

# Intergenerational Emotional Flourishing: Conceptualizing the Continuity of Positive Emotion Socialization Strategies Across Generations

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**Abstract**— Emotion socialization (ES; i.e., strategies that minimize, dismiss, magnify, or reward emotions) is influenced by parents' own understanding and expression of emotions—factors that are shaped by their socialization history (i.e., strategies used by their parents). The present discussion first summarizes parental ES strategies and discusses how these strategies differ between the socialization of negatively valenced and positively valenced emotions. Next, we review extant research on the intergenerational continuity of parenting practices in general, which focuses on maltreatment. We expand on this literature by highlighting the importance of considering the intergenerational continuity of ES strategies for positively valenced emotions (i.e., emotions that feel good to experience; e.g., pride, joy) and identify two mechanism that may play a role in the transmission of ES strategies pertaining to positively valenced emotions across generations: (1) parental expressivity of positively valenced emotions; and (2) children's emotion schemas that are shaped by parental expressivity and, in turn, serve to inform children's use of similar ES strategies with their own children down the line. A shift in focus from negatively valenced to positively valenced emotions in the area of intergenerational continuity may support family functioning and flourishing across generations.

**Keywords**— *Emotion Socialization, Parenting, Positively Valenced Emotions, Parental Expressivity, Schemas, Emotional Flourishing*

## I. INTERGENERATIONAL EMOTIONAL FLOURISHING: CONCEPTUALIZING THE CONTINUITY OF POSITIVE EMOTION SOCIALIZATION STRATEGIES ACROSS GENERATIONS

Emotion socialization (ES) refers to the parental strategies and behaviours (e.g., minimizing, dismissing, magnifying) used to shape a child's experience, understanding, expression, and regulation of emotions (Friedlmeier et al., 2011). When these strategies are supportive, children are likely to develop emotional competence, which is marked by a greater capacity to understand, express, and regulate their emotions (Eisenberg, et al., 1998). Parents' reactions to their child's emotional cues and expressions, how they discuss emotions with their child, and their style of emotion expressivity are broad ES strategies that directly influence a child's emotional competence (Eisenberg et al., 1998). The ES strategies that parents use are informed by their own understandings and beliefs about emotions, which stem, in part, from the ES strategies they

experienced in childhood from their parents (Hajal & Paley, 2020; Leerkes et al., 2020).

Research supporting the notion of intergenerationally influenced ES strategies has focused almost exclusively on the socialization of negatively valenced emotions, such as anger or sadness (Colombetti, 2005). However, the intergenerational influence of ES strategies for positively valenced emotions, such as pride and joy, (Colombetti, 2005) warrants investigation given that these strategies differ substantially from those used by parents in response to negatively valenced emotions (Costa Martins et al., 2018). That is, positively valenced emotions lead to the development of enduring psychosocial resources (e.g., improved problem solving, savoring positive experiences) and adaptive functioning (e.g., increased ability to manage emotions and social relationships) by momentarily broadening an individual's range of mental processes and behavioural capabilities (Fredrickson, 2001). Further, negatively valenced emotions arise in contexts where objects, events, or situations pose a challenge or threat to one's wellbeing, whereas positively valenced emotions arise in contexts where environmental contingencies support or contribute to wellbeing (Frijda, 2007). These differences suggest that the mechanisms that contribute to one's tendency to experience and promote positively versus negatively valenced emotions likely differ and warrant exploration (Costa Martins et al., 2018).

In this paper, we first outline parental ES strategies and discuss how these strategies differ between the socialization of negatively valenced and positively valenced emotions. Then, we review the existing literature on the intergenerational transmission of socialization practices, focusing on ES strategies. Finally, we identify two interrelated mechanisms through which parents may transfer emotion socialization strategies of positively valenced emotions to their children: parental positive dominant expressivity and its effects on shaping children's emotion schemas. Research on intergenerational continuity has been significant in identifying and interrupting maladaptive patterns across family generations (Waters, 2020). However, the scarcity of literature on the mechanisms that contribute to the transmission of adaptive patterns across family generations impedes the capacity to support families in initiating and retaining emotional flourishing across generations (Waters, 2020). Thus, this investigation may be valuable for initiating a shift towards developing and strengthening familial resources.

