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Understanding Emotions

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The elements of a cultural approach to emotion

The story of Romanticism, and how it shaped our current conceptions and experience of emotion in the West, illustrates the central theme of this chapter. That theme is that values, concepts, and ideas about the self, as expressed in art forms, rituals, social practices and institutions, shape how members of particular societies experience emotion, and that these matters are not universal. Our beliefs about emotion in the West, that emotions are both irrational and also authentic aspects of the true self, are products of a particular culture: the culture of Europe and North America, which is different, for instance, from the belief systems of the people Catherine Lutz met on Ifaluk.

What does it mean to take a cultural approach to emotion? Most importantly, a cultural approach involves the assumption that emotions are constructed primarily by the processes of culture. Aspects ranging from how emotions are valued to how they are elicited are shaped by culture-specific beliefs and practices, which in turn have been affected by historical and economic forces. The more radical claim is that emotions derive from human meanings which are necessarily cultural. They are like languages or works of art. They are radically different across different cultures, so that the interest in emotions across cultures is an interest in their differences. Your experience of love, for example, might not be comparable to the experience of love of people from a different culture.

A second assumption of some cultural approaches is that emotions can be thought of as roles that people fulfill to play out culture-specific identities and relationships. You'll recall Arlie Hochschild's work in chapter 1 on the emotional role that airline stewardesses are required to perform. Averill (1985) argues that falling in love, like many emotions, acts as a temporary social role. It provides an outline script for the role of "lover" in which it is permissible for other social roles to be suspended, for instance in relation to parents, or to former loved ones. The emotion "falling in love" accomplishes a transition, from one structure of social relationships to another.

Batja Mesquita (2001), a pioneer in the study of emotion and culture, contends that cultural approaches focus on the "practice" of emotion, in contrast to the "potential" for emotion. Potential means asking whether people of different cultures, if put in an appropriate experimental situation, would be capable of showing certain universal emotional responses in terms of experience, expression, and physiology (for relevant studies, see Tsai et al., 2002; Tsai & Levenson, 1997; Tsai, Levenson, & Carstensen, 2000). The answer is probably yes. In contrast, "practice" refers to what actually happens in people's emotional lives. The day-to-day emotional experiences of people from different cultures do differ, often dramatically. For instance, some cultures value or at least permit public expressions of anger (e.g., the Ilongot chronicled by Rosaldo, 1980), while others work hard to suppress all such expressions (e.g., the Utku Inuit people described by Briggs, 1970; see chapter 9). In some cultures (such as ours

in the West), shame is seen as damaging and to be avoided; in more hierarchically structured societies shame seems more valued and positive, in particular when displayed by the lower status person in an interaction (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Doi, 1973; Menon & Shweder, 1994). As Mesquita, Frijda, and Scherer (1997) observed: "people from different cultures appear to be similar in their emotion potential, especially when this potential is described at a higher level of meaning. Yet, despite the similarities in basic elements of emotional life, concrete emotional realities in different cultures may widely vary."

The self-construal approach: independent and interdependent selves

Now that we have discussed some assumptions of cultural approaches to emotion, let's consider three specific approaches that have emerged in psychology's new interest in culture (Peng, Ames, & Knowles, 2001). Consider first the two quotations below. The first is a famous passage from the Declaration of Independence of the United States:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

Now consider this well-known passage from *The Analects*, a book by the great Chinese philosopher Confucius:

> A person of humanity wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others.

The American Declaration of Independence and the *Analects* of Confucius have shaped the lives of billions of people. They reflect radically different ideas. The Declaration of Independence prioritized the rights and freedoms of the individual, and it protected the individual from having those rights and liberties infringed by others. Confucius emphasized the importance of knowing one's place in society, of honoring traditions and roles, and of thinking of others before the self. In Western societies, people are concerned about their individuality, about self-actualizing, about freedom, and self-expression. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." "If you've got it, flaunt it." In Asian cultures, homilies and folk wisdom encourage a markedly different self: "The empty wagon makes the most noise." "The nail that stands up is pounded down."

In an influential way of thinking about these cultural differences, Hazel Markus, Shinobu Kitayama, Harry Triandis and others have characterized two different kinds of **self-construal** (Fiske et al., 1998; Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Triandis, 1989, 1994, 1995). In table 3.1 we summarize two kinds of self-construal.

