A Relational Recasting of the Principles of Emotional Competence

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Abstract

Carolyn Saarni’s theory of emotional competence has made a central contribution by directing attention to some important functions of emotion in social interaction. Her work is permeated with examples of how emotions function within both successful and unsuccessful social interactions and relationships. An examination of her stated principles of emotional competence suggest in places a perspective that is primarily intrapsychic in nature, harking back to the early roots of emotion theory and research. In this piece, we note where Saarni has advanced implications of a relational theory of emotion for understanding emotional competence. In addition, we reframe some of Saarni’s principles to make them more consistent with current relational approaches to emotion. Finally, we offer additions and extensions that we believe are compatible with the general direction of her thinking before her untimely death.

*Keywords*: relational theories, self, negotiation, internalization, contagion
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Preamble

Saarni’s work in historical context

Carolyn Saarni’s work on emotional competence played a pivotal role in the history of the ‘Emotion Revolution,’ a period of proliferating research on emotion following periods in which first behaviourism and then information processing and cognitive psychology dominated. The parting shot of that revolution began in 1969, with cross-cultural evidence of consensus between Westerners and pre-literate New Guinea and Borneo tribal peoples in judging of facial displays (Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969). Occupying much of the 1970s, that line of work spawned a large number of studies on facial expression of emotion (e.g., Hiatt, Campos, & Emde, 1979). The studies of the 1970s, however, were conducted nearly exclusively without consideration of context – the displays given for judgement included only the head and neck of the actor – and revealed nothing about what event was faced by the actor (see Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983). There was good reason for such context-free studies: Before the Emotion Revolution, it was thought that emotion could not be identified from behavioural manifestations alone, but only from the setting – that is, the context in which the emotion occurred. The work of the 1970s thus was important in changing that thinking and instead showing that emotions could be measured by quantifying the movement of facial muscles or the acoustic qualities of the voice of an actor or an emoter (e.g., Scherer, 1986). In short, the contribution of the 1970s was to show that internal feeling state could be assessed by objective manifestations of external reactions (i.e., emotional expressions). In sum, the first stage of the Emotion Revolution centred on intrapsychic or intrapersonal processes.
At the beginning of the next decade (1980s), the conceptual focus of emotion research remained intrapersonal and intrapsychic but shifted to individual differences in discrete emotions. A primary illustration is the study of temperament (e.g., Goldsmith & Campos, 1982; Rothbart, 1981). Temperament refers to the disposition to react with one emotion more readily than another emotion. For instance, some children react to strangers more with fear than with other emotions, hence are called inhibited. Others show more frustration to a variety of events than other emotions, hence are called difficult children. Still others are more prone to show happiness than other emotions, and these babies are called cheerful babies (Kagan, 2010). The study of temperament soon evolved into the study of the effect of the infant on the caregiver, thereby reversing the usual focus of development, which had stressed the effect of parents on the infant. Two seminal studies in this direction (Crockenberg, 1981; Miyake, Chen, & Campos, 1985) reported that individual differences in neonatal irritability affected parents’ behaviours that ultimately led to categorizing the child as ambivalently attached at 12 months of age. This shift in the study of temperament soon opened up a rather new attempt at studying individual differences. The intrapsychic had started to become relational; that is, the same emotional reaction or expression was shown to have different effects depending upon the receiver of those reactions.

