

The influence of culture on the functioning of emotional intelligence

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Abstract

As previous studies have shown, emotions play a critical role in forming interpersonal relationships, social interactions, facilitation decision making and optimizing the brain functions. Although emotions are known as universal phenomena, most researchers believe that the way in which they are being experienced, expressed, perceived, and regulated can be influenced by cultural norms. Reviewing the theories and literatures, the present study attempted to investigate the influence of culture on behaviors through the process of emotional functions which is seemingly lacks enough research. Better understanding of this influence improves the knowledge in this area, thereby improving social interaction and social adjustment which is led to healthy life and wellbeing. One approach to this theme is from the emotional intelligence framework suggested by Salovey and Mayer (1990) who defined it as the ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions. This theory focuses upon emotional abilities that can be developed through learning and day-to-day experience. The results showed that a part of emotional intelligence ability is innate while another part can be changed through learning and experience; this later part dominated by culture that provides the structures, guidelines, expectations, and rules to interpret behaviors.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence-Culture

INTRODUCTION

The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) has received much interest in recent years when some psychologists considered that cognitive aspects such as intelligence, memory and problem-solving are not enough to predict successes in life. It is suggested by Salovey and Mayer who defined it as the “ability to perceive, appraise, and express emotion; using emotion to facilitate thought; to understand emotion; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p. 10).¹ They believed that a part of emotional intelligence ability is innate while another part can be changed through learning and experience; the later part dominated by a culture that provides the structures, guidelines, expectations, and rules interpret behaviors. The emotional intelligence theory focuses upon emotional abilities, and the influence of culture on behaviors accomplish through the functioning of the EI components. Better understanding the cultural effect improves the quality of relationships in home and work life and could impact on physical and psychological health.

In the area of culture researcher stated that culture contains “shared elements that provide standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historical period, and a geographical location.” (p. 1103).² The cultural rules and norms are learned from families, educational systems and society during the process of socialization.³⁻⁴ Recognizing emotions begin in infancy, through body language and mimicry, when a baby learns to smile back at mothers. There are the “unwritten codes”, different rules, and family background that governs the manner in which emotions expressed.⁵ Reviewing the literatures, the present study attempted to investigate the influence of culture on behaviors through the process of emotional functions which is seemingly lacks enough research. Cultural differences sometimes lead to notorious misunderstandings. Knowing that why an individual within a given culture responds a certain way, can help others to have positive emotional responses and actions.

EMOTION AND CULTURE

The concept of emotion includes a wide range of observable behaviors, expressed feelings, and changes in the body state. Emotions not only regulate the social encounters, but they also influence cognition, perception and decision-making through a series of interactions with intentions and motivations.⁶⁻⁷ Emotions play a critical role in interpersonal relationships and how people relate to each other. Emotional exchanges can have social consequences, and the result of this can maintain and enhance positive relationships.⁸⁻⁹

Some psychologists stated emotion fundamentally includes “physiological arousal, expressive behaviors, and conscious experience (p. 500)”¹⁰, but anthropologists mentioned that emotions are socio-cultural as well as

biological in nature. Research on the relationship between culture and emotions dates back to 1872 when Darwin claimed emotions and the expression of emotions are universal. Since that time, psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists have started to investigate the universality of the six basic emotions (i.e., Happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise).¹¹ In this area the sets of photographs created to display emotional expressions. These pictures were agreed by Americans. The researcher showed the pictures to people in other countries and asked them to identify the emotion that best describes the face. The results showed that facial expressions were in fact universal and innate.¹² While they are always influenced by culture. Researchers argue culture influences the ways that emotions are experienced depending which emotions are valued in the specific culture. Therefore, it can be said that cultures provide a necessary framework to interpret behavior in their people. For example, happiness is generally considered a desirable emotion across cultures. In individualistic countries such as America, regarding to happiness is infinite, attainable, and internally experienced but in collectivistic cultures such as Japan, happiness is very relational, related to social and external factors, and reside in shared experiences with others. In another example when American's are asked about emotions, they are more likely to have self-focused responses "I feel joy" but in the same situation a typical reaction in Japanese is between the self and others "I would like to share my happiness with others."

As mentioned above, human's emotions are influenced by a variety of physiological, neurological, and psychological items. Then, people in different cultures must be experienced similar emotions. It seems this is the primary subject addressed in the research on culture and emotions. On one hand research shows people universally recognize facial expressions of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and perhaps, surprise, and in the other hand anthropologists claimed that people in different societies behave extremely different in how they experienced, expressed, and understood emotion. Understanding the cross-cultural similarities and differences in emotional experience is very necessary and important. In one study researchers investigate how the expression and perception of emotion is influenced by culture. They examined how Dutch and Japanese people assess others' emotions. The results showed Japanese people express emotions in the tone of voice more than in the face while Dutch people pay more attention to the facial expression. Japanese people tend to hide their negative emotions by smiling, but it's more difficult to hide negative emotions in the voice. The researcher mentioned this could lead to confusion when a Dutch person, who is used to the voice and the face to show her/his emotion, talks with a Japanese person; they may see a smiling face and think everything is fine, while failing to notice the upset tone in the voice.¹³

