Similarities and Differences in the Expression of Six Emotions in Malaysia and the US

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Study 1: Scenario Development

To investigate cross-cultural similarities and differences in emotional processes, we need a measurement that is:
(a) Developed based on cultural norms that are generalizable beyond Western contexts.
(b) Capable of assessing each emotion separately.

As such, the first step in this project was to indicate cross-culturally generalizable elicitors of six emotion.

Participants from US, Malaysia, China, Japan, and Iran were asked to write scenarios that elicited specific emotions. There were at least 20 participants from each country (M Pain = 21.91, 76% female). Participants wrote two scenarios for 13 emotions. Coders thematically analyzed the scenarios, and found the most common themes extracted from responses in all cultures to be used in scale development.

Study 2

Based on the themes developed in Study 1, eight scenario-based questions were created for each emotion, such that the participant would rate their “experience” and “expression” of the corresponding emotion for each scenario.

Importantly, target of expression was experimentally manipulated with two levels: (a) Inner circle (i.e., partner and close friend); (b) Outer circle (e.g., casual acquaintances). 491 participants from the US (67.5% female, M Age = 19.60) and 258 participants from Malaysia (62.9% female, M Age = 20.04) completed the study.

Participants completed the scenarios, as well as measures of cultural variables (e.g., relational mobility) and measures of well-being (e.g., satisfaction with life).

Results

Inner vs. Outer Circle

Participants in both countries expressed more happiness and sadness to the inner (vs. outer) circle.

In both countries, participants expressed more anger and disgust towards the outer (vs. inner) circle, though both of these effects were larger among Malaysian participants.

Relationship with Satisfaction with Life

Expression of happiness and pride had the strongest correlation with SWL among Malaysian and US participants, respectively. Overall, the effects varied by emotion and target, and was stronger among Malaysian participants.

Culture and Expressivity

In general, there was a positive relationship between cultural variables and expressivity in both samples, with the exception of anger.

Of the two cultural variables, dependent self-construal was often a stronger predictor compared to relational mobility.

The Most Common Themes for Each Emotion Across Cultures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Iran</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High intensity:</td>
<td>Death of a loved one/pet</td>
<td>Break-up</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Hard work paying off</td>
<td>Getting something new</td>
<td>Getting something new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/Moderate intensity:</td>
<td>Inconsiderate Behaviors</td>
<td>Goal interruption</td>
<td>Feeling loved and appreciated</td>
<td>Having a nice meal/time</td>
<td>Unexpected convenience</td>
<td>Vicarious pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td>Death of a loved one/pet</td>
<td>Break-up</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Hard work paying off</td>
<td>Getting something new</td>
<td>Getting something new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High intensity:</td>
<td>Being exposed to one’s phobia</td>
<td>Being stalked</td>
<td>Accidents/natural disasters</td>
<td>Watching/hearing something scary</td>
<td>Anticipation of getting hurt</td>
<td>Missing a deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/Moderate intensity:</td>
<td>Bad manners</td>
<td>Exposure to contamination</td>
<td>Unpleasant taste/odor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Raja Intan Arifah binti Raja Reza Shah from HELP University, HASHIMOTO Kazuma and NAKASONE Kana from University of Tsukuba, and Sofia Maid from Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, for their important contributions to the data collection and translation process.