



## Cultural context moderates the relationship between emotion control values and cardiovascular challenge versus threat responses

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 11 February 2009

Accepted 21 September 2009

Available online 26 September 2009

#### Keywords:

Emotion

Cultural differences

Values

Cardiovascular threat versus challenge

### ABSTRACT

Cultural context affects people's values regarding emotions, as well as their experiential and behavioral but not autonomic physiological responses to emotional situations. Little research, however, has examined how cultural context influences the *relationships* among values and emotional responding. Specifically, depending on their cultural context, individuals' values about emotion control (ECV; the extent to which they value emotion control) may have differing meanings, and as such, be associated with differing responses in emotional situations. We examined this possibility by testing the effect of two cultural contexts (28 female Asian-American (AA) versus 28 female European-American (EA) undergraduate students) on the associations between individuals' ECV and emotional responding (experiential, behavioral, and cardiovascular) to a relatively neutral film clip and a laboratory anger provocation. In the AA group, greater ECV were associated with reduced anger experience and behavior, and a challenge pattern of cardiovascular responding. In the EA group, greater ECV were associated with reduced anger behavior but not anger experience, and a threat pattern of cardiovascular responding. These results are consistent with the notion that individuals' values about emotion are associated with different meanings in different cultural contexts, and in turn, with different emotional and cardiovascular responses.

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### 1. Introduction

How do people's cultural contexts shape their emotional responses? Emerging evidence suggests that culture affects the values that people hold about emotions as well as their experiential and behavioral responses to emotional situations. For instance, two cultural contexts that have frequently been compared – relatively interdependent Asian contexts versus relatively independent European contexts – differ such that in Asian cultural contexts emotion control (i.e., decreasing emotional experiences and behaviors) is valued more than in European cultural contexts, especially with respect to socially disengaging emotions (e.g., pride, anger; cf. Eid and Diener, 2001; Ekman and Friesen, 1969; Kitayama et al., 2006; Klineberg, 1938; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto, 1993; Potter, 1988; Russell and Yik, 1996; Wu and Tseng, 1985). In turn, people from Asian cultural contexts, as compared to European cultural contexts, often report experiencing lesser emotion and behave less emotionally in emotional situations (Mesquita and Karasawa, 2002; Tsai et al.,

2002; Tsai and Levenson, 1997). However, autonomic physiological differences have generally not been observed between these two cultural groups (cf. Levenson et al., 2007). These and similar findings lead to the conclusion that cultural context affects values about emotions as well as some – but not all – components of emotional responding.

Despite this progress in our understanding, research leaves open a number of important questions. One crucial lacuna lies in the fact that most research has examined main effects of cultural context on emotional responding. In addition to such main effects, cultural context might affect the relationships among components of emotional responding in important ways (e.g., Kitayama, 2002). In particular, values about emotions – on which individuals within cultures show robust and consistent differences – may be associated with different meanings in different cultural contexts. These differences in meaning, in turn, should lead to different associations between emotion-related values and emotional responding across cultural groups.

Specifically, in Asian cultural contexts, emotion control is highly and relatively unambiguously valued, and in turn affords individuals frequent opportunities to “practice” emotion control (Eid and Diener, 2001; Klineberg, 1938; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto, 1993; Potter, 1988; Russell and Yik, 1996; Wu and Tseng, 1985). In this context, then, highly valuing emotion

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**Table 1**  
Summary of hypothesized interactive effect of ethnic background and individuals' emotion control values (ECV) on evaluative patterns and associated emotional and cardiovascular responses during emotional episodes.

Ethnic background	Cultural context	Correlates of greater individuals' emotion control values (ECV) during emotional episodes		
		Evaluative patterns	Emotional responses indicative of ...	Cardiovascular response patterns indicative of ...
Asian-American (AA)	Relatively unambiguous endorsement of emotion control; more frequent affordance of episodes of emotion control	Low ambiguity; low effort; high perceived self-regulatory abilities	More effective emotion control	Challenge
European-American (EA)	More ambiguous endorsement of emotion control; competing values; less frequent affordance of episodes of emotion control	High ambiguity; high effort; low perceived self-regulatory abilities	Less effective emotion control	Threat

control at the individual level would be culturally consonant and associated with effective control of emotional responding in emotional situations as well as with a cardiovascular response pattern indicative of low ambiguity, low effort, and high ability (see Table 1, Row 1). In contrast, while emotion control is also often valued in European cultural contexts, it is more ambiguous because emotion expression is sometimes seen as an important function of being "authentic" and asserting one's self (Eid and Diener, 2001; Hochschild, 1983; Kim and Sherman, 2007; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In this context, then, highly valuing emotion control at the individual level would sometimes bring the individual into conflict with prevailing norms and should thus be associated with less effective control of the emotional response in emotional situations as well as with a cardiovascular response pattern indicative of greater ambiguity, greater effort, and lower ability (see Table 1, Row 2).

