

Cultural and Gender Differences in Emotion

Anne Student

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the concept of emotion as related to cultural and gender differences.

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Emotion

“Emotions are the cornerstones of our social worlds, affecting our interactions with others in countless ways” (Soto, Levenson, and Ebling, 2005). The domain of emotion is vast with many aspects to investigate and discover. Research suggests that there are basic emotions of anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise and also more complex emotions such as contempt, embarrassment, pride, and shame (Tracy & Robins, 2008). Two areas of interest in the literature culture (e.g., Tsai, Levensen, & McCoy, 2006) and gender (e.g., Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2004).

Culture

Culture refers to socially shared and transmitted patterns of ideas (values, norms, and beliefs) that are instantiated in everyday practices, institutions, and artifacts (Tsai, Levenson, & McCoy, 2006). Culture may play an important role in emotional regulation and expression. Of particular interest is the interplay between collectivistic and individualistic societies and social expectations and customs.

Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida (2007) explored cultural factors that influence idea affect. There are many ways that individuals within a culture can be influenced or biased. One such way is young children being influenced that certain emotions are more acceptable or more desired than others. The study focused on the central themes of children's storybooks and the emotions connected with the themes whether calm or active. American children tend to prefer books connective with activity whereas children from Western cultures tend to prefer books with a calmer demeanor. According to Tsai et. al.,

“Individualistic cultures, such as American culture, encourage their members to influence others (i.e., assert personal needs and change others' behaviors to fit those needs) more than collectivistic cultures. In contrast, collectivistic cultures, such as many East Asian cultures, encourage their members to adjust to others (i.e., suppress personal needs to accommodate others' needs) more than individualistic cultures. Whereas influencing others initially requires immediate action (e.g., asking someone to do something), adjusting to others initially requires suspended action (e.g., waiting for others' instructions). Immediate action involves increases in physiological arousal, whereas suspended action involves decreases in physiological arousal” (p. 18)

This may explain the findings that American children connect happiness with activity while East Asian children connect happiness with calm.

Continuing with the theme that different cultures express emotion differently is a study by Soto, Levenson, & Ebling (2005) where they compared the emotional experiences of Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans. It is believed that those in Chinese cultures tend to moderate their emotions, while those in Mexican cultures tend to be more openly expressive. Members of Chinese cultures “view emotions as dangerous, value emotional moderation, and emphasize social harmony over individual expression” (Soto et. al., 2005, p. 154) and some believed that extreme emotions caused illness. Although Mexico is also considered a collectivistic country, there are many emotional difference between the cultures. In Mexico, relationships have high levels of affection and affect is more “openly accepted and more highly valued” (Wikipedia, 2012). In fact, Murillo (1976, as cited in Soto et. al., 2005) stated that in Mexican American culture, “It is through...an ability to experience, in response to environment, emotional feelings and to express these to one another and share them that one experience the greatest rewards and satisfactions in life” (p. 155). The researchers results supported this notion. However, since the subjects live in America it would be interesting to compare the results with participants living in China and Mexico.

In a study by Tsai, Levenson, & McCoy (2006), the authors examined the degree to which cultural and temperamental factors accounted for variation in emotional response during an interpersonal task. They found that temperamental factors accounted for 0%-1% of the variance while cultural factors accounted for 6%-7% of the total variance.

Gender

There are many theories as to the differences in emotion between males and females. One theory is that of stereotypes. The stereotypical female has a more affiliative demeanor and is more likely to show happiness while a stereotypical male tends to be more dominant and more likely to show anger (Hess et. al., 2004). Women report more sadness, fear, shame, and guilt, whereas men report more hostile emotions such as anger (Fischer, et. al, 2004). Men and women also display emotion differently, as women smile more. It has been suggested that lower social power is correlated with increased smiling. These stereotypic expectations are in part a result of early socialization. For women, it is expected that they are nurturers. They need to have an increased ability for interpersonal skills and non-verbal communication. It is essential that they be able to sustain nurturing relationships; whereas men are expected to have more goal-oriented displays (Hess et. al.).

Fischer, et. al. (2004) were interested in examining cross-cultural variability of gender differences in emotion by analyzing these differences in countries with different gender roles. More specifically they looked at whether women were reporting more powerless emotion and men reporting more powerful emotions would continue across cultures considering the variability in gender roles. Overall they found this emotional pattern to be accurate with some interesting gender differences. Men from countries that have high male empowerment rated their powerless emotions less intensely.

In a study by Hess et. al. (2004), the researchers looked at facial features, gender, and emotional responses. They suggested that physical facial features of men are disposed to dominance including a high forehead, square jaw, and thicker eyebrows. They looked at three emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, and disgust and their results suggested that the main indicator of emotional response to a face was that of facial appearance.

Conclusion

I found cultural and gender differences in the realm of emotion quite interesting. Much of it makes sense in a commonsense kind of way. When we see a young boy showing the stereotypical emotions of a girl, then he just doesn't quite fit in with his peers and vice versa. The emotional modeling by those around and the reinforcement of these stereotypes begins when the individual is very young and becomes second nature.