It was at this time that Carolyn Saarni’s work became influential as she helped broaden the domains of emotion to be conceptualized relationally. Her aim was to characterize and understand effective, interpersonal interaction in ways that would benefit clinical interventions and training in family processes (see Cole, this issue). She first presented this work in 1988 at the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation (Saarni, 1990) and later published it in a major book titled The Development of Emotional Competence (Saarni, 1999). Her ideas were further developed in
chapter for the Handbook of Child Psychology by Saarni, Mumme, and Campos (1998) and Saarni, Campos, Camras, and Witherington (2006), and a condensed version of the Handbook by Saarni, Campos, Camras, and Witherington (2008). Her work stressed relational strategies. For example, Saarni studied how the emotion of one person could powerfully impact the emotion of a second person and thus emotions did not end at the periphery of one’s body as William James (1890, p. 331) and his followers stressed. Instead, emotions were broadcast with considerable effect on other people. Demonstrating the relational effects of emotional expressions, a classic study by Saarni (1984) investigated how children modulated their emotional expressions to a gift giver when they received a broken or undesirable gift, conveying appreciation of the receipt of the gift while masking disappointment at the gift’s undesirable nature (see Cole & Jacobs, this issue). Another relational strategy emphasized by Saarni was the acquisition of emotion language, which enabled children to better understand how to communicate their emotions. Her relational approach was captured in part by the eight skills relevant to emotional competence, summarized in Table 1, some of which we address in subsequent sections of this article (see also Denham, this issue).

--- Insert Table 1 here ---

### Table 1. Carolyn Saarni’s Principles of Emotional Competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill 1</th>
<th>Awareness of one’s emotions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Skill 2</td>
<td>The Ability to Discern and Understand Others’ Emotions</td>
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<td>Skill 3</td>
<td>The Ability to Use the Vocabulary of Emotion and Expression</td>
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<td>Skill 4</td>
<td>The Capacity for Empathic Involvement</td>
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<td>Skill 5</td>
<td>The Ability to Differentiate Internal Subjective Emotional Experience from External Emotional Expression</td>
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<td>Skill 6</td>
<td>The Capacity for Adaptive Coping with Aversive Emotions and Distressing Circumstances</td>
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<td>Skill 7</td>
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<td>Skill 8</td>
<td>The Capacity for Emotional Self-Efficacy</td>
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*Note: Adapted from Saarni (1999)*
In this brief paper, we elucidate the conceptual advances resulting from Saarni’s seminal writing while further developing a relational approach to emotion and emotion competence. We emphasize how this approach differs substantially from previous intrapsychic thinking about emotion. Regrettably, Saarni’s own development of a relational approach was cut short by her untimely death. To avoid misinterpretation or erroneous recommendations for clinical and social intervention based on Saarni’s work, we attempt in part to recast her principles with appropriate relational supplementation. In so doing, we emphasize how these principles are linked to adequate emotional competence.

Some Major Principles of a Relational Approach to Emotion

The relational approach stresses what the poet John Donne (1624/1999) wrote, ‘No man is an Island, entire of itself.’ Similarly, no emotion can be understood if it is not put into the context of the person’s social situation or encounters with important objects. A relational approach recruits some or all of the principles that follow.

1. The fundamental principle is that emotions have an object. In an intrapersonal view of emotion, emotion is often described without describing what emotions are about. A relational approach takes what emotions are about into account. Strictly speaking, we should not speak of ‘FEAR’ without speaking about the fear of some object in the world, (e.g., fear of ‘snakes’ or ‘losing a job’).
2. The vast majority of emotions occurs in interpersonal contexts. We share our emotions with our friends. We object to emotions from others with our own emotions. We attempt to persuade individuals by deploying emotional strategies in our interactions.

3. Emotion manifestation follows the principles of equipotentiality and equifinality. The principle of equipotentiality means that different responses can be in the service of the same emotion. For example, fear elicited by a gunshot can be manifested by running away or freezing, and anger at a frustrating person by preparation for aggressive action or by doing nothing as in passive aggressiveness. In contrast to the intrapersonal approach, prototypical facial or vocal expressions need not mark specific emotions. The principle of equifinality means that the same emotional expression can be in the service of multiple emotions. For example, ‘the smile serves many masters’ (Kagan, 1971). One can smile to indicate affiliation and communicate pleasure or one can smile to indicate derision or contempt. Following these principles, identifying the meaning of a particular expression requires a clear understanding of the context of its manifestation (e.g., the temporal flow of behaviour within which the smile is embedded).

