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Mother–Child Relationship and Emotion Regulation in Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Emotion regulation is a critical skill for individuals because it is related to emotion and response management. The development of emotion regulation can be influenced by many factors, including the relationship between mother and child. This research investigated the link between mother–child relationship and emotion regulation in emerging adults, aged 18 to 25 years old. A total of 191 emerging adults participated in the study by completing a questionnaire that comprised two measurement tools: the Bandung Family Relationship Test (BFRT) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ). Using this data, the researchers aimed to uncover whether each dimension in the mother–child relationship is tied to emotion regulation in emerging adults. Hypothesis testing was conducted using general linear model (GLM) analysis. The results showed that vulnerability, acknowledgement, and justice in mother–child relationships are related to emotion regulation, specifically cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression strategies. Conversely, restrictiveness, affection, and trust were not found to have any interaction with emotion regulation strategies. This research suggests that these dimensions must be adjusted to align with the developmental progression of this stage.

Emotion regulation is the process of controlling one’s emotions and responses to emotional stimuli (Gross, 1998). This process is important because emotions can prompt a person to respond to stimuli directly or indirectly through consideration or cognitive functions (Lazarus, 1991; LeDoux, 1996). Emotions can also influence decision-making (Gross, 2015). People with good emotion regulation are usually highly adaptable, resilient when facing adversities, and capable of establishing broad social relationships and making independent decisions (Mouatsou & Koutra, 2021). Therefore, all individuals should develop the ability to regulate their emotions.

Gross (2015) stated that there are two strategies for regulating emotions, namely cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal is a strategy in which individuals use cognitive assessment to reframe emotional situations as non-emotional ones so that they can modify and plan the responses they want to display. This is considered an adaptive form of emotion regulation. Meanwhile, expressive suppression is a strategy used to hide emotions by suppressing their expression. This strategy is considered maladaptive.

As emotion regulation is a skill that needs to be developed, each person performs it using different strategies (English et al., 2016). Individuals can regulate emotions adaptively or maladaptively depending on their personal development process, which is influenced by various factors, including the relationship between the individual and their parents. The role of parents in influencing their children’s emotion regulation is explained by Morris et al. (2017) through the tripartite model of emotion regulation. This model states that parental influence on children’s emotion regulation occurs through three mechanisms: (1) children’s observation of parental behavior, including how the parents regulate emotions; (2) parenting practices towards children, especially in aspects related to emotional development; and (3) the emotional atmosphere created within the family, including the relationships between children and parents.

With regards to these child–parent relationships, Crandall et al. (2015) stated that mothers play a greater role in developing their children’s emotional regulation than fathers. This is because mothers are more likely to be involved in their children’s emotional experiences. In addition, mothers tend to be more involved in



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resolving their children's emotional problems (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2020). Milojevich et al. (2020) found that children whose mothers have maladaptive emotion regulation strategies may develop similar strategies. The relationship formed by a mother's response to their child's emotions can also influence the child's choice of emotion regulation strategies (Bujor & Turluc, 2023).

The mother's response to the child's emotional expressions and feelings is one of the dimensions in the model of mother-child relationships created by Oud and Welzen (1989). Oud and Welzen (1989) described the mother-child relationship as the child's perception of the relationship they have with their mother and divided it into six dimensions: restrictiveness, affection, vulnerability, justice, acknowledgment, and trust. Each dimension is said to be related to the development of emotion regulation in children.

According to Pérez et al. (2021), excessive restrictions imposed on a child by their mother can increase the child's frustration and affect their temperament and emotion regulation. Other studies have mentioned that affection and vulnerability shown by mothers can help children regulate their emotions (Liu et al., 2022; Meng et al., 2020; Saldana & Forthun, 2020). Gong and Paulson (2017) stated that individuals who trust their mothers will build attachment and feel comfortable regulating their emotions adaptively, while Moran (2018) found that a lack of maternal acknowledgment can encourage children to use maladaptive emotion regulation strategies. According to the literature review, there has been no research analyzing the dimension of justice in mother-child interactions and its correlation with emotion regulation in children.

