

Emotional Culture: How Society Shapes Your Feelings

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Emotions are universal phenomena; however, they are affected by culture. While some emotions are universal and are experienced in similar ways as a reaction to similar events across all cultures, other emotions show considerable cultural differences in their antecedent events, the way they are experienced, the reactions they provoke and the way they are perceived by the surrounding society.

Cultural studies of emotions

Cultural studies of emotions originated from anthropology, sociology and psychology. The first accounts of emotion from a cultural perspective were ethnographic, and described emotions as idiosyncratic. Researchers such as Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and Jean Briggs described unique emotional phenomena and stressed emotions as culturally determined. For example, Briggs lived among the Utku Inuit and described a society where anger and aggression almost never occur, despite the common western notion that anger is a primitive universal emotion. Although these ethnographic studies point to considerable cultural differences, no general conclusions can be drawn from them regarding what cultural aspects affect emotions, or what level the culture influence. For example, it might be that the same emotions are experienced by all human beings; however the events that evoke them or the reactions they cause differ across cultures.

In the 1970s, the psychologist Paul Ekman showed that despite some idiosyncratic differences, the basic emotions are predominantly biological and thus are universal, expressed and perceived in similar way across all cultures. Those emotions are anger, fear, sadness, happiness and disgust. Now there are 7 universal emotions to be found, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, happiness, and contempt. There is evidence supporting both of these views on emotions. Theories that view emotions as culturally based tend to emphasize aspects related to the social environment: antecedent situations, overt behavior, and culturally specific ways of thinking and talking about emotions. Theories that regard emotions as universal, on the other hand, tend to focus on individual emotion elements such as facial expression.

More recent studies on culture and emotion use social psychology tools in order to find general cultural principles that affect emotions. These studies are often based on the classification of cultures according to certain values, such as the values suggested by Hofstede in *Culture Leadership and Organizations*; or the emotional manipulations observed by Khen Lampert in *Traditions of Compassion*.

Basis of cultural differences

Self construal

The way a person perceives her/himself in relation to the surrounding human environment affects one's emotional world. Collectivistic cultures emphasize the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other, for example by valuing attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them. Thus the self in collectivistic cultures is interdependent, and the individual is focused predominantly on his or her relationship with ingroup members or with the ingroup as a whole. In individualistic cultures, on the other hand, individuals hold an independent view of the self and seek to maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique inner attributes.

Subjective vs. objective emotions

The view of the self as independent in individualistic cultures leads to the perception of emotions as a unique personal experience. The emotional reality is therefore taken as subjective: different people are expected to have different emotional worlds, and to react in different ways to the same experiences. On the contrary, in collectivistic cultures, emotions are experienced out of relationships. They reflect the outer, rather than the inner world and are therefore taken as objective: it is assumed that all people experience the same emotion in a given social situation.

Self and emotions

The construal of the self affect the personal emotional experienced. The need to enhance the self and its independence in individualistic cultures leads to prevalence of emotions that stress the uniqueness and separation of the individual. In collectivistic cultures emotion relate more to the relationships with others and to the fitness of the individual to its social environment. Hence, the same situation might lead to different emotions in collectivistic and in individualistic cultures. In a research held by Mesquita (2001) it was found that achievements related to higher education in Turkey (a collectivistic culture) led to pride as a result of the honor brought to the family, while in Holland (an individualistic culture) similar achievements led to self satisfaction and content.

Cultural norms for emotions

Social norms exist for various aspects of emotions.

General emotional norms: what emotions are considered to be good or bad? Which should be more prevalent?

Feeling rules: how should one feel when encountering certain event (does being criticized lead to anger or embarrassment?)

Display rules: how should one act when experiencing certain emotion (does anger manifest as aggression or withdrawal?)

While individualistic cultures are loose regarding to the display rules (one can express one's feelings as preferred at the moment), norms for positive feeling rules in individualistic cultures are very tight. According to those norms, one should be happy and strive for happiness, and if one is not happy, that means one has failed to achieve life's goals. In collectivistic cultures such as China, the feeling rules are rather loose: there are no strict expectations about how one should generally feel. However, the display rules are much tighter: there are certain expectations about the way one should show one's feelings in a given context. For example, Confucian cultures consider expression of emotions (both positive and negative) as a possible threat to the social order. Hence, the norms are of not-showing personal emotions. One may feel as one pleases, as long as one doesn't express it.

Cultural effects on emotional aspects

Culture and Life Satisfaction

Culture affects the subjective well-being. Well-being includes both general life satisfaction, and the relative balance of positive affect versus negative affect in daily life. Culture directs the attention to different sources of information for making the life satisfaction judgments, thus affecting subjective well-being appraisal.

Individualistic cultures direct attention to inner states and feelings (such as positive or negative affects), while in collectivistic cultures the attention is directed to outer sources (i.e. adhering to social norms or fulfilling one's duties). Indeed, Suh et al. (1998) found that the correlation between life satisfaction and the prevalence of positive affect is higher in individualistic cultures, whereas in collectivistic cultures affect and adhering to norms are equally important for life satisfaction.

Shame and culture in the work context

Shame is an automatic involuntary response to a personal failure attributed to the self. The failure is relative to other's expectations, thus shame is a social emotion that involves self-consciousness. A study examined the effects of shame on salespersons in Holland (an individualistic culture) and the Philippines (a collectivistic culture). They found that bad experiences with clients led to similar shame emotions in both cultures. However, the responses to this shame were opposite: shame caused Dutch salespersons to withdraw and to perform poorer on their job, apparently because they directed most of their mental resources inwards, to defend the self. Filipino salespersons felt shame all the same; however, the shame caused them to put more efforts in building relationship and thus to perform better on the job. Moreover, Filipino salespersons demonstrated more Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB) after experiencing shame. The reason for this is that in collectivistic cultures shame signals that social harmony has been hampered and that the individual should act to rebuild it.

Problems in cross cultural research of emotions

Several problems exist when trying to compare emotions between different cultures.

Translation

Words describing emotions might not be equivalent across cultures. For example, happiness has a buoyant meaning in English. However for the Kipsigis, happiness occurs "when nothing is bothering you" thus has quiet calm meaning.

Some feelings are idiosyncratic, and do not have equivalent terms in other languages: Emotions across cultures and methods. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*.

Abhiman is a Hindi term best described as a feeling of prideful loving anger.

Sukhi is a Hindi term similar to peace and happiness.

Fureai is a Japanese term used when feeling a sense of connectedness to someone else.

Rettokan is a Japanese term that means to feel inferior

Schadenfreude is a German term defined by German philosopher Theodor Adorno as "the largely unanticipated delight in the suffering of another which is cognized as trivial and/or appropriate".

Saudade is a Portuguese term for feeling nostalgia for something probably forever lost.

Clustering

Across cultures, people report that they ideally want to feel more positive than negative. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. All cultures classify emotions as either pleasant or unpleasant, and desirable or undesirable, and most emotions are classified in the same way across all cultures. For example, sadness is classified as an unpleasant undesirable feeling everywhere, and happiness is always a pleasant desirable feeling. The classification of certain other emotions is not identical in all cultures, depending if the emotion is seen as either beneficial or detrimental to a person's goals and well-being and to the society norms. Examples for such differences include:

Pride is sometimes seen as a positive emotion in western cultures (such as the USA), in India it is considered to be a negative emotion.

Love is a purely positive emotion in western cultures, however in China it is seen as closer to sadness and negative loss emotions.