## II. EMOTION SOCIALIZATION STRATEGIES

ES strategies broadly include parents' reactions to children's emotional cues and expressions, their discussions about emotions with their children, and parental emotion expressivity (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Morris et al., 2007). Parental use of supportive ES strategies can support the development of emotional and social competence among their child (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Emotional and social competence refer to the capacity to understand one's own and others' emotions, and to manage and modulate emotional expressions to be situationally appropriate and meet goals in socially acceptable ways (Eisenberg et al., 1998).

ES strategies include both common and specific processes (Yeo & Cheah, 2023). Common processes pertain to a parent's meta-emotion philosophy, which encompasses parental values and beliefs about their own and their child's emotions (i.e., when it is appropriate to experience and express various emotions). A parent's meta-emotion philosophy can consciously or unconsciously guide their emotion socialization goals for their child (i.e., how emotions should be managed; Yeo & Cheah, 2023). The meta-emotion philosophy creates the emotional context through which a parent engages in more specific and direct strategies (e.g., magnifying or dismissing) to regulate their child's experience of emotions in accordance with their socialization goals (Yeo & Cheah, 2023). Specific processes are separated into parental responses to their child's expressed emotion (e.g., neglecting, rewarding, overriding, punishing, and/or magnifying the emotion) and parents' own emotional expressivities (e.g., outward or subtle display), which refer to a parent's style of displaying positively or negatively valenced emotions (Yeo & Cheah, 2023). Unsupportive ES strategies, such as neglecting, overriding, punishing and/or magnifying are thought to have intergenerational effects in the context of socializing negatively valenced emotions (Leerkes et al., 2020). Alternatively, parental positive dominant expressivity (i.e., emphatic style of displaying positive emotion) is a supportive strategy unique to the socialization of positively valenced emotions and may be particularly transmissible across generations (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Differences between the socialization of negatively and positively valenced emotions will be expanded upon below, followed by a discussion of how these emotion types may differentially contribute to child wellbeing.

### A. Socialization of Negatively Valenced versus Positively Valenced Emotions

ES strategies used to socialize positively valenced emotions differ significantly from those used for negatively valenced emotions. For instance, the use of magnifying, where the child's emotional expression is matched with greater intensity by the parent, is unsupportive for negatively valenced emotions as it may lead to emotion dysregulation (Costa Martins et al., 2018). However, this strategy is considered instrumental for the socialization of positively valenced emotions whereby it may enhance the child's experience of a positively valenced emotion and lead to savouring (i.e., indulging in and extending the experience of positively valenced emotions; Shi et al., 2023). ES strategies for negatively valenced emotions are considered supportive to the extent that they manage and minimize the child's experience

of them. Alternatively, strategies are considered supportive for the socialization of positively valenced emotions when they build-upon and extend their experience (Costa Martins et al., 2018).

One distinguishing feature between the socialization of positively and negatively valenced emotions is that strategies that support the cultivation of positively valenced emotions, such as expressive encouragement, provide a child with the ability to counteract negatively valenced emotions through the self-generation of positively valenced ones (Sosa-Hernandez et al., 2020). Another prominent strategy unique to the socialization of positively valenced emotions is the use of niche-picking such that parents intentionally create contexts where their child has the opportunity to experience or generate positively valenced emotions on their own (Lozada et al., 2016). Taken together, ES strategies considered supportive for the socialization of positively valenced emotions are those that actively construct them, while supportive ES strategies for negatively valenced emotions focus on regulating their experience. Based on these differences, we can expect their effects on child outcomes to differ as well.