A number of previous studies have demonstrated that the mother-child relationship is associated with emotion regulation in children and adolescents (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2020; Bujor & Turluc, 2023; Crandall et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2022; Meng et al., 2020; Saldana & Forthun, 2020). In a study by Price and Kiel (2022), it was noted that mothers' efforts to relate to their young children can determine those children's adaptation and emotion regulation skills. Relationships that are not based on vulnerability can predict anxiety disorders in children. In contrast, Elhousseini et al. (2023) found that relationships based on trust can encourage children to adapt prosocial behavior in elementary school.

During adolescence, the mother-child relationship is still associated with children's ability to regulate their emotions. Di Giunta et al. (2022) said that excessive restrictions in this relationship can lead adolescents to have difficulty processing and expressing their negative emotions. Conversely, appropriate restrictions can make them more capable of emotional regulation (Gao et al., 2021). However, so far, there has been no specific research in this vein conducted on emerging adults, even though emotion regulation is also a valuable skill for people at this stage of life.

Emerging adulthood is a transitional period from adolescence to full adulthood Arnett (2018). Individuals at

this stage have different developmental tasks from adolescents Zimmermann and Iwanski (2014). Arnett (2018) characterized emerging adulthood as a period of instability, identity exploration, and the dawning of a drive to develop autonomy. In light of these characteristics, it is important for early adults to have adaptive emotion regulation strategies.

The independence and autonomy acquired during emerging adulthood generally make it synonymous with a reduction in individual interaction with family, including mothers (Gilligan et al., 2022). However, there are differences between Western countries with individualistic cultures, where most previous studies were conducted, and Eastern countries with collectivistic cultures. Generally, emerging adults in Western countries begin to grow their autonomy by leaving the family home to study, pursue a career, build romantic relationships, and so on (Arnett, 2018). However, in Indonesia, a collectivist country, parents continue to influence and play a role in the lives of their adult children (Almira et al., 2019).

Given the importance of emotion regulation among emerging adults and the lack of research focusing on this age group in Indonesia, this study was conducted to explore the impact of mother-child relationships on emotion regulation in emerging adulthood. Based on the previous findings, the researchers proposed the following hypotheses: (1) the dimensions of the mother-child relationship play a role in the cognitive reappraisal emotion regulation strategy in emerging adulthood, and (2) the dimensions of the mother-child relationship play a role in the expressive suppression emotion regulation strategy in emerging adulthood.

Methods

Research Participants

The research participants were 191 young adults aged 18 to 25 years old. Participants were selected using the convenience sampling method based on the following criteria: (1) aged 18 to 25 years; (2) unmarried; (3) having a mother who was able to function independently in daily life.

Research Procedure

This research was approved by the Padjadjaran University Ethics Committee with letter number 245/UN6.KEP/EC/2024. Data collection was carried out online over 14 days, from January 20 to February 2, 2024, through a questionnaire in Google Forms. The link was distributed across various social media platforms, e.g., X (formerly Twitter), LINE, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The questionnaire began with research information and an informed consent form. Next, participants filled in demographic data, two measurement tools, and additional questions. After completing the questionnaire, participants submitted their answers and the data collection process was concluded.

Research Instruments

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) by Gross and John (2003), translated by Radde et al. (2021), was used to measure emotion regulation. The tool consists of 10 items describing cognitive reappraisal (6 items, e.g., “I control my emotions by changing my mindset according to the situation around me”) and expressive suppression (4 items, e.g., “I keep my feelings to myself”). It gauges participants’ attitudes toward each statement by asking them to give it a score from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The scores are calculated separately for each strategy, so a high score on a strategy indicates the likelihood of the respondent using it to regulate their emotions. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the validity of the Indonesian version of the ERQ. The results of the analysis showed that the instrument has goodness of fit with the study sample ($CFI = .936$; $RMSEA = .063$). Based on internal consistency testing, the instrument was also found to be reliable ($\alpha = .71-.75$). The ERQ has been used in a research population with a similar age range in a study by Mouatsou and Koutra (2021), who examined individuals aged 18 to 30 years old.