4. Emotional manifestations such as expressions and action tendencies are in the service of motives and, apparently, they perform that task very well (Frijda, 1986). The intrapersonal approach rarely talks about what elicited the emotion in the first place. That elicitation is central to a relational approach. Emotion is generated by the interaction of an event occurring outside the self and a motive inside the self. So, neither the event nor the self, per se, elicits the emotion.
5. Emotions have two relational manifestations. One is expression or social signaling, and the other is action tendency or readiness to change, maintain, or terminate something in the world. Expressions are social signals transmitted so as to influence the behaviors of others which they do indirectly. Action tendencies, on the other hand, influence the world directly by physically affecting the person-environment interaction.

6. Emotions can be contagious, but only in context. Joy begets joy, fear begets fear, disgust begets disgust, and anger initially begets fear, but then begets oppositionality. Contagion does not always occur but depends on circumstances. These circumstances are not well studied or understood (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994).

Corollary to Principle 6: The emotional arousal in person A can generate a related level of emotional arousal in person B. This aspect of contagion is important because person A’s arousal transmitted to person B can affect the performance of the perceiver (person B) as well as to intensify the emotion currently being experienced by person B.

7. Emotions can be constitutive of new psychological states. One example is that the self can be constructed from the reflected emotional appraisals of others, so the self is not merely intrapsychic. The second example is when a parent disapproves of a child’s action and directs sadness towards the child thereby generating an emotion of shame over that action. The first example is the organization of a person’s self-concept by the reflected appraisals of others (Anderson & Chen, 2002; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). A second example is how an action can
shift from affectively neutral to shameful by the type of emotional feedback that action generates in another (Barrett, 1996).

8. Making the relational intrapsychic: emotions can become internalized (i.e., become not directly observable yet felt by the individual). What is initially evident in overt behavior now becomes part of thought, memory, imagination, and planfulness. That is, the intrapsychic reflects a previous history of interactions in the world. This principle is powerful but has not received much attention with the exception of work by Manfred Holodynski (2013).

Definition and conceptualization of Emotional Competence

Saarni’s Definition/Conceptualization

We now turn to an examination of Saarni’s definitional treatment of emotional competence. Saarni defines emotional competence as ‘the demonstration of self-efficacy in emotion-eliciting social transactions’ (Saarni, 1990, 1999; Saarni, Campos, Camras, & Witherington, 2006; 2008). There are some corollaries embedded in her capstone skill (Skill 8), in which she expands on the meaning of emotional self-efficacy: ‘The individual views him – or herself as feeling, overall, the way he or she wants to feel…In essence, we are living in accord with our personal theory of emotion, when we demonstrate emotional self-efficacy as well as in accord with our moral sense.’ (see Skill 8; Saarni, 1999, p. 278). From a relational perspective, there are three features to note about this definition of emotional competence: (1) it emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy rather than the relation between self and the environment; (2) it ‘involves feeling the way one wants to feel’; and (3) it involves adherence to one’s own moral stance. Each of these can be recast in a relational manner.
First, although Saarni’s view of the self is permeated with relational thinking, the use of
the word ‘self’ creates an intrapsychic connotation. The Oxford Online Dictionary’s definition of
self reflects its common usage: ‘a person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others,
especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action.’ This popular
conceptualization does not capture our view that we have as many ‘selves’ as there are roles we
play (see also Neisser, 1988; and Sarbin, 1964). We have one ‘self’ when behaving with parents,
a different ‘self’ when behaving with friends, and other ‘selves’ depending upon our roles in the
work environment and so on. These examples suffice to show that the use of the term ‘self’ is
vague in what it designates. Instead of the term self-efficacy, we suggest the term ‘relational
efficacy.’ Relational efficacy occurs when the person takes into account, not only what his or her
feelings are, but also the feelings and strivings of the other. This revision in terminology would
make Saarni’s writings more theoretically consistent with her overarching framework of emotion
and emotional competence.

