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Cultural differences in emotions: a context for interpreting emotional experiences

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Abstract

In this article, it is suggested that cross-cultural assessment of emotional disturbances would benefit from the consideration of cultural differences in the modal, and normative emotions. A summary of the research literature on cultural differences in emotions, in particular in antecedent events, subjective feeling, appraisal, and behavior is provided. Cultural differences in emotions are understood functionally, such that the most prevalent emotional phenomena in a culture are those that fit and reinforce the distinct cultural models (i.e. goals and practices) of self and relationship. It is argued that a culture-sensitive approach to emotional disturbances would entail the assessment of emotional phenomena that are dysfunctional to the cultural models of self and relationship.

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1. Introduction

Emotions vary across cultures. That is, there are cultural differences in the prevalent, modal, and normative emotional responses (Mesquita, in press; Mesquita, Frijda, & Scherer, 1997). This has important implications for the assessment of *emotional disturbances*. Emotional disturbances have been defined as “‘excesses’ in emotions, ‘deficits’ in emotions, or the lack of coherence in emotional components” (Kring, 2001, p. 337). Implicit in the definitions of emotional disturbances is the standard of comparison, the prevalent, modal, and normative practices of emotions. As these practices vary across different cultural contexts, we propose that emotional disturbances are

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to some extent relative to the cultural emotion norms and practices that form their context (Jenkins, 1994, 1996).

The main focus of this article will be to provide a general synthesis of the patterns of available research findings on cross-cultural differences in emotions. From those differences in emotion practices, we will infer some hypotheses on the potential consequences for emotional disturbances across cultures. To date, very little empirical evidence exists that allows for evaluation of these hypotheses.

Importantly, our attempt to contextualize emotional disturbances is not to suggest that deviant emotional phenomena are *merely* socially constructed as emotional disturbances. This point of view would deny the real suffering involved in many emotional disturbances. It would also be inconsistent with evidence cited by the World Health Organization that certain patterns of emotional disturbances, as they occur in mental and behavioral disorders, are found across many different cultures (Murthy et al., 2001). Yet, insight in the differences in culturally *functional* emotional lives will facilitate and enhance the assessment of *dysfunctional* or *disturbed* emotions in ways described in this article.

2. Conceptualization of cultural differences in emotions

Emotions are biological as well as socio-cultural in nature. Much cross-cultural research on emotions has focused on the universal, biological aspects of emotions (Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). The socio-cultural aspects of emotions have been largely ignored, at least in psychology. More recently, several steps have been made towards conceptualization of emotions that allows the finding of cross-cultural differences in the phenomena.

First, many current emotion theories (e.g. Ellsworth, 1994; Frijda, 1986; Lang, 1988; Scherer, 1984) conceive of emotions as configurations of outcomes of multiple aspects, such as appraisal, action readiness, autonomic nervous system activity, and behavioral goal setting. These different aspects of emotions do not automatically follow from each other. Each has its own determinants in addition to the eliciting event. Thus, the ‘emergent’ emotion (Feldman Barrett, 1998, 2001) is constituted by the independent outcomes of the emotion components and may vary from one occurrence to the next. This view is in stark contrast with the idea that emotions are basic, invariant states of the body that can be turned on and off (Mesquita, 2001).

Furthermore, building on these multi-aspect theories of emotions, Mesquita et al. have distinguished between emotional practices—the actual emotions that people experience and express—and the potential for emotions—the emotional responses that people are capable of having in principle (Mesquita & Ellsworth, 2001; Mesquita et al., 1997). As emotions unfold, people select and activate outputs from the emotional potential. The combined outputs form the emotional practice, or experience (Mesquita, in press). Whereas many cross-cultural studies traditionally focused on the potential for emotions (e.g. the potential to recognize facial expressions in similar way Ekman et al., 1987; Izard, 1994), cultural differences in emotions are primarily to be expected at the level of emotional practices. In fact, work on emotional practices in other disciplines, such as anthropology, does reveal cultural differences in the prevalence, patterns, and specific contexts of emotional outputs in a given culture (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Briggs, 1970; Levy, 1973; Lutz, 1988).

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