

# Cultural Differences in Emotions

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## Abstract

Do emotions differ across cultures? This essay reviews the markedly different ways in which psychologists have approached this question in the past and discusses directions for the future. We first show how past research has often failed to find cultural differences in emotion by focusing on what emotions people from different cultures can have hypothetically, rather than investigating the emotions they actually have in daily life. Taking a sociocultural perspective, we demonstrate that cultural differences in people's actual emotional practices not only exist but are also meaningful and predictable: Accumulating evidence suggests that people experience more of those emotions that fit their culture's relationship goals and values. We review evidence for two mechanisms that may be behind these cultural differences in emotion—different situational ecologies and different tendencies to interpret (or appraise) emotional events. Finally, we discuss a road map for what lies ahead in the psychological study of cultural differences in emotion. We propose that future research will benefit from a dynamic approach to culture and emotion—an approach that explicitly captures how cultural differences in emotion emerge as a function of people's ongoing social interactions and relationships.

## INTRODUCTION

Are there cultural differences in emotions? This question is both timely and relevant as our societies become increasingly culturally diverse. For instance, we are confronted with the need to interpret our intercultural business partner's emotional expressions or to infer why our East Asian friends did not retaliate but reacted with shame when we got angry with them.

We show how psychologists have approached this question of "cultural differences in emotions" in markedly different ways. First, we discuss how much of the research focused on the emotions people *can* have, thereby mainly discovering cross-cultural similarities. Next, we review more recent studies that focused on the emotions people *actually* have in their daily lives. The latter research revealed more cross-cultural differences than previously assumed, suggesting that culture shapes emotions. Finally, we suggest that future research may benefit from taking a sociodynamic approach to culture

and emotion, by explicitly investigating how cultural differences in emotion emerge as a function of people's ongoing social interactions.

Before outlining the different approaches to cultural differences in emotion, let us look at a real-life example, to which we return throughout our review. Imagine that a colleague at work claims a prestigious task for herself, although this task had initially been assigned to both of you. Both Ayşe, a Turkish girl, and Ann, a Belgian girl, encountered such a situation. How will each of the girls respond emotionally? Will they have similar or different emotions, given their different cultural backgrounds?

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH: "BASIC EMOTION" AND "APPRAISAL" PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN EMOTIONS

### BASIC EMOTION APPROACH

The earliest scientific attempts to address cultural differences in emotion were undertaken by the psychologist Paul Ekman and his colleagues in the 1970s. Ekman showed pictures of posed anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, or happiness faces to both Western and non-Western participants, and asked them to identify these faces by selecting one emotion out of a list of six (the six emotions posed). Across cultures, people correctly identified emotional expressions above chance level (Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969). Subsequent studies used a slightly different design: In one study among members of an isolated group in New Guinea, participants picked the picture of the face that best fitted a story (Ekman & Friesen, 1971). So, for example, if people had just listened to a story similar to the one earlier in this essay on Ann and Ayşe and their colleague, they would be likely to select a picture of an angry face. On the basis of the results from these different studies, Ekman and colleagues concluded that emotions are universal.

In addition, Ekman and colleagues also drew conclusions about the nature of emotions: If emotions were universal, then they should originate from some innate, hard-wired systems in the brain/body, which they called *affect programs*. Cross-cultural similarities in the recognition of faces were taken as an indication that the emotions were similar in other respects as well (e.g., physiology, behavior, subjective experience). The idea was born that there are six discrete "basic emotions" that are universal and hard-wired (Ekman, 1992; Levenson, 2011).

Even if Anne and Ayşe may both experience anger when their colleague claims the task for herself, they may not show their feelings in the same way. It is possible that Anne expresses her anger, whereas Ayşe keeps quiet and just hopes the situation will be over soon. Basic emotions scholars explained

differences in emotional expression by cultural “display rules”—that is, culturally specific rules that indicate whether and when it is appropriate or not to express “true feelings” (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Matsumoto, 1990). The concept of “display rules” served to account for observed cultural differences in emotions, despite the universality in the emotions themselves (Ayşe and Anne both experience anger even if they express it differently).