Second, consider the view that an emotionally self-efficacious person feels the way he or
she wants to feel. This statement focuses on the interior self rather than the self in relation to
others. It also implies hedonic primacy (i.e., humans strive to maximize pleasure and minimize
pain intrapersonally). In fairness to Saarni, she thought about this aspect of self-efficacy in
relational terms although the statement of the principle obscures that emphasis. Her overarching
model emphasized communion with others. Emotional self-efficacy in her framework involves
acceptance that, at the onset of a transaction, person A has goals and plights that differ from
those of person B. It is not the imposition of one person’s emotions and goals on another.
Emotional competence can involve complete agreement, partial congruence, or total
disagreement; however, there is an attitude of respect for the other person’s position, or at least
acceptance (i.e., an agreement to disagree). In our view, at no time is person A necessarily ‘feeling the way he or she wants to feel.’

Third, Saarni’s definition of emotional competence implies that one feels a sense of self-efficacy when one’s morality is upheld. How can we view this emphasis on morality in relational terms? Conflicts about moral positions can be very difficult to reconcile. Consider the conflict between pro-life activists and pro-choice proponents. Both groups appeal to principles of morality, but their principles lead to opposite conclusions. We believe it a mistake to evaluate the success of a transaction by appealing to the extent to which an outcome is consistent with one’s own moral principles. From a relational perspective, we seek an alternative way to understand and frame this principle. Saarni’s position that emotional competence involves living up to one’s own moral principles irrespective of whether they are upheld by others does not address the relational consequences of such a position (e.g., the dissolution of family relationships due to strict adherence to different moral principles). We suggest acknowledging that emotional self-efficacy and moral self-efficacy are not always reconcilable. Certainly, the relation between them can be very complex and bears further reflection.

A Proposed Relational Criterion: Negotiation

A relational approach to emotional competence must emphasize the role of negotiation. Indeed, negotiation is intimately related to many of the skills Saarni discusses. Negotiation requires communicating emotions appropriately to ensure that one’s message is conveyed in an appropriate and non-threatening way (Skill 7). Negotiation also means discussing one’s goals and one’s strategies for attaining the goals when coping with aversive emotions and distressing circumstances (Skill 6). This may often include the proposal of alternative courses of action that
might allow for both parties to come to an agreement. In other words, effective emotional competence means, among other things, realizing that there may be multiple means to an end. This sets the stage for a relational approach to the problem of generating an interpersonal transaction.

In a relational approach, a skillful person deploys emotions in such a way that both one’s own and other’s goals are met (as far as possible) without causing resentment or oppositionality. As noted, negotiation may involve relinquishing, in part, what one wants when the transaction began, or it may involve partial withdrawal of one’s goals and may involve an agreement to disagree. We thus propose that any set of emotional competence skills should include the specifically relational skill of negotiation: the ability to effectively settle interactions that involve differences in goals and opinions.

**Language as a Tool for Emotional Communication, Socialization, and Negotiation**

Saarni emphasizes the point that one must be aware of one’s emotional state when engaging in interactions. However, from a relational perspective, what is important about this awareness is how it affects one’s communication of emotion to others and one’s ability to understand others’ emotions. While researchers often emphasize communication via facial expression, language can be an equally important tool. This point is reflected in several of Saarni’s skills of emotion competence (e.g., Skill 3: Ability to Use the Vocabulary of Emotion and Expression and Skill 7: Awareness of Emotion Communication in Relationships). Here, we add to these skills by highlighting additional semantic, pragmatic, prosodic, and semiotic avenues by which the child can be socialized into communicating emotion more clearly.
Consider awareness of communication. If one understands with superior clarity the difference between fear and anger in one’s mind but does not differentiate how one comes across when communicating fear as opposed to anger, then one’s own intrapsychic understanding may be for naught. In other words, what matters in competent interaction with another is how one’s intentions are received by the other person. Emotions can be communicated in many different ways and these many ways are captured in the relational principles of equipotentiality and equifinality. Exemplifying equipotentiality, anger can be conveyed by a loud, staccato tone of voice, but can also be conveyed by a stern fixed gaze and lowering the intensity of the voice while retaining a staccato tempo of commands (e.g., mother to child: I would. . . not. . . touch. . . that cookie. . . if I were you). Equifinality means that the same expressive pattern can convey vastly different emotional meanings in different contexts. The same smile can convey enjoyment in one context while in another context it can convey derision.

