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

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that positive emotions are more often seen, less often hidden, and more often discussed than negative emotions in Western culture. These results support the Western preference towards the maximization of positive emotion. Studies also show that East Asian culture places less emphasis on positive emotion, and instead prefers the constructive value of negative emotion. This study hypothesized that, just as the maximization of positive emotion is demonstrated through affect display in Americans, so too will the importance of group harmony in East Asians. This would manifest itself in a more similarities between the display of positive and negative emotion, as well as in the discussion of positive and negative emotional experiences. Research has also suggested that the perceived happiness of others affects our own view of what is a “normal” level of happiness – specifically, that Americans perceive others to be happier than they really are, which in turn makes them less happy. This study begins to explore whether or not the same notion exists in East Asian culture.

Keywords: culture, emotion, emotion regulation, display rules, affect display, life satisfaction

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"Of all the things you wear, you expression is the most important." – Janet Lane

Imagine, this morning, you woke up with a terrible headache. You rolled over to find that your alarm didn't go off, and thus spent the next seven minutes in a frenzy trying to ready yourself for work. As you race to work, you find yourself hitting every red light, and it feels like nothing is going right. As you stride to the front doors, 20 minutes late, you take a deep breath, put on a smile, and walk inside. There, you find everyone working, glancing up briefly to smile a cheerful, "Good morning!"

At first look, it seems like no one else could have possibly had the kind of morning you just did. Their smiles and chatter about last night's football game pose a striking difference to the minor panic you feel in your chest. However, as you compose yourself and chip in about "that Hail Mary pass," you realize you're in the clear. No one has detected anything wrong, and you can go on laughing with your coworkers. It's a good thing, too – everybody knows that work just isn't the place to express your negative emotions.

Display Rules and Emotion Regulation

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: up-regulation, known as *savoring* or enhancing; down-regulation, known as *dampening* or inhibiting; and the maintenance of emotional expression (Ekman & Frieson, 1969; Miyamoto & Ma, 2011; Gross, 1998). Research shows that we learn display rules at a very young age, and in doing so develop emotional competence (Ekman & Frieson, 1969; Saarni, 1990). The implementation of display rules is a functional process, used to increase the frequency of helpful emotions and decrease the frequency of harmful ones (Frijda, 1986).

However, this is not to say that we will always enhance our positive emotions and mask our negative ones. The beneficial or detrimental implication of any given emotion is a culturally-dependent construct (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). As individuals, we use emotion regulation to satisfy the display rules of the environment (Frijda, 1986; Gordon, 1989). These rules vary between cultures, depending on what is defined as acceptable or unacceptable expression (Matsumoto, Kasri, & Kooken, 1999).

Emotion Preferences of Western Culture

In Western culture, identified as *individualistic*, the prevailing script is the maximization of positive emotion and the minimization of negative emotion (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). As Larsen (2000) put it, “we generally want to feel good.” Individuals are encouraged to overtly express feeling, and to exaggerate its strength (Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, & Krupp, 1998). Emotions are viewed as significant personal events, and their expression is the individual’s prerogative (Safdar, Friedlmeier, & Matsumoto 2009). An individualistic culture values and endorses uniqueness and separateness, which sets the stage for outward emotional expression (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In Western Culture, “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” (Goleman, 1990).

Emotion Preferences of East Asians

When compared to an individualistic mindset, *collectivistic* cultures prove much more covert. Collectivistic cultures value the group above the individual. They promote harmony and unity while suppressing individual assertion (Noon & Lewis, 1992). Because emotion expression plays a critical role in the relationship between the self and the group, affect displays are highly controlled (Mesquita, 2001). They seek to find the “middle way,” creating a balance between positive and negative emotion, acknowledging the pros and cons of each. (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). When compared to Americans, Japanese participants are much less supportive of overt emotional expression, especially positive affect (Matsumoto, 1990; Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, & Krupp, 1998). In East Asian culture, “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down” (Goleman, 1990).

Cultural Trends of Well-being

If positive emotions are considered more desirable, and negative emotions considered less desirable in Western versus East Asian cultures (Eid & Diener, 2001), what implications does that make towards their happiness and well-being? Research has shown that individuals of East Asian culture consistently report lower subjective well-being, as well as lower frequency and intensity of positive affect when compared to Westerners (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Eid & Diener, 2001). This might suggest that East Asians experience less happiness than Westerners. However, Oishi (2002) noted that East Asians do not *experience* less happiness, but instead *recall* less happiness. Further research by Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, and Norasakkunkit (1997) suggests that, while positive emotions are viewed as constructive to the individualistic self, negative emotions are viewed as constructive to the collectivistic self. This means that each emotion is important to either culture in different ways, and each emotion is both treated and viewed differently.