Many psychology textbooks still introduce their readers to the six basic emotions. Unfortunately, these textbooks often fail to mention that the finding of universality is dependent on the specific paradigm that has been most commonly used in facial recognition studies (e.g., posed pictures, forced choices from the list of six emotion words). When this paradigm is abandoned, and the tasks are made more representative of emotion identification in real-life, the “recognition” rates of emotions drop significantly (e.g., Gendron, Roberson, van der Vyver, & Barrett, 2014; Russell, 1994). For instance, recognition levels drop when spontaneous, rather than posed emotional expressions are used, or when respondents freely label the expression, rather than choosing one emotion out of a list of six.

It is also possible that the emotional expressions of Anne and Ayşe differ because they have different feelings. Ayşe’s angry feelings may be accompanied by feelings of shame, whereas Anne’s anger may not be. If Ann vents her anger and Ayşe does not, this may be because Ayşe shame stops her from venting her anger.

#### APPRAISAL APPROACH

Appraisal theories that grew popular in the 1980s emphasize the central role of people’s *interpretation* of the situation to their experienced emotions, and thus readily account for the finding that people have different emotional experiences in the same situation (Arnold, 1960; Frijda, 1986, Lazarus, 1991). Thus, according to this view, Ann and Ayşe would experience different emotions in response to their colleague’s behavior, because they ascribe different meanings to the situation (i.e., they “appraise” the situation differently).

The appraisal approach led to a new way of investigating cultural similarities and differences in emotion. Researchers set out to test universality in the link between emotions and the corresponding appraisals of a situation. For example, respondents from different cultures would describe a situation in which they felt a particular emotion—say, anger—and then rate that situation on a number of appraisal dimensions, such as novelty, intrinsic pleasantness or goal-conduciveness, responsibility, coping ability, and norm-consistency. These studies revealed few cultural differences in the appraisals associated with specific emotions, which was again taken as support for a universalist

view on emotions (e.g., Roseman, Dhawan, Rettek, Naidu, & Thapa, 1995; Scherer, 1997; Scherer & Wallbott, 1994).

Arguably, these studies were not designed to yield cultural variation in appraisals (e.g., Mesquita, 2001a). In most of these studies, the appraisal dimensions were selected by (Western) researchers, without considering the possibility that other appraisal dimensions might be relevant in the cultures of comparison. In fact, in one study participants from two collectivistic cultures—Turkish and Surinamese—rated their emotions higher on the appraisals of respect and social worth than participants from an individualistic Dutch group (Mesquita, 2001b). Similarly, an interview study on offense situations with (individualistic) American and (collectivistic) Japanese participants revealed that 56% of the Japanese compared to only 5% of the Americans tried to understand or sympathize with the offender (Mesquita *et al.*, 2006). Thus, both studies revealed that, as compared to people from individualist cultures, people from collectivist cultures are more likely to take the perspective of the “other” when appraising an event, suggesting that different cultural contexts may encourage the use of different appraisals.

Applying this perspective to our example of Ann and Ayşe, we would interpret the differences in the girls’ pattern of emotions in terms of their take on the event. While Ann may focus on the way her colleague blocks her goals (experiencing primarily anger), Ayşe may also take the perspective of her colleague and be equally concerned with how she herself may have contributed to the situation and how that affects her social worth (experiencing shame in addition to anger).

## SUMMARY

In sum, traditional research on culture and emotion—whether it was approached from basic emotion theory or appraisal theory—has focused on *universals* in emotion. Much of this research set out to discover the potential for emotion: the emotions people *can* identify, and the appraisals people will make, *given* a particular emotion. In the next section, we review research from a sociocultural approach to emotion. This research has moved the field forward in two different ways: (i) it has shifted focus from the potential for emotion to emotion *practices*—the everyday emotional experiences of people in different cultures, and (ii) it has tried to understand cultural differences in emotions from the respective cultural meanings and practices.

## A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURE AND EMOTION

Cultural contexts differ with respect to their relationship goals (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000). For

example, in most individualistic cultural contexts, as in the United States or Belgium, relationship partners remain autonomous and support each other's independence, among others by helping each other to maintain self-esteem (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kim & Markus, 1999; Rothbaum *et al.*, 2000). In these relationships, it is important that partners assert themselves. Emotions such as pride and anger are valued, because they reflect individual self-worth and personal autonomy, whereas emotions such as shame and guilt may threaten a positive self-view, and therefore be less functional in these relationships.