Saarni described how parents or other socializing agents can teach children to differentiate among emotions by linking emotion terms to children’s reactions. For example, a parent might say, ‘How sad your toy broke; The dog’s bark is scary; How frustrating to build a tower and have it fall.’ However, we believe that another aspect of language (also touched upon by Saarni, see Skill 7) may have more pervasive impact on emotional competence than semantics alone. We here refer to an aspect of linguistic pragmatics embodied in the mood of a sentence: the interrogative, the imperative, or the declarative. The interrogative mood most often allows the listener to have the maximum ability to control his or her behaviour over a transaction. From a relational perspective, it implies a relationship of equality or deference on the part of the speaker. The imperative implies a hierarchical relationship between speaker and listener and thus distinctly does not allow for the receiver of the message to have control. Under Skill 7
(Awareness of Emotion Communication within Relationships), Saarni discussed how different types of relationships mandate different types of language. To this we add the particular importance of sentence mood and the implications of violating norms of mood usage. Within the context of a relational transaction, one is more likely to feel efficacious when responding to an interrogative statement than in responding to an imperative or even a declarative mood. We would further supplement what Saarni says about the semantics of speech by further emphasizing the pragmatics of speech that enable the other to maintain agency, efficacy, and control of the situation they find themselves in. In sum, there are semantic, pragmatic, and semiotic avenues by which the child can be socialized into communicating emotion more clearly.

**Empathy, Sympathy, Contagion, and Arousal**

For Saarni, a crucial aspect of emotional competence is empathy (see Skill 5: The Capacity for Empathic Involvement). Empathy is a surprisingly complex issue and defies simple definition (Hoffman, 2000). It involves one person, designated a witness, observing the emotional reactions of another person, typically someone in a state of suffering, with the witness reacting either to the emotional expressions of the sufferer or to the plight, the situation that the suffering person is in.

As Hoffman acknowledged, empathy can lead to prosocial action (called sympathy), but it can also lead to avoidance if the perceiver is so aroused by the plight and the expressions of the other that they choose to avoid further interaction with the other. When the arousal level is appropriate, the perceiver can be motivated to engage in sympathetic behaviours to relieve the emotional distress of the other. Ironically, such sympathetic behaviours may backfire. That is, one may accurately perceive another’s emotional distress but have an inaccurate understanding
of what caused the distress or what may effectively relieve it. The problem arises because
emotional expressions and plights can be in the service of multiple goals or motivational states. An example is sadness. Sadness can potentially result from a number of losses, such as loss of physical health, loss of a great opportunity, or loss of a close friend or family member. Therefore, the perceiver can make a correct empathic detection of ‘sadness’ but perform the wrong sympathetic action because he or she does not correctly understand the source of the sadness. A perceiver’s sympathetic intention may also ‘go wrong’ for other reasons. Consider another example depicted in the following vignette.

The scenario involves a husband witnessing his wife’s downcast face, body, gesture, and his knowledge of her being in need to complete a task, yet not having enough time to do so with excellence. In an act that, *prima facie*, seems sympathetic, the husband offered to take the children to and from school and to music and athletic lessons with the goal of relieving the wife’s time pressure. When the husband made this apparent sympathetic proposal, the wife flew into a rage and stated that the husband was taking away from her an opportunity she had to relate to her children and to show them her love. Clearly, the husband’s sensible proposed course of action gravely missed the mark. Although the registration of the emotional signals was correct, the attribution of the cause of the plight proved inappropriate. The husband mistakenly inferred the wrong plight and the wrong motivational state in his wife. This example gives a new meaning to what Paul Bloom (2016) called ‘the dark side of empathy.’ In engaging in sympathetic intent, one may inadvertently choose the wrong action to engage in. How would a relational approach help avoid the fury of the wife?

This difficulty in linking sympathetic action to empathy is generally not recognized in the literature. A previously discussed relational strategy – the use of the interrogative – may be
helpful in making sympathetic intent more effective. For instance, the husband might ask ‘Would it be helpful if I took the children to school and their music lessons, so as to save you time?’ or ‘Is there something else I could do to help give you more time to get your work done?’ Notice, as stated earlier, that the interrogative gives the recipient of the words a sense of control over the actions of the other.