Table 3.1 Two different self-construals. This table outlines the contrasting elements of the independent, individualist, self, widespread in much of Northern Europe and North America, with the interdependent self, prominent in much of Asia, Africa, and South America

The independent self	The interdependent self
I am autonomous, separate	I am connected to others
I have unique traits and preferences	I fulfill roles and duties
My behavior is caused by internal causes	My behavior is the result of the social context
Who I am is stable across contexts	My identity varies across contexts

Within the independent self-construal, the self is autonomous and separate from others. This type of self-construal is also sometimes referred to as individualism (Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2005). The imperative is to assert one's distinctiveness and independence, and to define the self according to unique traits and preferences. When explaining human behavior, the focus is on internal causes, such as one's own dispositions or preferences, which are thought of as stable across time and social context.

For people with interdependent, or collectivist, self-construals, the self is fundamentally connected with other people. The imperative is to find one's status, identity, and roles within the community and other collectives - for example, families and organizations. In explaining human action the emphasis is on the social context and the situational influences on behavior. One thinks of oneself as embedded within social relationships, roles, and duties, with a self that is ever-changing, shifting, and shaped by different contexts, relationships, and roles.

So how do these culture-specific self-construals lead to cultural variation in emotions? First let us consider anger. In Japan, although it is thought appropriate between people from different social groups, for instance in the tradition of Samurai warfare in feudal Japan, Markus and Kitayama (1991) report that anger is considered highly inappropriate between relations or colleagues. By contrast, anger between Americans who know and like each other is relatively common and accepted. Averill (1982) found in Massachusetts, by means of people keeping diaries structured like questionnaires, that incidents of anger occurred about once a week. Most concerned someone the participant knew and liked (e.g., a spouse, parent, child, friend). Most (63 percent) participants said the reason for their anger was to assert authority or independence, or improve their image.

These culture-related differences may account for how Japanese and American infants respond to the anger expressions of their parents. Miyake et al. (1986) showed interesting toys to American and Japanese infants of 11 months, pairing each toy with the mother's voice expressing joy, anger,

or fear. Measuring the time it took for the infants to start moving toward the toy after hearing the mother's expression, American and Japanese infants were no different in how soon they moved after the sound of their mothers' joyful or fearful voices. Cultural differences were pronounced, however, after their mothers had spoken in an angry voice: American infants started moving toward the toy an average of 18 seconds later, but Japanese infants took significantly longer, an average of 48 seconds, to start moving. Japanese babies were probably more inhibited by their mother's angry expressions because these were rare and highly negative events.

Independent and interdependent self-construals appear to be at work in culture-related differences in the evaluation of a more positive emotion. In Japan there is an emotion *amae*, for which there is no simple translation in English (Ferrari & Koyama, 2002). *Amae* is an emotion of interdependence, arising from a kind of merged togetherness, from comfort in the other person's complete acceptance. It is not that this emotion is unrecognizable in other cultures, or that it lacks universal significance. Rather, it has no approved place in adult Western life. Its original Chinese ideogram was of a breast on which the baby suckled. But as Westerners imagine this emotion, they know they ought to have grown out of it because it seems a bit infantile, a bit regressed. In Japan this is not so: this is an emotion of an accepting relationship within the family, and it is also valued as a mutual dependency between lovers.

The values approach

A second approach seeks to understand cultural differences in emotion in terms of differences in **values**, which refer to broad principles that govern our social behavior. Numerous values govern how we as members of a culture coexist in communities and accomplish tasks like allocating resources, pursuing different goals, fulfilling duties, or punishing moral violations. For example, people from different cultures attach different priorities to values like freedom, individual rights, equality, expressing thoughts and feelings, respect for authority, sexual purity, and the need to fulfill duties and obligations (e.g., Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Rozin et al., 1999; Shweder et al., 1997; Tsai, Simenova, & Watanabe, 2004). As one illustration, the anthropologist Benedict (1946) explained, in a book written in the last year of World War II and commissioned by the US Government to help understand the Japanese who were the adversaries, that to be sincere in America is to act in accord with one's innermost emotions. In Japan, the concept usually translated as sincerity, *makoto*, means something different: doing a social duty not according to inner feelings, but doing it completely, with expertise, without inner conflict.