The present research examined these hypotheses by considering the moderating effect of EA versus AA ethnic backgrounds on the associations between individuals' emotion control values (ECV; the extent to which someone believes that emotions ought to be controlled) and emotion responding. To provide context, we will review the literature on the main effects of these two cultural contexts on emotional responding before we turn to the present study. We focus on Asian versus European cultural groups because these groups, either residing in Asia and Europe or as part of a larger US-American context (then referred to as Asian-American and European-American), have yielded the largest body of research and because they differ clearly on factors relevant to emotions (e.g., independent versus interdependence notions of self, emotional display rules; cf. Hofstede, 1980; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto et al., 1998; Triandis, 1994).

### 1.1. Differences in emotional responding in EA versus AA cultural contexts

Following Kroeber and Kluckholm (1952), we define culture as "explicit and implicit patterns of historically derived and selected ideas and their embodiment in institutions, practices, and artifacts" (Kroeber and Kluckholm, 1952, p. 357). This definition does not entail that all people from one cultural context will behave and think alike. Rather, they are expected to show some similarities in values and psychological functions to the extent that they engage in particular cultural contexts. In addition, as the present analysis supports, individual and cultural values can interact in important ways (e.g., Kitayama et al., 2006). Cultural context can be operationalized as ethnic background, because ethnicity often covaries with particular cultural ideas and practices (Matsumoto, 1993; Oyserman et al., 2002). Ideally, one would directly measure the cultural ideas and practices that make up a particular cultural context and that are the presumed active ingredient in the effects of culture (cf. Kitayama, 2002). However, because this is often difficult or even impossible, we and others use ethnicity as a shortcut to infer differences in cultural context

(Butler et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2006; Matsumoto, 1993; Tsai et al., 2006). Consistent with this decision, we refer to cultural context when we refer to culture as our construct of interest, and ethnicity when we refer specifically to our operationalization of culture as ethnic group.

One important point of debate in scientists' understanding of emotions has been whether emotions are primarily biological and universal or primarily cultural and context specific (Darwin, 1872/1998; Ekman, 1992; Izard, 1992; Lutz, 1988; Russell, 1994). This question concerns not just the basic nature of emotions, but also has important practical implications for how people can and should alter their emotions. More recently, the scientific discourse on cultural influences on emotions has shifted in favor of a more nuanced one, which asks *which components* of emotional response are shaped by cultural factors rather than *whether* such influences take place (cf. Feldman Barrett, 2006; Hinton, 1999; Levenson et al., 2007; Matsumoto, 1993; Mesquita, 2003; Scherer and Wallbott, 1994; Tsai et al., 2006).

One of the main frameworks for understanding cultural differences is the distinction of interdependent versus independent understanding of the self (Hofstede, 1980; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto et al., 1998; Mesquita and Karasawa, 2002; Schwartz, 1992; Triandis, 1994). According to this distinction, people in Asian and AA cultural contexts tend to think about themselves relative to members of an in-group ("interdependent"). Because group concerns relatively outweigh individual concerns in interdependent Asian cultural contexts, individual emotion control is valued, especially with respect to negative and socially disengaging emotions (Ekman and Friesen, 1969; Kim and Markus, 2002; Kitayama et al., 2006; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Potter, 1988; Tsai et al., 2006; Wu and Tseng, 1985). For example, Klineberg (1938) reports that Chinese participants generally describe emotions as dangerous, value emotional moderation, and emphasize social harmony over individuals' expression of emotions. AAs rate the expression of negative emotions and emotion expression as less appropriate than do EAs (Matsumoto, 1993), and AAs are more likely to report suppressing emotional expression than are EAs (Gross and John, 2003; Triandis, 1994).

Relative to such interdependent cultural contexts, individuals engaged in European and EA cultural contexts tend to conceive of themselves as an independent entity, even with respect to an in-group. In EA contexts, emotions and their expression are seen as signs of psychological health and the individual's authenticity (Bellah et al., 1985; Lasch, 1979; Marshall, 1972; Suh et al., 1998; Tavris, 1984). People in EA contexts tend to value emotional expressiveness, especially of positive and self-focused emotions, because it allows individuals to assert themselves and experience themselves as unique and bounded (Kim and Sherman, 2007; Matsumoto, 1990). Naturally, all these effects vary across specific emotions (e.g., Eid and Diener, 2001; Matsumoto, 1993). For example, differences between Asian and European cultural groups can be reversed for socially engaging emotions (e.g., friendly feelings, guilt), with Asian participants valuing and experiencing a

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