Components of cultural complexity relating to emotions: A conceptual framework

Radek Trnka[a,b,*], Iva Poláčková Šolcová[c], Peter Tavel[b]

[a] Prague College of Psychosocial Studies, Milanska 471, 109 00 Prague 10, Czech Republic
[b] OUSHI, Palacky University, Univerzitni 22, 771 11 Olomouc, Czech Republic
[c] Institute of Psychology, Czech Academy of Science, Hybernska 8, 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

Many cultural variations in emotions have been documented in previous research, but a general theoretical framework involving cultural sources of these variations is still missing. The main goal of the present study was to determine what components of cultural complexity interact with the emotional experience and behavior of individuals. The proposed framework conceptually distinguishes five main components of cultural complexity relating to emotions: 1) emotion language, 2) conceptual knowledge about emotions, 3) emotion-related values, 4) feelings rules, i.e. norms for subjective experience, and 5) display rules, i.e. norms for emotional expression.

1. Introduction

The issue of cultural variation has recently been of growing interest in various fields of psychological research (e.g., Clegg, Wen, & Legare, 2017; Donaldson, Handren, Lindsay, & Lac, 2017). Research in educational psychology (Ferrero, Garaizar, & Vadillo, 2016; Wong, King, & Pomeranz, 2016), personality psychology (Klasios, 2016; Park, Uchida, & Kitayama, 2016; Trnka & Čábelková, 2016; Vignoles et al., 2016) and developmental psychology (Cheung & Elliott, 2016; Jackson, Raval, Bendikas-King, Raval, & Trivedi, 2016) has shown how various cultures shape self-construals, selfhood, beliefs or the parent-child boundary. Previous research also revealed some cultural variations in the ways people experience and express emotions.

Investigating cultural variations within the field of emotions is exceptionally important, because these variations may have serious applied impacts, e.g. on negotiation processes within strategic decision-making settings (Kopelman & Rosette, 2008). Moreover, cross-cultural differences in emotion-related values may facilitate the emergence of prejudice and discrimination (Tsai & Clobert, 2018) and may also cause inequalities in employers' preferences for candidates to top leadership positions (Tsai & Clobert, 2018). Therefore, we consider further development of theory in this field to be very desirable.

Recent empirical evidence has shown that cultures vary in emotion-related values (e.g., Su, Wei, & Tsai, 2014; Tsai & Clobert, 2018; Wei, Su, Carrera, Lin, & Yi, 2013) as well as in complexity and differentiation of display rules, i.e. norms for emotional expression (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Fontaine, 2009). This evidence indicates that cultures vary in the complexity of their structural backgrounds relating to emotions. Contemporary emotion theory covers plenty of specific areas, but a general theoretical framework involving cultural sources of variations in emotional experience and behavior is missing.

Cultures are highly complex dynamic systems (Chao & Moon, 2005; Sherblom, 2017), and from this perspective we may posit a key question about what areas of cultural complexity are related to experience, expression and regulation of emotions (Pascuzzi & Smorti, 2017) in individuals? At the beginning, it is necessary to say that individuals are not understood as being sharply separated from their cultural contexts within the dynamic systems perspective (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007). The relationship between culture and a person is always interactive and actively and mutually constructed. Therefore, if we speak about experience, expression and regulation of emotions in individuals throughout this study, we will always consider the individual to be a part of a mutually interactive process.

The main goal of the present study is to determine what components, or subsystems, of cultural complexity interact in emotion constructions, i.e. participate in the emotional experience and behavior of individuals. We integrate theories from different areas of emotion research and provide an integrative conceptual framework for understanding cultural sources of variations related to emotions. The present study builds on complexity and dynamic systems thinking (e.g., Bickhard & Campbell, 2003; Bickhard, 2000; Luhmann, 1995; Raczaszek-Leonardi, 2016; Sherblom, 2017) while also utilizing evidence from cross-cultural research on emotions. In the following text, we will start with an operational definition of culture and emotion

* Corresponding author. Science and Research Department, Prague College of Psychosocial Studies, Milanska 471, 109 00 Prague 10, Czech Republic.
E-mail addresses: trnkar@volny.cz (R. Trnka), polackova@praha.psu.cas.cz (I. Poláčková Šolcová), peter.tavel@oushi.upol.cz (P. Tavel).

within the dynamic systems perspective. Further, we will continue in determining and operationalization of the five major components of cultural complexity relating to emotions: 1) emotion language, 2) conceptual knowledge about emotions, 3) emotion-related values, 4) feelings rules, i.e. norms for subjective experience, and 5) display rules, i.e. norms for emotional expression. Finally, we will discuss the implications and future questions for both theory and research.

2. Emotion, culture and complexity

The present study follows the dynamic systems model of emotions (Bickhard, 2000) and the theoretical framework of Matsumoto and Hwang (2012) providing operational definitions of emotions and culture. Emotions are "transient, bio-psycho-social reactions to events that have consequences for our welfare and potentially require immediate action." (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012, p. 92). We can understand emotions as general modes of interactive responses to situations of interactive uncertainty (Bickhard, 2000). They have the character of an information processing system reflecting the open dynamics of any living system. From this perspective, emotions are forms of interaction with the system's own internal dynamical uncertainty informing how to proceed and how to anticipate the interactive flow (Bickhard, 2000).