Because emotions have different implications for each culture, the scripts by which they are displayed vary, as well. East Asians place a greater value on negative emotion, encourage the inhibition of affect display, and seek balance between positive and negative emotion; Westerners, on the other hand, shy away from negativity, maximize positivity, and encourage open expression. Therefore, if we look around at our peers to determine how much happiness they experience – how much happiness is “normal” – what exactly are we seeing? What are they allowing us to see?

Overview of the Present Study and Hypotheses

The goals of the study were threefold: firstly, we sought to explore affect display in Western culture. We hypothesized that, amongst American college students, positive emotions are more often seen and discussed, and less often hidden from others than negative emotions (see Jordan et al., 2011). These hypotheses align with the Western script of the maximization of positive emotion and the minimization of negative emotion – namely, that Westerners prefer to express happiness and hide negativity. In our Singaporean sample, we hypothesized that the East Asian students would show greater levels of inhibited emotion, and greater similarities in the overtness of positive and negative emotions. We drew these hypotheses from the Eastern cultural script that individual assertion should be suppressed, as well as the Eastern belief in the balance of positive and negative emotions. Such a balance should manifest itself in similar treatment of positive and negative emotional experiences – namely, how they are regulated and discussed. Lastly, we aimed to support current research suggesting that East Asians score lower on subjective happiness and life satisfaction scales. Previous research has suggested that overestimation of the happiness in others may predict a decrease in subjective well-being (Jordan et al, 2011). While we cannot draw any conclusions given our limited data, we hope that our results will shed further light on the factors associated with cultural differences in life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were solicited from a pool of Introductory Psychology students using an online sign-up process. This study consisted of volunteer participants, dichotomized into two groups: students from a large east coast university (a total of 446 students), and students from a small Singaporean university (a total of 43 students). These students were able to access the study using online survey software.

Disqualifiers. The original data from the US sample included 647 students, 201 of whom were disqualified on account of their nation of birth, or failure to respond to excessive questions (i.e. failure to respond to two or more items in each section, or skipping 3 or more items in a single section). The original data from the Singaporean sample included 56 students, 13 of whom were disqualified for the same reasons.

Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire which consisted of three main sections: the first section examined the use of the participants' emotion regulation by means of recalling six recent memories, three negative and three positive, in a counterbalanced order (see Jordan et al., 2011). After being assigned to one of the two conditions, participants were prompted with the following text:

> Please consider, for a moment, the last 2 weeks of your life.
> When have you felt good?
> When have you felt bad?
>
> Do any particular events stand out in your mind? Please take a few moments to recall these events.
> What happened?
> How did you feel?
>
> Once you have come up with three negative experiences and three positive experiences, please continue to the next page.

The participants were then taken to one of two conditions: Condition 1 asked them for 3 negative experiences first, followed by 3 positive experiences; Condition 2 reversed the order. In either case, the question was presented as follows:

> In each of the three boxes provided, please describe 3 distinct times (one per box) you have recently experienced [negative/positive] emotions.

After each description, participants were then asked 1) to rank the intensity of the experience on a response scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very intense*), 2) how many people could directly observe them when they were experiencing the emotion, 3) what their relationships were with these observers, 4) whether or not they tried to hide their emotions, 5) how many people, not present during the emotional experience itself, with whom they spoke about it afterwards, and 6) what their relationships were with these people. The available responses for #2 and #5 were limited to “None” or “One or more.” The available responses to #3 and #6 were categorized into 5 groups: “Strangers (Totally unknown)”, “Acquaintances (Somewhat known)”, “Friends”, “Family”, and the option “No one witnessed it.” Participants were able to select more than one response.

Upon completion of the Experience Recall section of the questionnaire, participants were given a 12-question survey, designed for this study, to gauge their perceptions of their own emotional behavior. The participants were asked to indicate to what degree they agreed or disagreed with a statement, using a 1-7 Likert scale (ranging from “*Strongly Disagree*” to “*Strongly Agree*”). The questions were written, though not presented, in corresponding pairs, allowing for paired analysis. Sample items and their pairings are included below:

> “I sometimes have trouble containing my emotion.”
> “When good things happen, I cannot help but to smile about them.”
> “If I express happiness for my successes, I worry that I may make other feel badly about themselves.”
> “If I share my worries, I worry that I will burden others with my sadness.”

The final section of the study consisted of three different surveys: select items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLALS), the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1997; Diener et al., 1985). We implemented these surveys to support research regarding the subjective happiness and well-being of East Asians.

Results

In analyzing the data from the Experience Recall, we looked at three major hypotheses: 1) Across both cultures, negative emotions occur more often in solitude than do positive experiences (H1), 2) Americans will inhibit negative emotions significantly more than positive emotions (H2a), and Singaporeans will show similar inhibition of positive and negative emotions (H2b), and 3) Americans will more often discuss positive emotional experiences than negative emotional experiences (H3a), and Singaporeans will show similar discussion practices for positive and negative emotional experiences (H3b), though they will overall discuss emotions less often than Americans (H3c).

