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Gyuyi Kang  
Brigham Young university

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Cultural Influence on Regulating Emotion

Gyuyi Kang

Brigham Young University

## CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON REGULATING EMOTION

### Abstract

Emotional regulation is an important aspect of our social lives that can build or weaken relationships. Regulating emotion is influenced by many factors and culture is one of many important factors that has a striking influence on how people regulate their emotion. The world can be divided into two major cultures: independent and interdependent culture. Most Western countries show characteristics of independent culture while most Eastern countries show the characteristics of interdependent culture. Depending on what culture we are from, we will exhibit differences in emotion regulation on, behavior, and emotional coping strategies. Thus, understanding cultural differences is especially crucial when delivering or communicating thought and emotions so the audience will interpret them correctly. How we regulate emotion will ultimately vary between individuals but culture can also be a positive indicator in viewing the norms as to how a group of people perceives their environment as it pertains to regulating emotion.

*Keywords:* Emotional regulation, Independent culture, Interdependent culture

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### Cultural Influence on Regulating Emotion

Being conscious of oneself, or knowing how each of us control and express our emotions, is essential in our lives (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007; Vandervoort, 2006).

Regulating emotion is one of the most important tasks when engaging in social interaction. For example, being understanding of others can build up a relationship while an inappropriate outburst could weaken it (Lopes et al., 2005). Thus, regulating emotion plays an important role in how we function in society, especially in acts such as communicating and connecting with others (Lopes et al., 2005). However, because each person's perceived experience with emotion is different, each individual might respond differently to the same situation. Religious backgrounds, social expectation, cultural influence, and many other factors can affect how one responds (Hoschschild, 1979).

Among many factors that can influence our emotion regulation is culture. Different cultures such as independent and interdependent culture carry different definition of the self and of others which is also known as self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, culture influences individuals' experience, including cognition, emotion, and motivation by providing meaning to the individual themselves, and also by providing to its community necessary coordination and organization (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto, 2007). Thus, culture shapes how people perceive events in their life and guides expressing one's emotion (Matsumoto, 1993; Soto, Levenson, & Ebling, 2005). Thus, understanding one's own culture and others will reduce conflicts and help regulating our emotion.

Despite the differences in culture, people from most cultures generally agree on what is morally right or wrong. However, people's perception of events' significance, as well as what is proper emotional behavior at such an event, differs depending on their backgrounds (Parrott, 1993; Tamir, 2009). Different cultures result in different sets of emotional control methods and different schools of thought as to how one should perceive their experience

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(Mesquita & Ellsworth, 2001; Miyamoto & Ryff, 2011). While individuals may express their emotions slightly different from the cultural expectation, culture is a good indicator for evaluating people within the culture (Allen, Diefendorff & Ma, 2014).

This literature review will discuss theories of why and how culture shapes people and specifically how people from independent and interdependent cultures regulate their own emotions by comparing and contrasting Eastern and Western societies; additionally, gender differences in regulating emotion will be discussed. This study will broaden our understanding of how people regulate emotions differently, while also highlighting different emotional control schemes and methods between cultures and society.

### **Cultural Influence in Our Lives**

Evolutionary psychology and environment of evolutionary adaptiveness give a brief view on how culture developed over time to fulfill basic human needs such as eating, drinking, breathing, sleeping, shelter, sex, and other elements that keep the human race alive and reproducing (Matsumoto, 2007; Sheldon, 2004). To achieve these needs, people started to form groups to protect themselves from danger, find a mate, and raise children safely (Buss, 2001). The population of these groups started to grow as the group was able to successfully protect themselves from other forces. Soon, systems and rules were needed to prevent chaos and to allow society to function more efficiently. As they organized their own society, their systems—or their culture—were passed down or shared from generation to generation, giving a meaning to the system that provides all basic needs and meaning in life (Matsumoto, 2007).

As a person is raised in a specific culture, he or she learns how to act and express his/herself according to each situation, relationship or context, and this can start to be learned at the very young age of 16 months (Bell & Calkins, 2000; Volling, McElwain, & Miller, 2002). Thus, a person from one culture can have an entirely different understanding of what

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is expected from another's point of view. For example, one of the common medical practices in Eastern culture, acupuncture, may seem threatening to a Western patient, while it is a completely normal medicinal practice for an Eastern culture. In a similar manner, culture—or the creation of social order, rules and guidelines—motivates people to regulate their emotion and behave as they should (Hochschild, 1979, Keltner, Ekman, Gonzaga, & Beer, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto, 2007). This makes culture a key factor to find how people regulate emotion.

