain characteristics that can describe our emotional experience (e.g., the tendency to be open, accessibility and apprehension of information that emotions provide), to a long-term and evolving openness (e.g., greater access to emotions) and ultimately social outcomes (e.g., emotional exchanges in interpersonal relationships). The model of emotional openness allows us to evaluate the different emotional processes perceived in a person and the coherence between them (Reichert, Genoud and Zimmermann, 2012). This model is based on five central dimensions: the cognitive and conceptual representation of emotions (REPCOG), the communication of emotions (COMEMO), the perception of internal emotional indicators (PERINT) and external (PEREXT) and the regulation of emotions (REGEMO) (Reichert, Genoud and Zimmermann, 2012). An additional dimension is added to the model, the normative restrictions of emotional openness (Reichert, Genoud et Zimmermann, 2012).

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the dimensions of emotional openness in mothers with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Methods

Forty-seven Quebec mothers of children with ASD participated in this study. Mothers are aged between 28 and 51 years old. The average age of mothers is 38 years old. Approximately 89% of mothers have a boy and 11% of mothers have a girl. The Emotional Opening Dimensions (DOE-36) questionnaire (Reichert, 1997, 2007) is used to assess the degree of emotional openness of mothers. The questionnaire includes 36 items that can be rated using a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

Results

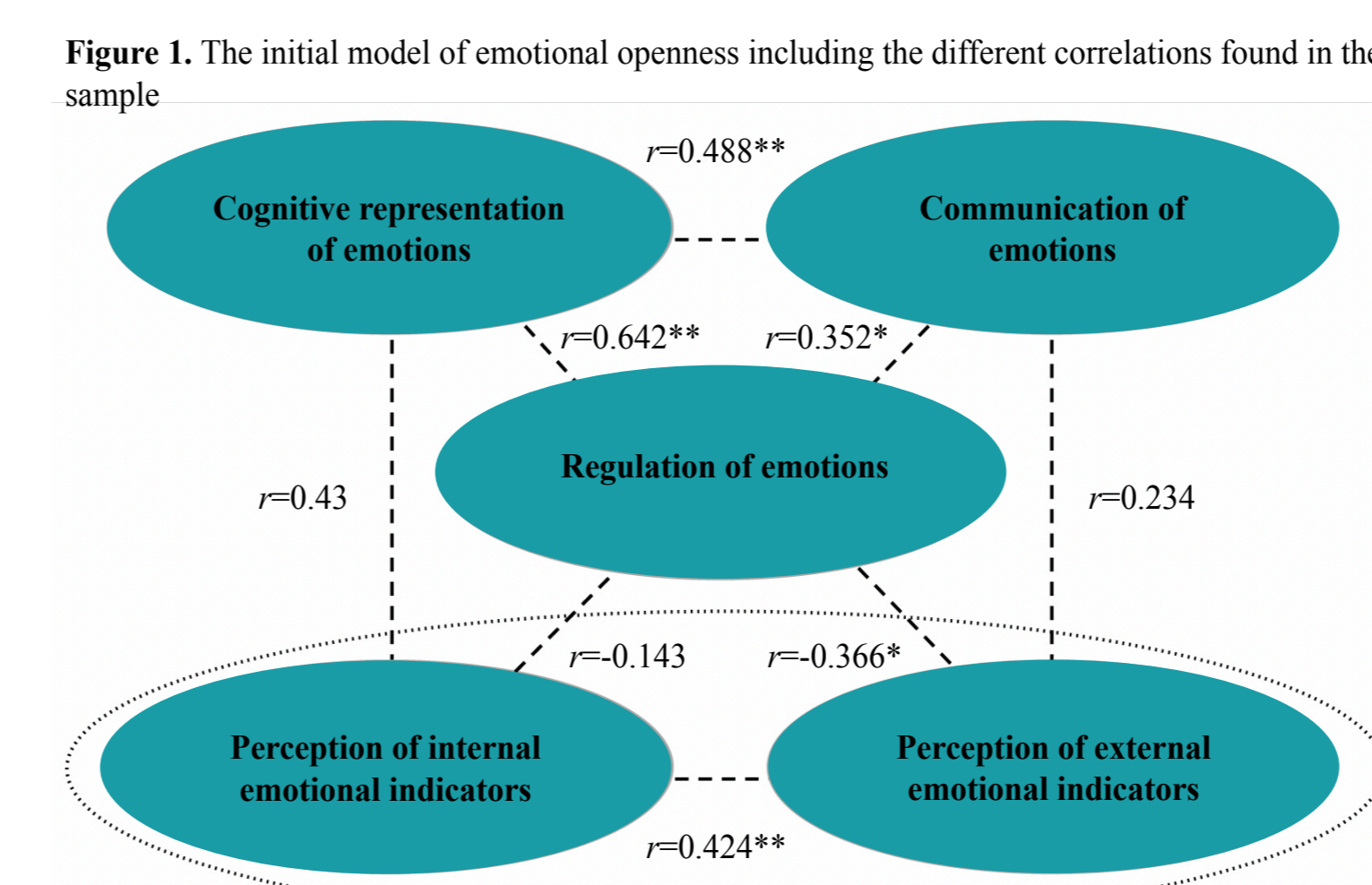
Mean and standard deviations for the six dimensions of emotional openness are presented (Table 1). The weakest dimension is the normative restrictions of emotional openness whereas the highest dimension is the cognitive and conceptual representation of emotions.