The Bandung Family Relationship Test (TRK-B) by Fitriana (2011) was used to evaluate mother–child relationships. This tool was designed to measure the relationships of each family member individually, making it relevant for use specifically in the mother–child context. The TRKB consists of 67 statements covering six dimensions, namely restrictiveness (11 items, e.g., “I think my mother often restricts me”), affection (11 items, e.g., “My mother is happy when I hug/kiss her”), vulnerability (9 items, e.g., “When I am in trouble, I know that my mother will feel it too”), justice (12 items, e.g., “My mother always keeps her promises”), acknowledgment (12 items, e.g., “My mother says that I can really cheer her up”), and trust (12 items, e.g., “I feel free to tell my mother everything”). It measures one’s perceptions of their relationship with their mother by assigning a score from 1 (No–No) to 5 (Yes–Yes) for positive items and 1 (Yes–Yes) to 5 (No–No) for negative items. The scores are calculated separately for each dimension so that a high score on one dimension indicates a high intensity of the participant’s experience of that dimension. The validity of the TRKB was conducted using confirmatory factor analysis, which found the tool to be valid in this study ($CFI = .982$; $RMSEA = .077$). The reliability analysis also showed that this measurement tool is reliable ($\alpha = .78 - .89$). The TRKB has been used in a research population with a similar age range (18 to 24 years) in a study by Nurvita (2023).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using JASP version 0.18.3 and SPSS version 28.0 (JASP Team, 2024; IBM Corp, 2021). Descriptive analysis was performed on demographic data to determine the frequency and percentage in the dataset and on variable data to determine the mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values for each

dimension of the mother–child relationship and each emotion regulation strategy. Finally, hypothesis testing was performed using general linear model (GLM) analysis.

Results

The study included 191 young adult participants aged 18 to 25 years ($M = 21$, $SD = 1.3$). Of these, 155 were women (81.2%) and 36 were men (18.8%). The majority were undergraduate students (89%) and unemployed (77%). Their residences were spread across several regions, with most residing in West Java (62.3%). A detailed description of participant characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Variable	N	Percentage (%)
Education		
Undergraduate Student	170	89%
Master’s Student	2	1%
Bachelor’s Degree Graduate	17	9%
Did Not Pursue Higher Education	2	1%
Employment Status		
Employed	44	23%
Unemployed	147	77%
Place of Residence		
West Java	119	62.3%
Special Capital Region of Jakarta	28	14.7%
Banten	14	7.3%
Special Region of Yogyakarta	8	4.2%
East Java	6	3.1%
Central Java	5	2.6%
Sumatra Island	6	3.1%
Bali and Nusa Tenggara	2	1%
Sulawesi Island	2	1%
Kalimantan Island	1	0.5%

Table 2 explains the results of descriptive analysis of the mother–child relationship dimensions and emotion regulation strategies. Vulnerability has a higher average than other dimensions, although the difference between its average score and those of the affection, justice, acknowledgment, and trust dimensions is slight. Similarly, the cognitive reappraisal strategy has a higher average than expressive suppression, but the difference in average scores is less than 1 SD. Table 3 shows a significant relationship between vulnerability and cognitive reappraisal strategies ($F(6, 1) = 4.330$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .023$). These results indicate that children’s perception of sensitivity in mother–child relationships has a 2.3% influence on their use of cognitive reappraisal in emerging adulthood. Acknowledgment is also related to cognitive reappraisal ($F(6, 1) = 8.954$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .046$), with a child’s perception of acknowledgment from their mother having a 4.6% influence on their use of these strategies in emerging adulthood. Meanwhile, restrictiveness, affection, justice, and trust are not related to cognitive reappraisal.

Table 2
Descriptive Analysis of Mother–Child Relationship and Emotion Regulation

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Mother–Child Relationship				
Restrictiveness	2.49	.78	11.00	49.00
Affection	3.95	.67	16.00	55.00
Vulnerability	3.99	.59	11.00	45.00
Justice	3.83	.56	28.00	60.00
Acknowledgment	3.89	.63	22.00	60.00
Trust	3.63	.67	19.00	59.00
Emotion Regulation				
Cognitive Reappraisal	5.43	.82	15.00	42.00
Expressive Suppression	4.86	1.15	9.00	28.00

The vulnerability dimension is related to expressive suppression strategies ($F(6, 1) = 5.304, p = .022, \eta^2 = .028$), with results showing that children’s perception of sensitivity in mother–child relationships has a 2.8% influence on their expressive suppression. This type of strategy also has a relationship with justice ($F(6, 1) = 5.706, p = .018, \eta^2 = .030$), as a child’s perception of justice in the relationship with their mother has a 3.0% influence on their use of expressive suppression. The remaining dimensions of restrictiveness, affection, acknowledgment, and trust have no relationship with expressive suppression strategies.