(H1) The Context of Positive and Negative Emotions

For both the American and Singaporean samples, negative emotions occurred alone (without witnesses) approximately twice as often as positive emotions. In our American sample, 29% of negative experiences occurred in solitude, whereas 15% of positive experiences did so. When these items were treated as a whole in a One-Sample *T* Test (positive emotions in the presence of others minus negative emotions in the presence of others *per participant*), positive emotions occurred significantly more often around others than did negative emotions, $t(445) = 8.58$, $p < .05$. In our Singaporean sample, the results were similar: 29.3% and 16.1%, respectively; $t(42) = 2.34$, $p < .05$. An Independent-Samples *T* test showed no significant cultural differences between the results of Americans and Singaporeans.

(H2a and H2b) The Regulation of Positive and Negative Emotions

When it came to hiding emotions, both American and Singaporean participants reported inhibiting negative emotions more often than positive emotions. American participants reported hiding negative emotions 43.1% of the time and positive emotions only 8.3% of the time. When these items were treated as a whole in a One-Sample *T* test, negative emotions were hidden significantly more often than positive emotions amongst Americans, $t(443) = 17.09$, $p < .05$. On the other hand, Singaporeans reported hiding negative emotions 33.2% of the time and positive emotions 19.8% of the time; when these items were treated as a whole in a One-Sample *T* test, negative emotions were hidden significantly more often than positive emotions, $t(42) = 4.476$, $p < .05$. In a cross-cultural comparison, an Independent-Samples *T* test showed that Americans are significantly more likely to inhibit negative emotions than Singaporeans, $t(482) = 2.299$, $p < .05$

(H3a, H3b, and H3c) The Discussion of Positive and Negative Emotions

Lastly, we found that Americans were more likely to talk about their positive emotional experiences than their negative emotional experiences, and overall more likely to talk about all emotional experiences than Singaporeans: while 27.8% of negative experiences were not discussed afterwards, 20.2% of positive experiences were not discussed afterwards. When treated as a whole in a One-Sample *T* test, Americans discussed positive emotional events significantly more than negative emotional events, $t(445) = 4.70$, $p < .05$. Singaporeans, on the other hand, reported that 34.9% of negative experiences were not discussed after the event, and 30.2% of positive experiences were not discussed after the event; a One-Sample *T* test showed no significant difference in the discussion of positive and negative emotions amongst Singaporeans.

An Independent-Samples *T* test showed no significant differences between Americans and Singaporeans in the discussion of positive and negative emotion. However, further analysis using an Independent Samples *T* test showed that Americans were significantly more likely than Singaporeans to talk about both positive and negative emotional experiences with their families, $p < .05$.

Perceptions of Emotional Behavior Survey

In the 12-item Perceptions of Emotional Behavior survey, four items produced significant results. Both questions asking about the participant's concern for their emotion's effect on their peers – "If I share my worries, I worry that I will burden others with my sadness" and "If I express my happiness for my successes, I worry that I may make others feel badly about themselves" - yielded significant differences between Americans and Singaporeans. Singaporeans reported agreeing much more with these statements than did Americans ($p < .05$). Additionally, Singaporeans reported to agree more with the statement "I don't mind failure, as long as I learned something from it" than did Americans ($p < .05$). However, Americans indicated greater agreement with the statement "I feel comfortable sharing my worries and complaints with my family" than did Singaporeans ($p < .05$.) This finding supports the results attained from the Emotion Recall section. For the means and standard deviations of the items on the Perceptions of Emotional Behavior Survey, please see Appendix A.

The University of California at Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLALS), the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

In the final section, the individual items from each survey – the UCLALS, the SHS, and the SWLS – were combined together and treated as three distinct variables. When treated as a whole, the cultural comparison of the SHS and SWLS responses did not produce significant results. However, using an Independent-Samples *T* test on the UCLALS, Singaporeans did report significantly higher levels of loneliness than did Americans, $t(468) = 2.39$, $p < .05$. Means and standard deviations of the UCLALS can be found in Appendix B.

Discussion

Participants of both cultures reported that negative experiences occur approximately twice as often in solitude than do positive experiences. Therefore, we see cultural consistency regarding the overtness of positive and negative emotional experiences. However, 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. Considering the Western script of maximizing positive emotion, we can see why we see so few instances of inhibited positive emotion in Americans (8%). We see a much higher value (19.8%) amongst Singaporeans. On the other hand, we found that Americans inhibited the expression of negative emotion more often than Singaporeans: 43.1% and 33.2%, respectively.

