Maternal report of emotional response duration in young children's developmental psychology

Most research on emotional phenomena has focused on differentiating the type of emotion (e.g. positive, negative, happiness, fear), the frequency with which it occurs (e.g., how often fear is experienced), and the intensity of an emotion. However, there are a number of other parameters, such as temporal features, are worth investigating. There is new research suggesting that the timing of an emotional reaction may be more informative than the intensity of that reaction (Larson et al., 2002). Women who were spider phobic reached their peak reaction quicker to pictures of spiders than non-phobic women. This finding suggests that the timing of emotional reactions may be more important for emotions related to maladaptive behaviors. What about other temporal parameters, such as duration? Emotions can vary in duration and often last for extended periods. Previous research has shown that the duration of negative emotions such as fear or anger extend longer than positive emotions such as pleasure or excitement (Ricci-Bitti & Scherer, 1986). In another study, subjects were asked to evaluate an emotional experience. Fifty percent of the subjects reported the experiences lasting for longer than an hour and 22% for longer than 24 hours (Frijda et al., 1991). These results describe how an emotional episode can have long lasting effects on a person's emotional state and behavior. Despite these few studies, little is known about the duration of emotion in children and how best to measure them. To this end, we developed a new parent-report questionnaire to examine the duration of emotions in children. Questions were written that tapped into the specific temporal feature of duration of emotions. An example question asked, after a toy has been taken away, my child stays angry for more than 10 minutes. Questions were written for the following emotions: fear, anger, sadness, and pleasure. Parents were asked to endorse each question as being very typical to very atypical of their child on a scale from 1 to 7. As is typical with parent-report questionnaire research, participants were mothers of children 18 months to 4 years of age. The first wave of data included 52 completed questionnaires and supported the evidence of the establishment of the four emotion scales. The questions held together for each scale and the respective alpha for each emotion include Fear: .36, Anger: .90, Sadness: .89, and Pleasure: .86. The negative scales of fear, sadness and anger correlated (give correlations) with each other and were uncorrelated with the positive scale of pleasure. The fear scale reported four items that are described as extreme cases and are used to define outlier children. Anger and sadness were highly correlated with each other and showed less correlation with fear. Pleasure was uncorrelated with the other three emotions which determines that pleasure is an independent emotion and occurs on its own.