Discussion

Emotion regulation is an individual’s ability to manage their emotions and comprises two strategies (Gross & John, 2003): cognitive reappraisal, an adaptive strategy involving cognitive processes, and expressive suppression, a maladaptive strategy used to suppress emotions. The development of emotion regulation can be influenced by various factors, one of which is the mother–child relationship (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2020; Morris et al., 2017; Oud & Welzen, 1989). Oud and Welzen (1989) discussed six dimensions of this relationship, i.e., restrictiveness, affection, vulnerability, justice, acknowledgment, and trust. The quality of the mother–child relationship is described as the child’s perception of the intensity of these dimensions and their dynamics in connection to their mother. This study identified correlations between mother–child relationship and emotion regulation in emerging adulthood. The researchers hypothesized that each dimension of this relationship plays a role in the emotion regulation strategies employed during this life stage.

The results showed that several dimensions in the mother–child relationship are tied to emotion regulation strategies. Vulnerability, which is a child’s perception of their mother’s sensitivity toward them, has a significant impact on both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression in this study. Liu et al. (2022) similarly found that maternal sensitivity and empathy can encourage children to deal with their emotional problems through adaptive emotion regulation. Conversely, a lack of maternal

sensitivity can cause children to have difficulties dealing with their emotional problems and rely on maladaptive emotion regulation (Meng et al., 2020).

A mother’s sensitivity and empathy affect her parenting behavior. Highly sensitive mothers typically exhibit warmth and responsiveness to their children’s feelings, leading the children to more easily understand their own emotions and communicate them. Conversely, a study by Gross and John (2003) noted that mothers with low sensitivity rarely respond to their children’s feelings. This can make it difficult for those children to regulate their emotions (Crespo et al., 2017). In addition, maternal sensitivity is important for helping children transition into emerging adulthood: based on research by Ma and Wang (2021), it can provide support and space for children to express their emotions and maintain the quality of the relationship between mother and child. Bloxson et al. (2021) also stated that relationships that are not based on sensitivity and empathy can lead to antisocial behavior in children and predict psychopathology.

Acknowledgment refers to a child’s perception of their mother’s recognition of their feelings and behaviors. This dimension has a significant relationship with cognitive reappraisal, showing that a mother’s acknowledgment of her young adult children can encourage them to regulate their emotions adaptively. The link between maternal acknowledgment of children and those children’s tendency to adaptively regulate their emotions was further explained by Han et al. (2015). According to them, positive reactions from mothers to children’s behavior and feelings can lead to fewer emotional problems. A study by Bérubé et al. (2023) also found that negative reactions from mothers can make children more responsive to negative emotions and lead them to have difficulty recognizing positive ones. However, the present study found no link between the dimension of acknowledgment and expressive suppression strategies. This indicates that a lack of recognition from emerging adults’ mothers does not necessarily encourage them to suppress their emotions.

Justice describes a child’s perception of how fairly their mother treats them. DeMaris and Mahoney (2017) note that this is important for children’s development because those who perceive fairness in their family can more easily navigate social interactions, develop trust, and form conflict resolution skills when they reach emerging adulthood. In this study, the dimension of justice was not found to be related to cognitive reappraisal, but it was found to have a relationship with expressive suppression. These results indicate that a lack of fairness in a mother’s treatment of her early adult children may encourage them to suppress their emotions. Pillemer et al. (2010) agree that children’s perceptions of injustice by their mothers may be related to emotional suppression, which leads to depression symptoms and adjustment difficulties. Injustice in emotional expressions can also be related to emotion regulation. According to Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2022) and Morelen et al. (2016), by being dishonest in expressing their feelings, mothers can push their children to not express their feelings either.