In contrast, the relationship goals in most collectivistic cultures such as Japan or Turkey are to be interdependent and to adjust to each other's expectations (Heine *et al.*, 1999; Lebra, 1992). Being aware of one's shortcomings is important, because this will help a person adjust behavior, and accommodate the relationship partner (Kitayama, Matsumoto, Markus, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Emotions such as shame promote a person's alignment with others and will thus fit, whereas emotions such as anger might be seen to threaten relational harmony, and therefore be less conducive to interdependent relationship goals.

According to a sociocultural perspective on emotions, the emotions that are conducive to culturally valued relationships are experienced more frequently and intensely than emotions that can disrupt the desired types of relationships. As such, the emotions we actually experience or express in our everyday lives differ from the emotions we *can* experience or express. To illustrate this, we refer to an example from a well-known ethnography about the emotional lives of Utku Inuits (Briggs, 1970): This group of Inuits certainly knows anger—it is a topic of much conversation—but hardly ever experiences it; in fact, they avoid this emotion by all means, because it is thought to disrupt the groups' social harmony. Similarly, the emotions experienced by Anne and Ayşe may differ because of the culturally distinct relationship goals; their emotional practices can probably be understood from their functionality to achieve their culture's common and desirable relationship goals.

#### EMOTIONS FIT CULTURAL CONTEXTS

There are cultural differences in the *emotion norms* and *ideal emotions* that can be understood from each culture's valued ways of relating. For instance, with regard to explicit emotion norms, Eid and Diener (2001) found cultural differences in the desirability of several emotions, both positive and negative: Whereas people from independent cultures (European American and Australian) valued feelings of "pride" more positively than people from interdependent cultures (China and Taiwan), the opposite was true for feelings of "guilt." Similarly, there are systematic differences in people's ideal

emotions—that is, the emotions people “ideally would like to feel” (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). In several studies, Tsai and her colleagues found that European Americans ideally want to feel high-activation positive states, such as excitement and elation, whereas East Asians prefer low-activation positive states, such as peaceful and serene feelings (e.g., Tsai *et al.*, 2006). Follow-up research revealed that the culture’s most ideal emotions prepared the people to act in culturally consistent ways: High-activation positive emotions prepare individuals for influencing others, which is valued in European American contexts; low-activation positive emotions facilitate social adjustment, which is valued in East Asian contexts (Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung, & Yeung, 2007).

Along the same lines, systematic differences have been found in how frequent or intense people actually (and not only ideally) experience emotions. For instance, Kitayama and colleagues investigated the frequency and intensity of different types of emotions in European American and Japanese students using a retrospective self-report study and a diary study (Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006). *Socially disengaging* emotions—such as pride, anger, or irritation—were found to be more frequent and intense in European American than in Japanese cultural contexts, which is consistent with the European American emphasis on autonomy and independence. In contrast, *socially engaging* emotions—such as feeling close, ashamed, guilty or indebted—were found to be more frequent and intense in Japanese than in European American cultural contexts, which is in line with the East Asian emphasis on relatedness and interdependence. Thus, in each cultural context, the emotions that are consistent with relationship ideals tend to be experienced frequently and intensely, while emotions that are inconsistent tend to be experienced rather rarely.

Recent research from our own laboratory has revealed that people’s patterns of simultaneously experienced emotions tend to align with how most other people feel in their culture—probably as a result of shared relationship goals (De Leersnyder, Mesquita, & Kim, 2013). In a series of studies, we compared individuals’ emotional patterns to average patterns of their own versus another culture, and consistently found a better emotional fit with the own culture (De Leersnyder, Kim, & Mesquita, 2014). In addition, immigrants were more similar to their host culture’s emotional patterns to the extent that they had been exposed to relationships in that culture (De Leersnyder, Mesquita, & Kim, 2011, 2013). Thus, if Ayşe immigrated to Belgium and became exposed to Belgian culture, her pattern of emotional experiences (of both anger and shame) would likely come to resemble the emotional pattern of Anne (of experiencing primarily anger). This phenomenon of emotional acculturation provides support for the idea that people’s daily emotional lives are intertwined with their current cultural environments.