Members of cultures that differ in the importance of specific values should experience different **elicitors** of emotions related to that value. In cultures where a particular value is prioritized, say respect for hierarchy, then

one should expect emotions related to that value. So one would expect embarrassment or shame to be more readily elicited and more commonly experienced in Japan, for instance, than in America. We have already suggested that in more hierarchical cultures status- or honor-related emotions like embarrassment, shame, and pride are more common and elaborated. Now consider a rather striking observation about jealousy (Salovey, 1991; Van Sommers, 1988). Elicitors of jealousy that seem obvious in one culture do not seem to evoke jealousy in another, and these differences stem from cultural differences in sexual values. In the West, jealousy tends to be felt when the sexual attention of a primary partner turns toward someone else (Buss et al., 1992; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Harris, 2003; Harris & Christenfeld, 1996). As Hupka (1991) points out, in Western society monogamy, which leads to the two-parent family, is a cherished value, and a key to establishing one's adult status, economic security, housing, rearing of children, adult companionship, and sex. A sexual interloper threatens this value, and the accompanying social structure, so in Western society such a person is jealously feared and hated.

In some other, more clan-based, societies, however, the self is more interdependent, collective, extended. Cooperative effort supports everyone including the elderly, child-rearing is distributed among several people, adult companionship derives from many relatives, and monogamy is not so highly cherished. In some such societies, extramarital recreational sex is customary. Hupka (1991) discusses how when at the beginning of this century the Todas of India were visited by anthropologists, they were found to live in a society of this kind. They were not jealous when marriage partners had lovers from within their social group. Instead, Toda men did become jealous if their wives had intercourse with a non-Toda man. Interestingly Hupka says they also became distressed in a similar way if a second-born son got married before the first-born. He suggests that the core cultural value of jealousy is invoked when something highly valued, which has been hard to achieve, is threatened by an interloper. For Toda men, a great deal is invested in their first-born children, and so if this structure is threatened, distressing emotions with characteristics similar to jealousy can occur.

Heelas (1986) has proposed that in some cultures a particular emotion is recognized, has special names, and is the subject of social discussion. Such emotions are **hypercognized** (Levy, 1984). They are emphasized in the language of the culture. By contrast, certain emotions seem little noticed in some cultures; they are not conceptualized or commented upon. They are **hypocognized**. For example, in China it is important to act with honor, to fulfill one's place within a community and its many hierarchies, and to avoid losing face. Shame is an emotion that closely connects to these values. It reinforces social hierarchies, and signals respect for those in power. In China shame is hypercognized: the Chinese language has at least 113 words related to the concept of shame (Li, Wang, & Fischer, 2004). Insofar as Western culture is becoming shameless, perhaps in the West shame is on its way to being hypocognized.

The epistemological approach

Epistemologies are ways of knowing. They refer to knowledge structures and theories that guide patterns of thought, affect, and behavior in domain-specific ways (Peng, Ames, & Knowles, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Kaiping Peng and Richard Nisbett have characterized the epistemologies of East Asians and Western Europeans (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). East Asians are guided in their knowledge and thought by a holistic, dialectical system of thought that has its roots in the great intellectual traditions of East Asia, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. This epistemology is based on five principles: (1) change so that nothing is static; (2) contradiction, that opposites often are consistent and both true; (3) covariation, so that events are interrelated in complex fields or systems; (4) compromise, so that truth may lie in the synthesis of opposites; and (5) context, so that events occur not alone but in contexts.

In an imaginative demonstration, Peng and Nisbett (1999) tested the hypothesis that Asians should find greater meaning, and even pleasure, in contradictory ideas than Americans They first found that Chinese proverbs involved more contradiction (e.g., "half humble is half proud") than American proverbs, which involved more one-sided, singular truths ("half a loaf is better than none"). Then Chinese and American students were presented with a set of proverbs. Chinese students found contradictory, dialectical proverbs to be more comprehensible, likeable, and usable. US students preferred the more linear proverbs.

One would expect that as compared with Americans, East Asians might experience greater **emotional complexity**: the simultaneous experience of contradictory emotions, such as happiness and sadness, compassion and contempt, or anger and love. Perhaps East Asians would be more willing to endorse multiple, even contradictory, meanings for the complex social situations and as a result, experience contradictory emotions. By contrast, Westerners might focus more on singular meanings of a situation, and experience simpler emotions.