### **Independent vs. Interdependent**

Markus and Kitayama proposed that there are two types of cultures in this world: independent and interdependent. A sizable segment of the United States and many Western-European cultures fall into independent cultural systems while most of Asian, African, Latin-American and many southern European cultures fall under interdependent cultural systems (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Even though these two cultural systems are exhibited in many countries, this paper will compare and contrast the U.S. and European independent countries to Eastern Asian interdependent countries.

Independent culture, also known as individualism, comes from the idea that individuals are independent from each other (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Independent culture maintains that an individual's unique inner attributes and values have distinctive, personal opinions and attitudes. Individuals feel less responsibility, duty or loyalty for the group in this kind of culture. In contrast, interdependent culture, also known as collectivism, values connection between individuals by emphasizing attendance, focus towards others, fitting in, and being harmonious with the people in the community (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

These systems can be found in everyday life, even in a setting such as parents having dinner with their children. A typical American parent, or a parent from any other more

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individualist culture, might say, “Think of the starving kids in Ethiopia, and appreciate how lucky you are to be able to eat this food”, while a typical Japanese parent or a parent from a collectivist culture would be more likely to say, “Think about the farmer who worked so hard to produce this rice for you; if you don’t eat it, he will feel bad, for his efforts will have been in vain” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Looking at the Japanese family’s dialogue, it is clearly shown how much importance is placed on not only their own selves or family but on the people who are part of their society. On the other hand, an American family’s dialogue seems to focus more on how blessed they are to have the food than on the people who put it on their plate.

### **Behavior**

The differences between independent and interdependent cultures are manifested in behaviors. In independent cultures, individuals see emotions as one’s right and a crucially important personal experience, while interdependent cultures support harmony and cooperation as opposed to being different from others (Allen et al., 2014; Oyserman et al., 2002). In China, the general attitude toward emotion is that it is dangerous, irrelevant, or even potentially harmful, and so emotional moderation is highly valued (Eid & Diener, 2001). Thus, emotional moderation became a norm in China while emotional expression is the norm in the U.S. (Allen et al., 2014).

A study by Allen et al., (2014) shows how people from independent and interdependent cultures behave differently. The researchers found two different emotional moderation behaviors, referred to as surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting refers to modifying what is expressed externally. It is suppressing or ‘faking’ what is felt. On the other hand, deep acting is associated with conscious changes of how one feels by reappraising, focusing on positives, and physiological adjustment. To find out how people from two different cultures regulate their emotions, the researchers compared two hundred and thirty-

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one Chinese service workers and two hundred and eighty U.S. service workers. When display rules – such as smiling at customers – along with personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization were compared to surface acting and deep acting, there were some significant differences between U.S. and Chinese workers. An increase of surface acting in U.S. workers resulted in a high increase of emotional exhaustion, while Chinese workers' exhaustion showed very little increase. Personal accomplishments were also decreased as surface acting increased in U.S. sample, while personal accomplishments stayed much the same even with the increase of surface acting in the Chinese sample. When deep acting was used, negative correlation showed in the U.S. population while no big increase was shown in the Chinese sample. The result showed how people perceive and understand the circumstances differently and result in different behaviors. An extensive study that included 6,048 responses from 33 countries also found a pattern that individualistic countries are associated positively with negative emotions toward being in groups. However, people in independent culture countries were also positively correlated with happiness and surprise (Matsumoto, Yoo & Fontaine, 2008). The result indicates that people from different culture's stress level and efficiency can increase and decrease in different situations.

### **Cause of Emotional Regulations**

Culture influences how people perceive self and others, resulting in different perspectives and behaviors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, individualistic and collectivistic cultures have different reasons for why they would regulate their emotion in certain situations or places. People generally would like to feel positive emotions but depending on an individuals' situation, they sometimes dampen their positive emotions (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Seventy-eight European-American undergraduates and 108 Japanese undergraduates were studied to see what caused them to dampen positive emotions. Social concerns, dialectical beliefs, self-efficient tendencies, self-



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improvement motivation and interpersonal tactics were found to all influence a person's emotional dampening (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011).

Interestingly, even though regulating emotion is more common in Asian culture, social concerns were the most frequent reason for dampening one's emotion for both populations. People who chose social concerns for dampening their emotion usually had a reason related to fear of hurting another's feeling or social image. For example, expressing too much emotion for one's accomplishment might be seen as arrogant behavior. About 70.13% of the U.S. sample and 60.64% of the Japanese sample chose social concern for dampening their emotion (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011). The difference being only 9.49% shows that social concerns are important for living in a society in both independent and interdependent cultures.