## HOW EMOTIONS MAY COME TO FIT CULTURAL CONTEXTS

But what are the mechanisms underlying these cultural differences in people's emotional lives? Do people in different cultures experience different types of situations? Or do they have different emotions in response to the same situations because they have different appraisals and concerns in these situations? In the following section, we review evidence for cultural differences at these two levels: different situations as well as different appraisals or concerns. We show that at each level emotional practices are shaped in accordance with the cultural goals (Mesquita, 2003; Mesquita & Leu, 2007). Of course—and as touched upon earlier—there may also be additional differences in the ways in which people regulate their emotions; yet, we limit our discussion to emotional experiences only (but see De Leersnyder, Boiger, & Mesquita, 2013; Mesquita, De Leersnyder, & Albert, 2014).

## DIFFERENT SITUATIONAL ECOLOGIES

One way in which people's daily emotional lives may come to differ is through systematic differences in the types of (emotional) situations they encounter. For instance, the social lives of European Americans are replete with practices that make individuals feel special and unique, which likely affords happiness and good feelings about one's (independent) self (Nisbett, 2003, Kitayama *et al.*, 1997). In comparison, many Japanese cultural practices promote self-reflection or self-criticism (e.g., *hansei*—a scheduled time to think about areas of self-improvement in school; Lewis, 1995)—practices that rather gives rise to feelings of shame.

Recently, we systematically investigated how the situations that people commonly encounter in their culture may contribute to cultural differences in the experience of anger and shame (Boiger, Mesquita, Uchida, & Barrett, 2013; Boiger, Güngör, Karasawa, & Mesquita, 2014). In these studies, we found that situations that elicit culturally desirable emotions occur frequently—and are thus culturally promoted—and that situations that elicit culturally undesirable emotions occur rarely—and are thus culturally avoided. In one study, American and Japanese students indicated for a number of situations derived from both cultures, how frequently most students they know would encounter these situations, and to what extent they would feel either anger or shame in that situation (Boiger *et al.*, 2013). In line with our expectations, we found that situations were perceived as more likely to occur by European American students, and less likely to occur by Japanese students, to the extent they elicited anger. The opposite picture emerged for shame: Japanese students rated the situations that elicited stronger feelings of shame to be more likely to occur than American students, who perceived them as rather uncommon.

To return to our example of Ann and Ayşe: It is conceivable that Ann's workplace organizes monthly awards for the "most productive employee of the month," increasing employees' level of competition and thus giving Ann more opportunities to feel disappointed, frustrated, or angry when she loses a prestigious task to her colleague. In contrast, it is conceivable that Ayşe's workplace centers around conformity toward the bosses and, therefore, leaves less room for individual competition, making the event that occurred rather rare. Thus, the cultural organization of daily life may play a role in affording the emotions that people experience.

#### DIFFERENT APPRAISALS OR CONCERNS

Another way in which people may come to experience different emotions is through the appraisals they commonly experience and associate with an emotion. In a recent study, we attempted to combine the bottom-up approach of previous, qualitative research (see preceding text; Mesquita *et al.*, 2006) with rigorous statistical testing of a large number of participants (Boiger, De Leersnyder, *et al.*, 2014). We first selected culturally relevant anger and shame situations, appraisals, and action readiness items. Next, we asked students from the United States, Japan, and Belgium to tell us for each situation how they would appraise the situation and react if it happened to them. To put the question of cultural variation in appraisals to the test, we used an inductive statistical technique that identified patterns in participants' responses. Much like a very skilled research assistant who is entirely blind to the hypotheses, the CLASSI model (classification model for individual differences in sequential processes; Ceulemans & Van Mechelen, 2008), identifies types of participants who show a similar response pattern. We then compared these inductively derived types against the cultural origin of the participants.

We found that, across cultures, the most common types were different. For instance, for anger we found the different types of persons that occurred in each culture, but to different extents. One type of person that did not express anger and ruminated about the anger situation, was the most common variety in the Japanese group but not in the other two; another type of anger, which was associated with blaming and aggressive tendencies, described the largest proportion of Americans; yet another type of anger best characterized the Belgian sample. In each culture, the type of person that was most commonly found appeared to fit best with the relationship goals: nonexpressed anger in Japan helps to maintain relational harmony, and assertive anger in the United States serves independence.