Recent findings lend credence to this possibility. Thus, in **experience sampling** studies, in which students were beeped electronically and reported on their current emotions, as well as in laboratory studies, Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean participants were more likely than Western European students to report feeling positive and negative emotion in the particular moment (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002). Western Europeans often showed negative correlations in their reports of positive and negative emotion: the more they reported of one kind of emotion, say happiness, the less they reported of its opposite, say sadness. Westerners strive to maximize positive emotion and minimize negative emotion, whereas Asians seek a balanced emotional state (Kitayama et al., 2000).

Approaches to studying cultural influences on emotion

Cross-cultural comparisons

Do cultures differ with respect to elicitors of emotions? Here researchers have given participants from different cultures emotion terms, like anger or fear, and asked them to provide situations that would produce each kind of emotion (e.g., Boucher & Brandt, 1981). Or they have provided situations and asked participants to report what emotions they might feel. Or they have given members of different cultures pictures of facial expressions of different emotions, and asked them to describe an event that would produce the emotion in the photo (Haidt & Keltner, 1999).

While there are universals in the elicitors of emotion, which we examine more closely in chapter 7, cultures have been found to differ in their emotional responses according to whether the elicitors of emotion are socially "engaging" and involve other people, or "disengaging" so that they primarily involve the self. It has been found that members of interdependent cultures such as Japanese, Surinamese, and Turkish tend to experience positive emotions (calm, elation) in socially engaging situations, for example, in informal exchanges with friends (Kitayama, Karasawa, & Mesquita, 2003; see also Mesquita, 2001). By contrast, Americans and Dutch people are more likely to experience positive emotions in relatively disengaged situations, for example in activities oriented toward personal accomplishments (see also Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Haidt & Keltner, 1999).

A further cultural difference to emerge centers upon the notion of **display rules**, which are thought to influence how and to whom it is appropriate to express different emotions. We saw at the start of this chapter, for example, that on the Pacific island of Ifaluk it is not appropriate to express too much happiness. More generally, people can de-intensify their emotional expression, for example suppressing the urge to laugh when someone is pompous at a public meeting. People can also intensify their expression, for example smiling more appreciatively upon hearing a boss tell the same story for yet another time.

Across cultures, people vary in how they modulate their expression of emotion. For example, in many Asian cultures it is inappropriate to speak of personal accomplishments, and in these cultures individuals may de-intensify their expressions of pleasure at personal success. Among the Chewong, a small group of aboriginal hunters and shifting cultivators in Malaysia, prohibitions exist against the expression of all emotions with the exception of fear and shyness (Howell, 1981). The Chewong have explicit behavioral rules about what to do and what not to do in different circumstances. Penalties of severe bodily ills are believed to occur if rules are broken. The result is that the Chewong are emotionally inexpressive with each other. "They rarely use gestures of any kind, and their faces register little change as they speak and listen" (pp. 134-5). This raises the interesting question

of whether the Chewong actually experience emotions they seem to avoid expressing.

The original demonstration of display rules is an experiment by Ekman and Friesen (Ekman, 1972; Friesen, 1972). Participants were 25 American and 25 Japanese males, each in his own country. In Phase 1 participants were alone and watched film clips of a canoe trip, a ritual circumcision, a suction-aided delivery of a baby, and nasal sinus surgery. In Phase 2 a graduate student from the participant's own society entered the room, and interviewed the participant briefly about his experience while viewing the clips. In Phase 3, the interviewer remained, sitting with his back toward the screen and facing the subject, while the very unpleasant clip of nasal surgery was replayed and the interviewer asked the participant: "Tell me how you feel right now as you look at the film." In each phase, participants' facial expressions were videotaped, although they did not know this.

The results were that when they were alone, in Phase 1, American and Japanese participants displayed similar facial expressions of fear and disgust at almost exactly the same times in the films. But in Phase 3, facing the interviewer and the screen, the Japanese participants smiled more and inhibited their negative expressions more than the Americans. When viewed in slow motion, the videotapes showed Japanese participants beginning to make a facial expression of fear or disgust, but then masking it with a polite smile. The conclusions in terms of display rules have aroused controversy, however. Fridlund (1994) is critical of the concept of display rules, and prefers the explanation that the Japanese were more polite, and tended to look more, and smile at, the interviewer rather than concentrate on the film.