Most Asian cultures are superstitious (Shek, 2004). In China, the number 4 signifies death, so people try to use that number as little as they can (Simmons & Schindler, 2003). Dialectical belief, which refers to applying philosophies and nature to the world – such as believing the number seven will bring you a luck, – have a greater influence – on Japanese populations than on American populations. As it was expected in the cultural rim, this concern was shown four times more prevalent in a Japanese sample (23.40%) than a U.S. sample (5.19%). One Japanese participant explained, “[it is] because I am constantly thinking that there will be a bad event after a good event” (pg.1349). While dialectical beliefs were big in Japan, interpersonal tactics were about four times more influential in the American than the Japanese. This tactic involves hiding or reducing one's emotion to attract or manipulate others. For example, one might act calm when he or she is asked out on a date, even if they are excited. Around 12.99% of the U.S. population used interpersonal tactics while only 3.19% of the Japanese population fall into this group (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011).

People will try to regulate their emotions for various reasons. Even though the

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American culture and the Japanese culture are very different, it was similar in a way that both cultures cared much about social concerns. However, the second most popular reason – dialectical belief— for Japanese was a huge impact caused by culture, which is passed down from ancestors.

### **Emotion Regulation Strategies**

As mentioned before, regulating emotion is an essential part of our lives (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007; Vandervoort, 2006). Engagement factors and disengagement factors are some of the basic coping strategies that were found to regulate one's emotion, either to be more engaged with another or to have some distance (Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989; Carver & Coonor-Smith, 2010). Strategies were not discussed in the paper if they were not used by more than ten percent of people. For engagement strategies, crafting a background and thinking about victims were the two ways that encouraged people to get more engaged emotionally. On the other hand, disengagement strategies were involved with distancing, denial, deliberate shallow processing, shifting focus and expressive suppression/masking (Davis, Greenberger, Charles, Chen, Zhao & Dong, 2012).

Not many cross-cultural studies have been done, but Davis et al. (2012) and other researchers conducted one of the first cross-national examinations to empirically examine whether Eastern and Western cultures differed in emotional intensity and emotion regulation. Over 400 participants from China, Europe, America (including Chinese Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Korean Americans and Japanese Americans) were studied. As a result, Chinese samples reported higher use of disengagement tactics with less emotional intensity than Americans (Davis et al., 2012).

As we move forward in the study, gender difference is also something that the paper would just touch on but not go in deeply. It is also one of the elements that impacted emotion regulation between female and male. The social norm for men in Asia is to keep their

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emotion to themselves and to stay calm. For that reason, Chinese men used a lot more disengagement strategies to keep them from being too emotionally engaged in a situation. Likewise, expressing more emotions was the social norm for American women, so they used more engagement strategies. Eastern Asian Americans had similar results to Americans (Davis et al., 2012). This is important information in that it supports the idea that culture is a greater factor in shaping our emotional regulation than race.

### **Conclusion**

Culture is needed to increase survival and reproduction and to keep the order of a society. Because it is passed down for many years, what people do base on one's culture is accepted as a norm. Today, people have started to create their own culture by having their own Christmas tradition or a wedding anniversary, etc. to strengthen relationships with those around them. People learn how to act, feel and behave through culture, whether it is found in a nation or in a family.

Among the many cultures that we can see in the world, the two major ones are called independent and interdependent culture. Independent culture is found mostly in Western countries while interdependent culture is mostly found in Eastern countries. Comparing and contrasting people from these two different cultures has yielded very interesting results. People reported their emotions and how they regulated their emotions, and there was a noticeable amount of difference in how people would regulate their emotion and behavior depending on which culture they were raised in.

The studies examined acknowledge different cultures and how and why people behave differently. They provide general knowledge and brief insights into how someone from a different culture can be different from what one is used to. Culture is ingrained deeply in our everyday lives that we often do not recognize it until interacting with someone of a different culture than our own. Understanding what kind of environment an individual grew

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up in can possibly increase positive relationships and efficiency. It is especially crucial today since businesses and governments work globally. However, not enough research has been conducted about how this knowledge can be applied in our lives. Additionally, the research that does exist is cross-cultural studies that it makes hard to compare and contrast to have a comprehensive understanding. In future investigations, researchers should study how this knowledge can be used to improve the quality of social relationships between people of different nations.

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