Culture affects emotional functioning through identifying which emotions are negative or positive, when emotions expressed and even how emotions should be displayed. Culture provides structure, guidelines, expectations, and rules to help people understand and interpret behaviors. Several ethnographic studies suggest there are cultural differences in social consequences, particularly when it comes to evaluating emotions. They suggest the concept "Cultural scripts" which is referred to cultural norms. Cultural scripts determined how positive and negative emotions should be experienced and combined, and how people regulate their emotions.¹⁴ Another research discussed about social norms that dictate how people should feel at certain times (in wedding day or at a funeral).¹⁵ However, in recent studies cultures have been found to differ in expressing emotion¹⁶ and in how emotion is recognized.¹⁷ These cultural differences have been related to the variety of items such as: the level of affect emotion recognition¹⁸⁻¹⁹, to ratings of emotional intensity²⁰, the way an event is appraised²¹, and the influence of language on the emotion lexicons.²²⁻²³

EMOTION PERCEPTION AND CULTURE

Emotion perception is the first component of emotional intelligence theory. It is referring to perceive emotions in oneself and the others via faces, voices and body language and also to express emotions in suitable ways. ¹Perceiving emotions is a basic element of emotional intelligence, because the process of emotional information is possible through it. Some of the researchers stated emotion perception is the ability to infer emotional information from facial expressions, vocal inflections or some combination of these.²⁴ In another definition emotion perception is the ability to recognize faces and facial expressions which are fundamental in social life.²⁵⁻²⁶⁻²⁷⁻²⁸

Emotional facial expressions are an important part of social communication. It has a key role in interpersonal interaction; any failure of this ability often leads to difficulties in human relationships. Social and cultural norms are determined how and when emotions are expressed.¹² The ability to perceive the emotional expression in others is essential to social communication and an organism that cannot react when a enemy is angry has a poor chance to escape and survive.²⁹⁻³⁰ They claimed all humans regardless to race or culture possess the ability to express emotion in the same ways through their faces and other nonverbal behaviors and the human brain discriminate facially-expressed emotions innately³¹⁻³² although in the recent studies cultures have been found to differ in expressed emotion even in the basic emotions.¹⁶

According to the results of some research recognition is conceptually more primary than emotion regulation because regulation is only possible after recognition has occurred. Thus, recognition must be a precursor to regulate; conversely, if the emotion is not recognized, there is nothing to regulate.²⁴⁻³³⁻³⁴⁻³⁵

EMOTION REGULATION AND CULTURE

Emotion regulation is considered to be one of the components of emotional intelligence theory. It is an ability to regulate and manage emotion in oneself and others. Emotion regulation refers to the “processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (p. 275).³⁶ This ability is used more in social management by doing effective alternative actions to achieve better outcomes. People with low scores in this component are not being able to identify another's emotions and react to them. In the other hand, people with high level of managing emotions, understand others and encourage them to experience a safely emotion, they also do not judge others.

High emotion regulation is the most important predictor of positive intercultural adjustment.³⁷⁻³⁸ It is important for positive adjustment because it control negative emotions during conflict and stress, which are inevitable in intercultural life.

How the emotions are regulated differ across cultures. Anthropologists proposed that cultures have conventions and norms that influence the management of emotions.³⁹ Based on the cultural norms different cultures socialize their children to regulate their emotions; cultural differences influence emotion regulation strategies. For example, In America, parents encourage emotional expression while suppression of emotion is often disapproved. It is important for American mothers to focus on their children's successes while which is important more for Chinese mothers are focus on provide discipline for their children.⁴⁰ In a laboratory experiment, when children succeeded on a test, American mothers present positive feedback (e.g. “You're so smart!”), while Chinese mothers provided more neutral or task relevant feedback (e.g. “Did you understand the questions or did you just guess?”).⁴¹ The result of this research shows how American mothers are more likely to “up-regulate” positive emotions and Chinese mothers are more likely to “down-regulate” children's positive emotions by not focusing on their success. Therefore, expression of emotions is often discouraged, and suppressing one's individual emotions to better fit in with the emotions of the group is looked at as mature and appropriate.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the influence of culture on the functioning of emotional intelligence. Reviewing and carefully evaluating the literatures and the results of research employed in the field of emotion research show although emotions are known as universal phenomena, the way in which they are being experienced, expressed, perceived, and regulated can be influenced by cultural behaviors. A part of emotional ability is innate while another part can be changed through learning and experience; this later part dominated by culture that provides the structures, guidelines, expectations, and rules to interpret behaviors

There are some limitations in cultural and emotions research; the lack of diversity in samples is the first limitation in this area. Current research literature is dominated by comparisons between Western (usually American) and Eastern Asian (usually Japanese or Chinese) sample groups, future studies should include more countries in this analysis. The second one that is very important and considerable is culture ever changing and dynamic, it is not static.

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