

Cultural Differences in the Overtness and Covertness of Positive and Negative Emotion

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Introduction

Affect Display and Display Rules

The idea of display rules was first introduced by Ekman and Frieson (1969), who defined them as scripts for controlling affect displays. This included three forms of affect regulation: savoring, dampening, or maintaining. The trends of these rules vary between cultures, depending on what is defined as acceptable or unacceptable expression (Matsumoto, Kasri, & Kookan, 1999).

Emotion Preferences of Americans (Individualistic)

- Prevailing script of maximizing positive emotion and minimizing negative emotion (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000).
- Individuals encouraged to overtly express feeling and exaggerate its strength (Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, & Krupp, 1998).
- Values and endorses uniqueness and separateness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).
- “The squeaky wheel gets the grease” (Goleman, 1990).

Emotion Preferences of East Asians (Collectivistic)

- Values the group above the individual.
- Promotes harmony and unity and suppresses individual assertion (Noon & Lewis, 1992).
- Emotion expression plays a critical role in the relationship between the self and the group, so affect displays are highly controlled (Mesquita, 2001).
- Seek a balance between positive and negative emotion (Peng & Nisbett, 1999).
- Less supportive of overt emotion expression when compared to Americans (Matsumoto, 1990; Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, & Krupp, 1998).
- “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down” (Goleman, 1990).

Hypotheses

- **(H1)** In both cultures, negative emotions will occur when alone more often than positive emotions.
- **(H2a)** Americans will hide negative emotions significantly more than positive emotions.
- **(H2b)** Singaporeans will hide positive emotions more frequently than Americans.
- **(H3a)** Americans will discuss positive emotions with others significantly more than negative emotions.
- **(H3b)** Singaporeans will discuss positive emotions with others significantly less than Americans.
- **(H3c)** Americans will discuss emotional experiences more often than Singaporeans.

Method

Participants

This study consisted of volunteer participants from ECU (a total of 446 students) and from Singapore Management University (a total of 43 students). These students were able to access the study using online survey software.

The Surveys

- Section 1: memory recall of six recent memories, three negative and three positive, in a counterbalanced order (see Jordan et al, 2011). The survey asked for the intensity of the emotion, who was present, whether or not they hid their emotion, and with whom they spoke about it afterwards.
- Section 2: 12 question survey designed for this study, The Perceptions of Emotional Behavior Survey, gauges perceptions of emotional behavior.
- Section 3: Satisfaction with Life Survey (SWLS), the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLALS).

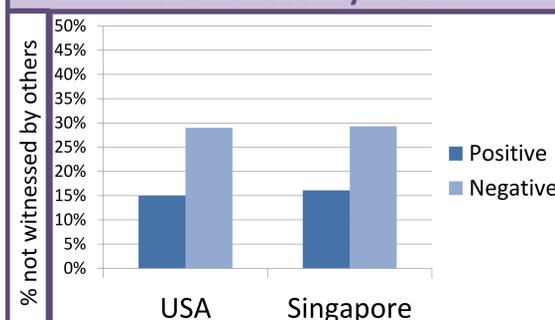
Discussion

Participants of both cultures reported that negative experiences occur approximately twice as often in solitude than do positive experiences, indicating cultural consistency regarding the overtness of positive and negative emotional experiences. Yet we see considerable differences in the way these emotional experiences are handled. Data analysis showed that Singaporeans dampen positive emotions more than twice as often as Americans do.

We also found significant differences in *with whom* emotional experiences are shared. American participants were significantly more likely to share their emotional experiences with their family members than Singaporeans. This finding was indicated by the responses to the family-oriented question from the Perceptions of Emotional Behavior survey: “I feel comfortable sharing my worries and complaints with my family.”

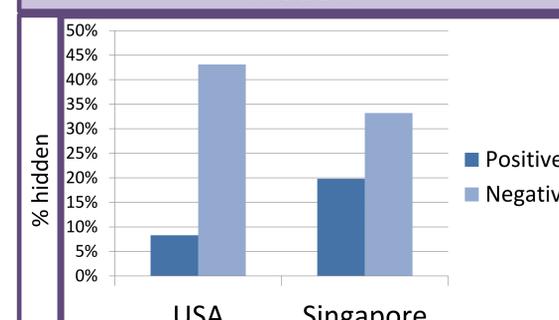
Overall, the study found strong differences in the display and treatment of emotional experiences, which were consistent with the display rules of each country.

Not witnessed by others



Cross-cultural *t*-tests yielded no significant differences between USA ($M = .39, SD = .96$) and SING ($M = .35, SD = .97$) in the percentage of positive and negative experiences witnessed (or not witnessed) by others; $t(487) = -.269, p > .05$.

Hidden



Cross-cultural *t*-tests suggest USA ($M = 1.07, SD = .958$) are more likely than SING ($M = .72, SD = .797$) to hide negative emotions from others, $t(482) = 2.299, p < .05$.

Not discussed after the event



Cross-cultural *t*-tests yielded no significant differences between USA ($M = .23, SD = 1.02$) and SING ($M = .14, SD = 1.14$) in the percentage of positive and negative emotions discussed (or not discussed) with others; $t(487) = .537, p > .05$.

Results

USA: Negative emotions occur in solitude 29% of the time; positive emotions occur in solitude 15% of the time; $t(445) = 8.58, p < .05$.

SING: Negative emotions occur in solitude 29.3% of the time; positive emotions occur in solitude 16.1% of the time; $t(42) = 2.34, p < .05$.

*The Perceptions of Emotional Behavior Survey

Singaporeans agreed significantly more than Americans did with statements gauging their concern for their emotion's impact on the peer group: “If I share my worries, I worry that I will burden others with my sadness” (USA: $M=4.43, SD=1.66$; SING: $M=5.44, SD=1.26$; $t(486) = -3.875, p < .05$) and “If I express my happiness for my successes, I worry that I may make others feel badly about themselves,” (USA: $M=4.1, SD=1.65$; SING: $M=4.9, S=1.4, t(486) = -3.212, p < .05$

Singaporeans ($M=4.98, SD = 1.33$) also agreed significantly more than Americans ($M=4.12, SD = 1.69$) did with the statement, “I don't mind failure, as long as I learned something from it,” $t(487) = -3.232, p < .05$

Americans ($M=5.30, SD = 1.58$) agreed significantly more than Singaporeans ($M=4.47, SD -1.79$) did with the statement, “I feel comfortable sharing my worries and complaints with my family,” $t(486) = 3.252, p < .05$

The SWLS, no significant differences: USA ($M = 4.64, SD = .812$) and SING ($M = 4.53, SD = .79$), $t(486) = .896, p > .05$.

The SHS, no significant differences: USA ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.14$) and SING ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.10$), $t(389) = 1.52, p > .05$.

The UCLALS, *t* test indicated that SING ($M = 2.4, SD = .50$) reported higher levels of loneliness than USA ($M = 2.64, SD = .63$); $t(468) = 2.39, p < .05$

USA: Negative emotions are hidden 43.1% of the time; positive emotions are hidden 8.3% of the time; $t(443) = 17.09, p < .05$.

SING: Negative emotions are hidden 33.2% of the time; positive emotions are hidden 19.8% of the time; $t(42) = 4.476, p < .05$.

USA: Negative experiences were not discussed with others more often (27.8% of the time) than positive experiences were not discussed with others (20.2% of the time), $t(445) = 4.70, p < .05$.

SING: Negative experiences and positive experiences did not differ significantly in how frequently they were discussed with others (negative, 34.9% of the time; positive 30.2% of the time), $p > .05$.

*USA more likely to talk to family, $t(487) = 4.192, p < .05$

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