### B. The Cultivation of Positively Valenced Emotions and Child Wellbeing

There are significant positive psychosocial outcomes of supportive ES strategies for children's development of positively valenced emotions and are captured by the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). This theory contends that the experience of positively valenced emotions within supportive relational contexts momentarily broadens the range of an individual's mental processes and behavioural capacities, and builds lasting physical, intellectual, and social resources (e.g., improved health, problem-solving abilities, and ability to form relationships with peers). Further, children subject to supportive ES strategies, such as magnifying emotion, may continue to self-generate positively valenced emotions by seeking and creating experiences that elicit those same positively valenced emotions that their parents encouraged (Fredrickson, 2001). Freeman and colleagues (2022) found that children whose parents actively sought to enhance and savour their positively valenced emotions were more inclined to do so independently. Parental expressive encouragement of positively valenced emotions is an example of an ES strategy that is found to lead to the broaden-and-build effect (Fredrickson, 2001). This strategy enhances children's broader subjective wellbeing by expanding various resources, such as psychological (e.g., the ability to regulate negative emotions more effectively), intellectual (e.g., creative thinking and problem-solving abilities), and social (e.g., social network expansion) These resources shape a child's emotional preferences (i.e., broadening of mental processes) and positions them towards opportunities that would enable these emotions to be experienced further (Fredrickson, 2001). The broaden-and-build effect is a unique and powerful outcome of parental use of ES strategies around positively valenced emotions. Taken together, these outcomes on child wellbeing highlight the need to investigate the features that support parents' efforts to cultivate positively valenced emotions in their children, such as intergenerational influence.

### III. INTERGENERATIONAL SOCIALIZATION PRACTICES

The existing body of literature on intergenerational transmission in parenting practices has predominantly examined the continuity of adverse behaviours across generations such as maltreatment (e.g., abuse and neglect). For instance, children subject to harsh, rejective and/or hostile parenting practices such as dismissing a child's negative experiences and/or criticizing them, are more likely to adopt these same practices as parents (Conger et al., 2013; He et al., 2020; Sekaran et al., 2021; Taccini et al., 2024). Parental invalidation (i.e., consistent punishment or minimization of a child's expressed emotions or needs) has also been found to be transmissible across generations because of its ability to shape a child's attitudes about parenting (Lee et al., 2023). Similar findings have also been shown for other abusive parenting practices, such as physical and psychological violence (Rodriguez et al., 2018). For example, mothers who experienced physical and psychological abuse in childhood were more likely to engage in physical and psychological aggression with their own children. These findings support the intergenerational transmission hypothesis (ITH) which posits that violence tends to continue across parenting generations because abusive childhood experiences lead to negative attributions and unrealistic standards that may influence how a parent interprets their own child's behaviour (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Experiences of abuse can also impart attitudes around the utility of physical punishment, which may influence a parent's use of abusive practices to manage child expressions deemed inappropriate (Rodriguez et al., 2018).

Although the ITH focuses on cycles of maltreatment, researchers have more recently begun to examine the intergenerational transmission of growth-promoting and constructive parenting behaviours, though primarily within Western cultures (Belsky et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2023; Nepl et al., 2009; Yan et al., 2016). This literature focuses on the transmission of adaptive parenting practices as well as practices that sever the cycles of maltreatment captured by the ITH (Sekaran et al., 2021). For instance, children subject to parenting characterized as warm, accepting and supportive and who received healthy forms of parental discipline (e.g., clear boundary-setting, explanations for consequences) are more likely to adopt these constructive practices when they become parents (Belsky et al., 2009; Belsky et al., 2005). Belsky and colleagues (2005) explain this trend by suggesting that proximal life experiences (i.e., experiences that directly impact development) when a child is developing are predictive of their functioning in adulthood, including the parenting practices they adopt. For instance, a positive family climate (i.e., high levels of communication and expressivity) is regarded as a proximal experience that contributes to the intergenerational transmission of constructive parenting practices (Belsky et al., 2005).

Together, these bodies of work have supported the idea of ITH, that parents replicate the forms of parenting they experienced themselves as children (Yan et al., 2016). However, there is less research investigating the use of specific strategies as they pertain to the socialization of negatively valenced emotions and—especially—positively valenced emotions across generations.

### IV. INTERGENERATIONAL EMOTION SOCIALIZATION STRATEGIES

There is an urgent need to understand intergenerational emotion socialization given that ES strategies are key determinants of social and emotional competence amongst children and youth (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Leerkes and colleagues (2020) found that parents who experienced unsupportive ES (e.g., dismissing) in response to negative emotions from their own parents growing up were more likely to use those same strategies with their own children decades later. Their findings support the broader significance of parental ES strategies identified in Eisenberg et al.'s (1998) model of emotion socialization, in which parenting practices in the subsequent generation represent a tenable outcome of ES strategies experienced in childhood. Leerkes and colleagues (2020) propose affect-event links as a potential mechanism driving this continuity. Affect-event links refer to the cognitive-affective process whereby the ES strategies parents experienced in childhood formed schemas (i.e., stable interpretations and manners of responding to emotional content). These schemas guide a parent's socialization efforts with their own children by consciously or unconsciously drawing on the parenting practices they experienced in their own childhood as templates for how to handle parenting challenges (Leerkes et al., 2020). Leerkes and colleagues (2020) focus exclusively on ES strategies of negatively valenced emotions.

