



Review Article

Cultural differences in emotion: differences in emotional arousal level between the East and the West

Nangyeon Lim*

Department of Psychotherapy, School of Nursing and Public Health, Kyungil University, Daegu, Korea

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ABSTRACT

Whether emotion is universal or social is a recurrent issue in the history of emotion study among psychologists. Some researchers view emotion as a universal construct, and that a large part of emotional experience is biologically based. However, emotion is not only biologically determined, but is also influenced by the environment. Therefore, cultural differences exist in some aspects of emotions, one such important aspect of emotion being emotional arousal level. All affective states are systematically represented as two bipolar dimensions, valence and arousal. Arousal level of actual and ideal emotions has consistently been found to have cross-cultural differences. In Western or individualist culture, high arousal emotions are valued and promoted more than low arousal emotions. Moreover, Westerners experience high arousal emotions more than low arousal emotions. By contrast, in Eastern or collectivist culture, low arousal emotions are valued more than high arousal emotions. Moreover, people in the East actually experience and prefer to experience low arousal emotions more than high arousal emotions. Mechanism of these cross-cultural differences and implications are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Whether emotion is universal or social is a recurrent issue in the history of emotion study among psychologists.^{1–3} Some researchers view emotion as a universal construct and that a large part of emotional experience is biologically based.^{4,5} Ekman⁶ argued that emotion is fundamentally genetically determined, so that facial expressions of discrete emotions are interpreted in the same way across most cultures or nations.

In addition, similar emotions are experienced in similar situations across cultures. In a study conducted by Matsumoto and colleagues,⁷ Japanese and American participants reported to feel happiness, pleasure, sadness, and anger in similar situations. In other words, people experienced positive emotions when they are in positive antecedent situations (e.g., meeting friends or achievements) but negative emotions when they encounter negative antecedent events (e.g., traffic or injustice), regardless of culture.

* Department of Psychotherapy, School of Nursing and Public Health, Kyungil University, 50, Gamsil-gil, Hayang-eup, Gyeongsan-si, Gyeongsangbuk-do, Daegu 38428, Korea.

E-mail address: nangyeonlim@kiu.kr

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However, culture also influences emotion in various ways. Culture constrains how emotions are felt and expressed in a given cultural context. It shapes the ways people should feel in certain situations and the ways people should express their emotions.⁵² In a large number of studies,^{3,8,9} some aspects of emotion have been shown to be culturally different, because emotion is not only biologically determined, but also influenced by environment, and social or cultural situations.¹⁰ The role of culture in emotion experience has also been stressed in sociology theories. For example, Shott⁵³ argued that to experience emotion, people first experience physiological arousal and then they label this arousal as emotion. In this process, culturally defined and provided emotion words are used. Some other examples of emotional aspects that have cultural differences are ways of emotion expression,¹¹ ways of facial expression and recognition of emotions,⁹ nature of emotions commonly experienced,^{7,12,13} and affect valuation.¹⁴

2. Individualist and collectivist cultures

Cultural differences in various aspects of emotion have been studied and reported. Now, what is culture and how is it defined? In cross-cultural psychology, culture is referred to as “shared elements that provide the standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historic period, and a geographic location (p. 408).”¹⁵ Since Markus and Kitayama⁸ published a monumental paper on comparisons of the self between the West (e.g., America) and the East (e.g., Japan), most cross-cultural studies have compared Western versus Eastern cultures.¹⁶ Eastern culture commonly indicates culture of East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and China. Western culture includes the culture of North American and Western European countries.

Markus and Kitayama⁸ introduced the term “self-construal” for establishing the differences between the two cultures. Westerners construe self as independent and separate from other people. This is referred to as *independent self-construal*. Those who have independent self-construal consider that the basic unit of society is the individual, and groups exist to promote individual’s well-being.¹⁷ For this reason, Western culture is identified as individualist culture.¹⁶ In individualist culture, individual’s uniqueness is important. People are encouraged to express their inner states or feelings, and to influence other people.¹⁸

By contrast, Easterners construe self as fundamentally connected to, and interdependent on, others. This is called *interdependent self-construal*. For those who have interdependent self-construal, the core unit of society is the group. In addition, individuals must adjust to the group so that society’s harmony is maintained.¹⁷ For this reason, Eastern culture is identified as collectivist culture.¹⁶ In a collectivistic cultural atmosphere, individuals try to modify themselves and not influence others to fit in the groups they are in.¹⁸ Although, in both individualist and collectivist cultures, all individuals have both independent and interdependent self-construals,^{8,19,20} each culture normally encourages to more strongly cultivate its promoted self-construal than the other.¹⁶

3. Two-dimension structure of emotion: Valence and arousal

Myers⁵⁸ argued that “physiological arousal, expressive behaviors, and conscious experience” are fundamental elements of emotion (p. 500). In other words, emotional arousal is one of the most important research topics in psychology literature. In line with this, one of the many researched aspects of emotion that shows cultural differences is emotional arousal level. Affective states (i.e., emotion, mood, and feeling) are structured in two fundamental dimensions: valence and arousal level.^{21–23} Russell²⁴ proposed the *circumplex model of affect*. The circumplex model of affect proposes that all emotions are the product of two independent neurophysiological systems.²⁵ In other words, affective states are systematically organized and represented as two bipolar dimensions: pleasure–displeasure (or valence) and degree of arousal. The degree-of-arousal dimension, which is also called activation–deactivation²⁶ or engagement–disengagement,²⁴ refers to the perception of the physiological activation level during affective experience.^{21,27} In other words, high affective arousal can be understood as the activation of the autonomic nervous system.⁵⁵ Literature shows that both emotional valence and arousal affect brain activity^{28,29} and cognitive behaviors such as decision making and memory.⁵⁶

Russell²⁴ categorized verbal expressions of emotion in the English language in the two dimensions of valence and arousal. Since then, this two-factor structure of emotion has been demonstrated numerously by many studies in different methods.³⁰ This two-dimensional structure of emotion was also proved to be appearing in many different nations and cultures.^{24,30–32} In other words, valence and arousal can account for all emotional states.³³ Table 1 lists high and low arousal emotions as categorized in previous literature.

Emotions with different arousal levels have different purposes or functions.³⁴ Russell²⁶ argued that high arousal emotions are energized states that prepare action. These emotions correspond to situations where mobilization and energy are required. When a high arousal emotion is induced, decision making becomes focused and simplified.²⁶ Moreover, high arousal emotions such as joy or anger are known to amplify the nervous system in various ways.³⁵ By contrast, low arousal emotions are enervated states that prepare inaction or rest.²⁶

4. Cultural differences in emotional arousal level

Cross-cultural differences in emotional arousal level have consistently been found. Western culture is related to high arousal emotions, whereas Eastern culture is related to low arousal emotions. These cultural differences are explained by the distinct characteristics of individualist and collectivist cultures. In Western culture, people try to influence others.⁸ For this purpose, high arousal emotions are ideal and effective.¹⁸ By contrast, in Eastern culture, adjusting and conforming to other people is considered desirable.⁸ To meet this goal, low arousal emotions work better than high arousal emotions.¹⁸

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