Differences in the most important cultural values may underlie some of the differences in appraisals: People will appraise emotional situations according to their meaning with regard to important values. Several studies from our



own laboratory are suggestive in this regard. In two retrospective self-report studies, we asked Belgian students to report recent emotional situations and to indicate *if* and *to what extent* the situation had been relevant to a number of different values. In a next step, we compared the reported relevance of each value during emotional situations with the extent to which it was reported to be a “guiding principle” in the lives of a representative sample of young Belgians in a large survey research (ESS round 5; Norwegian social Science Data Services, 2012). We found that the hierarchy of values during emotional situations was mirrored in the hierarchy of values in daily life (De Leersnyder, Kim, *et al.*, 2014).

Moreover, within emotional situations, each type of values predicted different emotions. When *self-focused* values (personal success, ambition) were most relevant in a situation, socially disengaging emotions (e.g., pride, anger) were more intense than socially engaging emotions (e.g., closeness, shame); when *other-focused* values (e.g., being loyal, helping others) were most relevant, the reverse pattern of emotions was yielded (De Leersnyder, Koval, Kuppens, & Mesquita, 2014). Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional experiences tend to be *about* the most important cultural values: (i) culturally salient values are more readily available as standard of appraisal in emotional situations, and (ii) the different types of values—self-focused versus other-focused—translate into different patterns of emotional experience (more disengaging versus engaging, respectively). Thus, returning to Ann and Ayşe, Ann would be particularly concerned with maintaining her personal autonomy and realizing her potential during the conflict with her colleague, and this might lead her to experience anger, whereas Ayşe would be more concerned with her loyalty toward her colleague, increasing the likelihood of her experiencing shame. In both cases, the different values or concerns are associated with the emotions that are most conducive to the central values (and relationship goals) in the girls’ cultural contexts.

## SUMMARY

A focus on emotional *practices* reveals variation in emotions that can be understood from the culture’s prevalent relationship goals and values: People’s actual emotional experiences thus seem to differ in systematic and predictable ways which previous research failed to grasp.

## ROAD MAP: A SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMIC SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CULTURE AND EMOTIONS

Research to date has failed to study the *processes* by which emotions come to fit culturally valued relationship goals. This is a limitation that future

research should address. Over the past few years, we have developed a sociodynamic perspective that conceives of emotions as dynamic processes that unfold over time, and as a function of the interactions and relationships in which they take place (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Mesquita & Boiger, 2014; Mesquita, 2010). We propose that, in each culture, these interactions and relationships are (imperfectly) aligned with the cultural relationship goals, which set the constraints (meanings, habits, etc.) for any ongoing interaction. Because emotions unfold during interactions and relationships (see also Butler, 2011), the typical emotional processes will differ between cultures. The complexity of emotional processes can be appreciated from our example. Ann's anger may trigger a different emotional response in the colleague than Ayse's expression of both anger and shame. In turn, whether the colleague will get snappy or will react with empathy will be part of the culturally different ways in which interactions unfold, and is likely to impact the unfolding of emotions.

A sociodynamic approach focuses on the typical ways in which emotions unfold during real-life interactions between people in ongoing relationships (such as couples or mother-child relationships). Cultural differences in emotions would be described as differences in the trajectories of emotional interaction. The approach moves away from treating culture as the independent variable and emotion as the dependent variable. Rather, emotion is seen as a process emerging over many interactions.

Some past research has ventured in this direction. For example, Trommsdorff and Kornadt (2003) compared German and Japanese mother-child interactions after a transgression by the child. Japanese mothers initially remained friendly, and responded to disobedience with empathy; in contrast, German mothers attributed ill intentions to their children, and insisted on compliance. When children stuck to their disobedient behaviors, Japanese mothers responded with disappointment, after which both the children and mothers would compromise. Conversely, German mother-child dyads escalated into more angry interactions. In both cases, these different emotional trajectories reflected the culturally valued relationship goals: Japanese dyads prioritized relational harmony over individual desires, whereas the partners of German dyads each asserted their individual needs. Furthermore, the emotional trajectories may have contributed to shape children's future interactions, thereby affording the reproduction of culturally valued relationships.

This research clearly shows how a sociodynamic perspective both documents the role of culture in the shaping of daily emotional experiences, and illuminates how emotional interactions themselves are constitutive of culture. Culture is not only at the heart of emotions; emotions may also be at the heart of culture.

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#### FURTHER READING

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