Emotion regulation (ER) is one prominent outcome of effective use of ES strategies and is identified as a transmissible feature of parenting practices (Bridgett et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2007). Observational learning around managing emotional experience, the parenting practices aimed specifically at socializing ER abilities, and the emotional climate of the family may work in conjunction to replicate ER status across generations (Bridgett et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2007). Since the use of ES for the socialization of positively valenced emotions (e.g., magnifying and positive encouragement) have been noted for their ability to facilitate enhanced ER abilities among children, an exploration of the intergenerational transmission of these specific strategies and how they may undergird improved emotional functioning across generations is a rich area for future research.

### V. MECHANISMS UNDERLYING INTERGENERATIONAL ES STRATEGIES FOR POSITIVELY VALENCE EMOTIONS

We propose two interconnected pathways for the transmission of specific ES strategies used by parents when socializing *positively valenced* emotions across generations: parental positive dominant expressivity, which specifically influences the socialization of positively valenced emotions, and emotion schemas, which are the cognitive-affective structures that are shaped by parental expressivity of emotion.

#### A. Parental Positive Dominant Expressivity

Parental emotional expressivity has been identified as an ES socialization strategy that is thought to be transmissible across parenting generations particularly for positive emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Parental emotion expressivity refers to a parent's consistent style of displaying their emotion in the family context (Ding et al., 2023). Children reference the

expressive style of their parents to understand the display rules of emotions—that is, which emotions are appropriate to express and when—and to interpret the emotional expression of others and respond to them (Ding et al., 2023). The four identified parental emotional expressivities include positive dominant expressivity (i.e., emphatic display of positive emotion), positive submissive expressivity (i.e., subtle display of positive emotion), negative dominant expressivity (i.e., emphatic display of negative emotion), and negative submissive expressivity (i.e., subtle display of negative emotion; Yeo & Cheah, 2023). Positive dominant expressivity involves parents' emphatic display of positive emotions and is highlighted as the style of parental expressivity found to be cyclical between parent and child (Ding et al., 2023).

Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) draw particular significance to parental emotional expressivity for its role in predicting a child's later engagement with emotion in their model of emotion socialization. They suggest the role of parental emotional expressivity in shaping the basis of a child's self and world schemas as a key mechanism through which the child may adopt a similar style of emotion expressivity as a parent (Eisenberg et al., 1998). A parent high in positive dominant expressivity shows high levels of preoccupation with their own and their child's emotions, they display less emotion dismissiveness and are more likely to be responsive and accepting of emotions and encourage their child's expression particularly for positive emotions (see Figure 1; Eisenberg et al., 1998).

Parental expressivity shapes a child's expectations, evaluations and beliefs about emotional experiences and expressions by making attributions about their value as a means of communication (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997). The types of emotions and the degree to which parents express them are shown to determine the extent to which they are valued and expressed by their children (e.g., the overt parental expression of pride communicates to a child that pride is a valuable emotion to express; Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997). A child may internalize and mirror the expressivity displayed by their parent by using it to guide their own emotional expressions and to inform how they respond to the emotional expressions of others (Eisenberg et al., 1998).

Among Western cultures, parental expressivity may hold particular significance in socializing positively valenced emotions because these emotions are highly valued. For instance, children's own positive dominant expressivity is found to be linked to their mother's positive dominant expressivity (Eisenberg et al., 1998). This impact is shown to be stable throughout development, in which college students' expressivity for positive emotions was associated with high degrees of parental expressivity for positive emotions experienced during childhood (Eisenberg et al., 1998). These findings suggest that parental positive dominant expressivity may function as the template through which a child develops stable and enduring standards that influence the evaluation, management and response to positive emotions even beyond the family environment from which they emerged. These points highlight the enduring and cyclical nature of parental expressivity with regards to an individual's experience and expression of positive emotions.