These results can be explained by both current research and data retrieved from the Perceptions of Emotional Behavior survey. Studies show that collectivistic cultures discourage overt positive emotional expression; in the Perceptions of Emotional Behavior survey, we found that Singaporeans scored significantly higher on questions dealing with the effect of personal emotion on their peer group: “If I share my worries, I worry that I will burden other with my sadness,” $t(486) = -3.88$, $p < .05$; and “If I express my happiness for my successes, I worry that I may make others feel badly about themselves,” $t(486) = -3.21$, $p < .05$. These findings suggest that East Asians may inhibit overt positive expression because of their concern for its influence on their peer group. This, however, does not explain the higher frequency of inhibited negative emotions in Americans versus Singaporeans. If Americans support open emotional expression, and Singaporeans support inhibition of emotion, one might think that Singaporeans would show more instances of hidden negative emotion. However, there are more factors to consider than simply the tendencies of inhibition. Singaporeans place a greater value on negative emotion, whereas Americans reject it. We might then consider that the Singaporean support of negative emotion (or perhaps the American aversion to negative expression) has a stronger effect on affect display than their support of overall stoicism.

Lastly, the study produced interesting results regarding cultural tendencies of discussing emotional experiences. As predicted, Singaporeans showed greater similarities between the discussion of positive and negative emotions (30.2% and 34.9% not discussed, respectively) than did Americans (20.2% and 27.8% not discussed, respectively). This data is supported by the collectivistic desire to seek balance between positive and negative emotion, and the individualistic tendency to maximize positive emotion. In addition, we found significant differences in *with whom* these experiences were shared. American participants were significantly more likely to share their emotional experiences with their family members than Singaporeans. This finding was corroborated 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."

In terms of the UCLALS, the SWLS, and the SHS, the lack of significant results was surprising. An overwhelming amount of research has found that East Asians score significantly lower in terms of subjective happiness, and yet our results did not support that claim. This could be due to a variety of reasons, most likely the small sample size of students. However, the significantly low scores on the UCLALS do raise the question: do Singaporeans perceive themselves to be lonelier than Americans? If so, could this be due to the cultural script supporting emotional inhibition? The researchers hope to find answers to these questions upon further study.

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Appendix A

Perceptions of Emotional Behavior: Group Statistics

Question	Culture	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel comfortable sharing my worries and complaints with my family.*	US	445	5.30	1.582
	Sing	43	4.47	1.791
I sometimes have trouble containing my emotion.	US	446	4.27	1.752
	Sing	43	4.42	1.829
If I share my worries, I worry that I will burden others with my sadness.*	US	445	4.43	1.664
	Sing	43	5.44	1.259
I don't mind failure, as long as I learned something from it.*	US	446	4.12	1.690
	Sing	43	4.98	1.336
I often talk about my emotions with my family.	US	446	4.42	1.873
	Sing	43	3.88	1.966
I feel better after "venting" my emotions.	US	443	5.46	1.472
	Sing	43	5.28	1.843
There are few better feelings than the feeling of success.	US	445	5.29	1.406
	Sing	43	5.16	1.344
If I express my happiness for my successes, I worry that I may make others feel badly about themselves.*	US	445	4.10	1.645
	Sing	43	4.93	1.404
When I have a dispute with a friend, the best thing to do is to be open and honest about our feelings.	US	446	5.58	1.287
	Sing	43	5.77	1.192
When good things happen, I cannot help but smile about them.	US	445	6.03	1.115
	Sing	43	6.23	.718
I am more concerned with the successes of my peer group than I am of my own.	US	446	3.81	1.494
	Sing	43	4.16	1.542
I prefer to take ownership of my successes than to share them with the group.	US	446	4.14	1.393
	Sing	43	4.00	1.254

* denotes significant results, *p < .05*

Appendix B

UCLALS: Group Statistics

Question	Culture	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
How often do you feel unhappy doing so many things alone?	US	443	2.27	.753
	Sing	43	2.23	.649
How often do you feel you cannot tolerate being so alone?	US	443	2.49	.857
	Sing	43	2.37	.787
How often do you feel as if nobody really understands you?*	US	443	2.40	.885
	Sing	43	2.05	.722
How often do you find yourself waiting for people to call or write?	US	444	2.43	.905
	Sing	43	2.37	.757
How often do you feel completely alone?*	US	445	2.83	.955
	Sing	43	2.51	.856
How often do you feel you are unable to reach out and communicate with those around you?	US	443	2.75	.912
	Sing	43	2.51	.703
How often do you feel starved for company?*	US	444	2.94	.837
	Sing	43	2.42	.731
How often do you feel it is difficult for you to make friends?*	US	444	2.84	.933
	Sing	43	2.51	.935
How often do you feel shut out and excluded by others?	US	446	2.79	.838
	Sing	43	2.63	.757

* denotes significant results, *p < .05*