These ideas extend Saarni’s thinking to acknowledge the ambiguity that may occur when one performs any prosocial action devoted to the relief of suffering in the other. We also propose a second revision of empathy as discussed by Saarni. Although Saarni and most others treat empathy exclusively in the context of the witness observing the suffering of another, we believe empathy should be extended to witnessing the positive reactions of another as well (see Aronfreed, 1968). For example, we also may experience empathy when we observe a young couple being married or a grandson getting a trophy for achievement or an athlete winning with a record-attaining performance.

Although not explicitly discussed by Saarni, emotional contagion is closely related to empathy and is one of the most relational concepts relevant to the study of emotional competence, and yet it is one of the least studied. Emotional contagion refers to the generation of a like emotional state (but not necessarily an exact motor mimicry) in the perceiver of an emotional state by an actor. Emotional contagion involves a closer degree of similarity between the expression of the observers and that of the model or the emoter than is observed in empathic reactions. Emotional contagion may contribute to emotional competence because it allows for the interpersonal sharing of emotion related goals and facilitates the development of shared strategies for achieving those goals (e.g., fleeing in a particular direction from a danger identified by another person). At the same time, it may be detrimental to emotional competence if
contagion is limited (e.g., to in-group members) and facilitates emotion-related goals and strategies that do not sufficiently take into account other relevant stakeholders in a situation.

Emotional contagion has been studied in some depth by Hatfield et al. (1994) as well as by Provine (1997). As with all emotional phenomena, it is contextually bound. One context that appears to be important is the intensity of the emotion reaction that elicits the contagion.

Negative emotions appear to be more ‘contagious’ than positive emotions (Barsade, 2002). Some research suggests emotional contagion can be observed in the neonatal nursery (see Sagi & Hoffman, 1976; Simner, 1971), although that effect appears to drop out by five months (Campos et al., 2008). Others have claimed that emotional reactions other than crying can be elicited in the neonate and young infant through imitation (Field, Woodson, Greenberg, & Cohen, 1982; Haviland & Lelwica 1987). However, additional research is needed to substantiate these findings of imitation of discrete emotions in young infants.

Another important concept related to empathy that is touched upon in Saarni’s writing is arousal. Transfer of arousal between persons is a well-known phenomenon that may often occur via the process of contagion. A person's arousal level is likely to affect performance and the development and implementation of strategies related to achieving emotion-related goals. Note that typically a middle level of arousal brings about the best performance, not only in the self but also when the arousal is communicated through contagion in another. Disorganized performance can be elicited by either low levels of arousal or extremely high levels of arousal. How well a person’s skill is organized to begin with – another contextual parameter – interacts with the level of arousal, such that a weakly organized skill is improved maximally by relatively low levels of arousal and a strongly organized skill is improved maximally by high levels of arousal. A well-
organized skill profits more from high levels of arousal, whereas a weakly organized skill profits
more from lower levels of arousal (Cofer & Appley, 1964).

Emotional Internalization

Throughout this article, we have contrasted the intrapsychic approach with the relational
one. In this section, we try to bring the two approaches together while maintaining our emphasis
on relational thinking. In short, we will argue that the tools of emotional competence may first
emerge in the context of social interaction and then be gradually internalized to become
intrapsychic representations (e.g., emotional experiences). However, even in their intrapsychic
form, emotion processes reflect their relational origins.

Our argument has parallels in Vygotsky’s well-known (1937/1987) social relational
type of language and cognitive development and is similar to proposals made by Holodynski
and Friedlmeier (2006) with respect to emotion. Internalization is a phenomenon readily seen in
fiveto seven-year-old children in cognitive settings. Whereas the young child verbalizes aloud
the steps he or she is taking in solving a problem, the older child uses private speech not
accessible to an observer when solving the same or similar problems. In sum, public speech
evident in problem solving becomes unobservable, but is still functional when dealing with a
cognitive task. The process of internalization of public speech into private has not been entirely
specified. (In this connection, the term minimization has been proposed, but that term seems to
beg the question of mechanism). Nevertheless, internalization is seen as an advance in cognitive
development.