Table 3
Hypothesis Testing Using the General Linear Model

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Restrictiveness	Cognitive Reappraisal	.006	.937	.000
	Expressive Suppression	.097	.756	.001
Affection	Cognitive Reappraisal	3.101	.080	.017
	Expressive Suppression	1.087	.298	.006
Vulnerability	Cognitive Reappraisal	4.330	.039	.023
	Expressive Suppression	5.304	.022	.028
Justice	Cognitive Reappraisal	.008	.928	.000
	Expressive Suppression	5.706	.018	.030
Acknowledgment	Cognitive Reappraisal	8.954	.003	.046
	Expressive Suppression	2.261	.134	.012
Trust	Cognitive Reappraisal	.133	.716	.001
	Expressive Suppression	.158	.691	.001

Restrictiveness, affection, and trust were not found to be related to either emotion regulation strategy. The restrictiveness dimension in this study had the lowest average among all the dimensions. This suggests that the research participants perceived lower restrictiveness from their mothers compared to the other dimensions of the mother–child relationship. The researchers suspect that this is because in countries with a collectivist culture, such as Indonesia, it is normal for parents to still be heavily involved in the lives of their adult children. For instance, it is not unusual for adults in collectivistic countries to still live with their parents (Hofstede, 2011). This can make children accustomed to close parental involvement in their lives even after they have grown up.

The affection dimension had the highest average score in this study after vulnerability, indicating that participants tended to have a positive perception of their mothers' affection. However, this affection was not related to their tendency to regulate their emotions. Keskin and Branje (2022) said that a maternal affection is an important predictor of adaptive emotion regulation in adults. Affection given to adult children, on the other hand, is not relevant to their emotion regulation (Parra et al., 2015; Saldana & Forthun, 2020).

Trust was also a dimension with a fairly high average, although not as high as the average score for vulnerability (see Table 2). GLM analysis showed that one's trust in their mother is not related to their ability to regulate their emotions. These results are in line with research by Ouyang and Cheung (2022), which explained that trust in the mother–child relationship is important to avoid conflict, but is not necessarily related to emotion regulation skills, especially in emerging adulthood (Gong, 2013).

Limitations

Although this study provides new information regarding the relationship between mothers and children and children's emotion regulation in the Indonesian context, it also has limitations. One limitation that needs to be discussed is related to the research sample, which, while very heterogeneous, did not reflect the heterogeneity of

the population because the sampling technique used did not require this. Since it was a preliminary study, the researchers focused on a general description of the emerging adult group without specifying sample characteristics, e.g., education, occupation, residence, and so on. As a result, the findings may pose biases if used as a guideline for discussing early adults with specific characteristics: for example, early adults who are already working or who have not pursued higher education, both of which were underrepresented in the present sample (see Table 1).

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that several dimensions of the mother–child relationship are related to children's emotion regulation strategies in emerging adulthood. The vulnerability dimension is related to both strategies, proving that a mother's vulnerability and empathy toward her child's emotions during emerging adulthood play an important role in their emotion regulation. Acknowledgment is related to the cognitive reappraisal strategy, while the justice dimension is related to the expressive suppression strategy. The restrictiveness, affection, and trust dimensions were not found to be relevant to the emotion regulation strategies of young adults.

Implications

The study has practical implications for mothers, young adults, and practitioners in related fields. Mothers should realize that their emerging adult children need them to offer vulnerability, acknowledgment, and justice in order to develop adaptive emotion regulation skills. This can be done by fostering empathy in the relationship and maintaining openness in communication. Emerging adults can also take an active role by assertively communicating their emotional needs to their mothers.

Practitioners, such as psychologists, can help both mothers and children build positive relationships by emphasizing the key dimensions: restrictiveness, affection, vulnerability, justice, acknowledgment, and trust.

Psychologists can educate mothers and children about healthy relationships and teach relational skills, such as understanding each other's perspectives, communicating needs openly, and respecting each other's personalities.

Recommendation

This study found that several dimensions of the mother-child relationship are not significantly related to emotion regulation strategies due to the absence of those dimensions during the emerging adult developmental stage. Therefore, future research can compare an emerging adult group with child and/or adolescent groups to further examine the link between mother-child relationship dynamics and emotion regulation among these age ranges.

Declarations

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Authors' Contributions

TS designed the study, conducted the data collection, analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript. SN and SI provided feedback and approval of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in the research process, manuscript writing, or publication.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

The researchers declare the use of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, in the process of manuscript writing. All contents generated by AI have been reviewed, verified, and edited by the researchers, who are fully responsible for the manuscript's authenticity.

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