## *B. Emotion Schemas*

Emotion schemas may be one channel through which parental positive dominant expressivity is transmitted across parenting generations. In Eisenberg and colleagues' (1998) model of emotion socialization, researchers suggest that specific parenting practices, particularly parental positive dominant expressivity, in the subsequent generation represent a direct outcome of the ES strategies experienced in childhood because of their role in the formation of schemas. Schemas refer to an individual's stable representations of the world and the self as an actor in the world (Eisenberg et al., 1998). They maintain stability by filtering out irrelevant information to consolidate only the information that is believed to be relevant to the self (Fraleigh et al., 1997).

As discussed above, Leerkes et al. (2020) proposed that parental ES strategies may be transmitted across generations via emotion schemas (i.e., affect-event links as termed by the researchers). They posited that childhood ES experiences craft emotion schemas, which influence how socioemotional content is understood and processed over time (Leerkes et al., 2020). Although Leerkes and colleagues (2020) discussed emotion schemas in the context intergenerational ES for negatively valenced emotions, similar processes may be at play during the intergenerational transmission of positively valenced emotions. For instance, a parent who encourages the experience and expression of positively valenced emotions may unconsciously prompt their child to associate the encouragement of positively valenced emotions with the child-rearing context. This association would then become activated when the child becomes a parent and is raising their own children. Thus, it is through parental ES efforts (e.g., positive dominant emotion expressivity) that the emotions that are experienced across contexts form a structure, such as emotion schemas (Izard, 2007). This structure becomes an enduring aspect of the self and one's response style that influences emotional functioning throughout one's own development and the development of one's children across generations (Izard, 2007).

If children's emotional schemas are shaped by parental strategies encouraging the expression of positive emotions, positive emotion expressivity may become an important and stable feature by which children define themselves and a critical determinant for how they respond to positive emotions (see Figure 1). A parent's overt display of positive emotion (i.e., positive dominant expressivity) communicates to their child their attitude specifically towards positively valenced emotions and indicates their social value (Izard, 2007). Thus, if a parent appraises their own experience of pride as valuable, the ES strategies they adopt will reflect an effort to impart these same values around pride and nurture their expression within their child. In explicitly communicating the value of positively valenced emotions, their child may develop their own attitudes about positively valenced emotions that mirror those represented by their parent's socialization practices (Izard, 2007). In this case, the consistent parental use of positive dominant expressivity may function as a vector of values and beliefs around positively valenced emotions that could contribute to the development of a child's enduring emotion schemas cognitive-affective structures (Izard, 2007). The schematic recognition of positive dominant expressivity as a valuable response to the experience of positively valenced

emotions would guide how a child communicates and responds to them beyond early developmental contexts and into adulthood where they become parents themselves (Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997; Izard, 2007). Thus, the use of parental positive dominant expressivity may be a key ES strategy for positively valenced emotions that is transmitted across generations through its role in shaping a child's emotion schema.

## VI. DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to shed light on the importance of understanding the ES strategies of positively valenced emotions that get passed down across parenting generations. First, we outlined parental ES strategies and their role in developing social and emotional competence in children, and discussed how these strategies differ between the socialization of negatively and positively valenced emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). We discussed theory and research showing that socialization goals for negatively valenced emotions represent efforts to minimize and manage their appearance, while those for positively valenced emotions represent efforts to enhance and build-upon their experience (Costa Martins et al., 2018). We also discussed how the socialization of positively valenced emotions can enhance child wellbeing by increasing coping capacity and building enduring social and psychological resources, and is thus critical to explore from an intergenerational lens. We then summarized the extant research on the intergenerational transmission and continuity of parenting practices and explore how specific ES strategies might be cyclical across generations. We introduced the ITH which has utility for explaining the continuity of abusive parenting practices, but has not been applied to more constructive parenting practices (Rodriguez et al., 2018). We argued that employing this hypothesis when considering the continuity of ES strategies for positively valenced emotions may inform our ability to promote emotional flourishing across generations (Waters, 2020). Finally, we highlighted two distinct but interconnected intergenerational channels through which positively valenced emotions may be passed down across generations: parental positive dominant expressivity and emotion schema. The use of parental positive dominant expressivity may be transmitted across generations by shaping a child's emotion schema—that is, their enduring beliefs and attitudes—around the value of expressing positively valenced emotions and encouraging their expression in others.