Table 1
Mean and standard deviations for the six dimensions of emotional openness

Dimensions of emotional openness	Mean	Standard deviations
Cognitive and conceptual representation of emotions (REPCOG)	3.46	0.81
Communication of emotions (COMEMO)	3.12	0.80
Perception of internal emotional indicators (PERINT)	3.29	0.77
Perception of external emotional indicators (PEREXT)	3.44	0.73
Regulation of emotions (REGEMO)	3.01	0.79
Normative restrictions of emotional openness (RESNOR)	3.00	0.80

Results

For example, mothers have difficulty displaying behaviors consistent with social norms but have more ability to differentiate emotions, differentiate emotions from others sensations, relate emotions to the situations to which they are connected and name emotions. Correlations between the different dimensions of emotional openness are analyzed. The initial model of emotional openness is presented by including the different correlations found in the sample (Figure 1).



Associations between the dimensions of emotional openness, the age of the mother, and the gender of the child were made. The age of the mother is positively and significantly associated with the cognitive and conceptual representation of emotions ($r = 0.328^*$), but with no other dimension of emotional openness. As the mother's age increases, she is better able to differentiate emotions, to differentiate emotions from others sensations, to relate emotions to the situations to which they are connected and to name emotions.

Results

The gender of the child is negatively and significantly associated with the perception of external emotional indicators ($z = -1.974^*$) and the normative restrictions of emotional openness ($z = -2.097^*$). Thus, mothers with a male child have a lower score on the perception of external emotional indicators ($m = 3.36$) than mothers with a female child ($m = 4.10$). Also, mothers with a male child have a lower score on normative restrictions of emotional openness ($m = 2.90$) than mothers with one female child ($m = 3.80$). For example, boys' mothers have difficulty to identify their physical manifestations and to display behaviors consistent with social norms comparing to girls' mothers.

Conclusions

This study highlights the profile of the emotional openness of mothers with children with ASD. Specific interventions can also be put in place to work on the weaknesses of the emotional openness of these mothers. For example, interventions could promote the recognition of physical manifestations to develop more abilities to differentiate emotions and encourage the communication of emotions in daily life of boys' mothers.

References

- Reichert, M. (1997, 2007). DOE-36. Suisse : Université de Fribourg.
Reichert, M., Genoud, P. A. et Zimmermann, G. (2012). *L'ouverture émotionnelle : une nouvelle approche du vécu et du traitement émotionnels*. Wavre, Belgique : Éditions Mardaga.