Human culture is defined as "a unique meaning and information system shared by a group and transmitted across generations" (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012, p. 95). Emotions are not independent of culture, because they emerge in the perpetual flow of momentary emotion constructions, i.e. during dynamic interactions between individuals and the socio-cultural context (Boiger & Mesquita, 2015; Witherington, 2017). They are relational in the sense that they are adaptations to a basic informational property of the organism-environment relationship (Bickhard, 2000). Emotions are largely functional to the sociocultural environment in which they occur (Mesquita & Boiger, 2014). In other words, cultural contexts trigger different ways of how people make sense of the world, and these ways consequently also participate in dynamic constructions of emotional experiences and behaviors in time and space (Boiger & Mesquita, 2015).

Matsumoto and Hwang (2012) developed a preliminary theoretical conceptualization of various cultural influences on the emotional life of individuals (Fig. 1). The first domain is the domain of priming reactions as immediate responses that occur in reaction to an event stimulus. Priming reactions are suggested as not requiring language or much conscious deliberation and, therefore, the contribution of culture within this domain is low relative to domains of subjective experience and emotion meanings. Subjective experience represents the second domain, and it covers self-reported experience, various forms of internal interpretations and labeling. This domain is influenced by culture more

than is priming reactions, because it requires language as a verbal property provided by culture. Finally, attitudes, values, beliefs and concepts of emotion together represent the domain called emotion meanings. These constructs require higher-level cognitive skills, e.g. abstract thinking and memory, guiding how individuals should think about emotions (Imbir, 2016). This domain is apparently highly interrelated to cultural influences.

The introduced framework covers both subject and cultural influences. In the present study we continue further in deeper operationalization of major cultural sources related to cultural variations within the realm of emotions. Generally, we understand culture as a broader system composed of parts, components or subsystems that are interdependently (or independently) related (Chao & Moon, 2005). Previous cross-cultural research on emotions has revealed variations in various domains relating to emotional experience or behavior, for example, in cultural values and normative patterns of behavior. Various values, beliefs, representations, rules, scripts, prototypical actions and customs related to emotions may be identified in all cultures. We operationalize these fields as components or subsystems contributing to the overall complexity of a given culture.

The interaction of any system with its environment is bidirectional, i.e. the environment influences the system and the system influences the environment. Moreover, no sharp internal–external or objective–subjective divide can be made when analyzing dynamic, highly complex systems (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007). For example, a culture should not be understood as being distinct from the person, because the individual should not be divided from his or her context (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007). Thus, the relationship between culture and a person is always interactive, and therefore, a person's emotional experience or behavior are just part of a mutually interactive process.

Systems are dynamic, and they perpetually interact, evolve and adapt to changing environments (Bickhard & Campbell, 2003; Bickhard, 2000; Chao & Moon, 2005). In other words, systems are in a perpetual process of autopoietic differentiation (Bickhard, 2016; Luhmann, 1995; Triandis & Suh, 2002), where autopoiesis means a self-producing mechanism that maintains the identity and existence of the system through self-reference, self-regulation and feedback. If we speak about cultural subsystems, such as cultural values, beliefs, representations or rules, we should accept that they are not stable and persistent over time. In contrast, cultural subsystems are emergent and always changing relational properties. Novelty is always possible, because new values, beliefs, representations or rules may emerge in a system's organization (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007).

All cultures are differentiating all the time. Cultural values, beliefs, representations and rules are the results of emergence and autopoietic differentiation in time and space. However, these cultural elements are not autonomous subsystems but instead are deeply integrated in the basic interactive dynamic character of systems (Bickhard, 2000). What can be revealed by empirical research is the degree of differentiation within each subsystem, i.e. the differentiation in various values, representations, rules, scripts, prototypical actions or customs. The moment of measurement of some variable makes a cut in the sense of properties that can be observed in a given time and space. Therefore, when we measure any domain of cultural complexity, we always deal with temporal states of measured variables, because autopoietic differentiation proceeds perpetually in all systems. However, various degrees of differentiation of cultural subsystems may be determined in the moment of measurement, and the various degrees of differentiation denote what researchers call cultural variations in the areas reviewed at the beginning of this paper.

3. Components of cultural complexity relating to emotions

The following criteria were taken into account when determining the major components of cultural complexity relating to emotions: a) the area is a part of the cultural system, b) the area may participate in
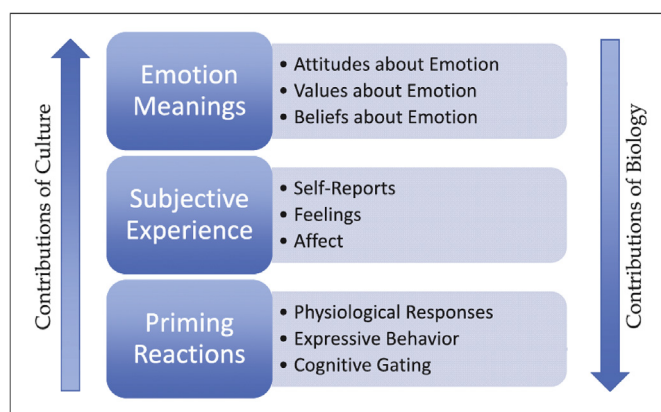

Fig. 1. Three domains reflecting various degrees of cultural and biological influences on priming reactions, subjective experience and emotion meanings (Source: Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012).