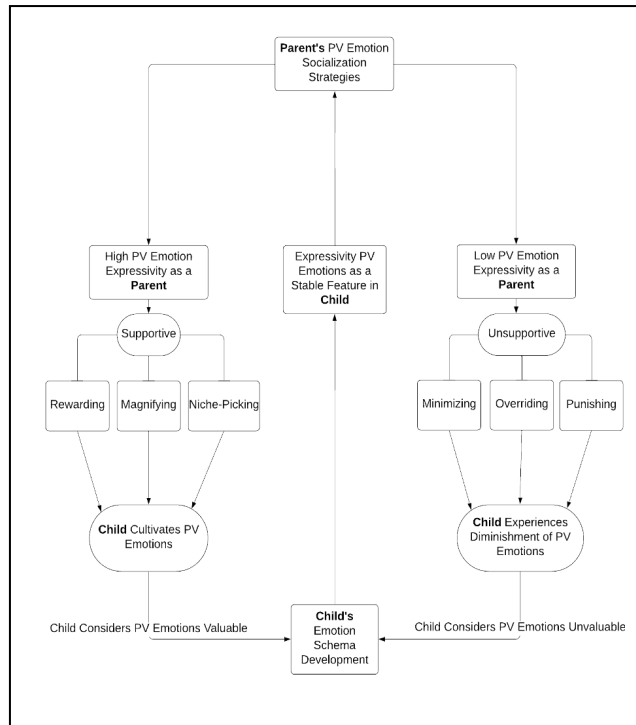
Given the plethora of modern intervention efforts focused on severing maladaptive emotion patterns across generations (Choi, 2023), our focus on identifying the intergenerational influence of parental ES strategies for positively valenced emotions is critical for complementing current efforts and could contribute to the development of programs focused on supporting the acquisition of adaptive emotion patterns across generations (Leerkes et al., 2020). Our efforts seek to initiate a shift away from crisis management to instead focus on enhancing long-term positive outcomes among families (Waters, 2020). Positive psychology interventions could contribute to the development of parenting skills and resources, such as supporting the development of positive dominant expressivity, by targeting parental attitudes and beliefs around positively valenced emotions which could lead to stable positive emotional functioning across parenting

generations (Waters, 2020). This discussion aimed to make the idea of emotional flourishing relevant in the existing body of literature on the intergenerational features of parenting practices by proposing a pathway for the transmission of ES strategies for positively valenced emotions across generations. The potential for further research to support emotional flourishing and family wellbeing across generations necessitates continued exploration.

We acknowledge the limitations of our discussion to direct future exploration in this area. Firstly, our investigation is conceptual in nature and that the relationship between emotion schemas and the continuity of ES strategies for positively valenced emotions remains relatively unexplored empirically. Further, the practices that parents adopt, including the ES strategies they use, occur within a sociocultural context (Eisenberg et al., 1998). The present proposal would be strengthened by considering the extent to which shifts in cultural contexts across parenting generations may influence or impede the transmission of positive dominant expressivity and how culture may shape the socialization processes identified in developing an individual's emotion schema (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Additionally, the extent to which the pathway we propose applies to the ES of discrete positive emotions (e.g., pride versus joy versus appreciation) is worth exploring to better understand the specificities and generalisabilities of intergenerational ES strategies. It is also important to highlight that ER, which is a viable outcome of parental use of ES strategies, may also be a mechanism that supports the continuity of specific ES strategies across generations (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Morris et al., 2007). A child's improved capacity for ER is thought to be an outcome of parental positive dominant expressivity. This suggests that ER, in addition to emotion schemas, could be a relevant transmissible feature from parent to child involved in the pathway we have proposed (Tan et al., 2019). Further exploration of the pathways that lead to the transmission of ES strategies for positively valenced emotions across generations is warranted.

## APPENDIX

**Figure 1.** Conceptual Pathway of the Intergenerational Transmission of Socialization Strategies for Positively Valenced (PV) Emotions



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