The process of internalization of emotion, according to Holodynski (2013) and
Holodynski and Friedlmeier (2006), involves a similar developmental shift from the external
manifestation of emotion (e.g., what is publicly observable) to one where the emotion is playing a role that is purely internal and cannot be observed by any other person. Just as the internalization of cognition facilitates cognitive processing, internalization of emotion facilitates the regulation of emotion. It does so by enabling greater flexibility in the manifestation of emotion. Internalization also doubtlessly speeds up the manifestation of emotion. The process of miniaturization of emotional expression deemed essential to internalization results in responses that are more easily and rapidly manipulated. Damasio (2005) makes a similar point about internalization of physiological feedback accounting for why there has been no success in relating overt physiological feedback in adults to feeling states. The feedback from the periphery of the body is no longer needed after internalization has taken place because the representation of such internal physiological feedback has been organized in the brain.

There is still another advantage to the internalization of emotion. Consider that for the human being, emotion is manifested in a multiplicity of response domains (e.g., facial expression, vocal expression, gesture, instrumental activity, the use of words, physiological responses, and emotional mirroring among others). These domains have little or nothing in common with each other, but they all fall under the rubric of emotion (e.g., fear, anger, joy, disgust, etc.). This creates an epistemological puzzle: How can one create a single category such as emotion from domains that have little or nothing in common? Internalization may facilitate the integration of emotion responses from different domains, such that it allows for replacing facial and vocal expressions with words or physiological reactions. This integration facilitates the regulation of emotion by enabling responses from one domain of emotion (e.g., verbalizations) to substitute for responses from another domain (e.g., instrumental actions).
This function of integrating domains that have little or nothing in common with each other and substituting components of one domain with components from another domain may be facilitated by the cognitive processes of classification described by Eleanor Rosch (Rosch & Mervis, 1975), based on the thinking of the Ludvig Wittgenstein (1953/2002). Rosch and Wittgenstein proposed the concept of ‘family relation’ to explain how phenomena that have few or no features in common can yet be unified into single categories. This thinking has become a staple in cognitive science. The concept of family relation enables someone to understand that a long rope that has no strand in common from beginning to the end still constitutes a single rope. Lack of commonality does not preclude unitary categorization. By analogy, facial, vocal, gestural, verbal, and physiological reactions can be integrated across time and space, even though they have little or nothing in common from beginning to end. To summarize, internalization can make possible the manifestation of emotion in a multiplicity of ways much more than had been possible prior to internalization. Thus, although we can talk about intrapersonal or intrapsychic emotions ontologically, across development the relational stance we have argued for remains fundamental: the intrapersonal emerges from the interpersonal.

Saarni’s writings do not discuss the process of internalization, but throughout her writings she comes close to proposing something analogous to what we have just described. We propose that the process of internalization should emerge from its current state of oblivion: it merits descriptive observation and experimental investigation. We believe internalization to be perhaps one of the most central processes by which the child becomes ‘emotionally adult-like’ and more flexible in manifesting emotion. Ultimately, the internalization process helps make children and adults more emotionally competent. Without doubt, internalization is extremely
relevant for understanding emotional competence and strikes us as eminently consistent with the
scope of Carolyn Saarni’s writings.

Coda

Carolyn Saarni’s theory of emotional competence has made a central contribution by
directing attention to some important functions of emotion in social interaction. We have tried to
point out in what aspects Saarni’s approach can be further developed and made more relational
as she attempted before her untimely death. This article has been intended to supplement and
bring up to date her thinking and enable the field to make greater strides in inculcating in
children appropriate modes of behaviour and implementing smoother courses of emotion-related
action in adults. In so doing, we hope to extend the scope of Saarni’s important contributions and
encourage the generation of new ideas and new procedures for achieving emotional competence.
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