

Cultural variation in pro-positive versus balanced systems of emotions

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People generally perceive positive emotions more favorably than negative emotions and try to increase positive emotions and decrease negative emotions. However, the extent to which people hold such pro-positive and contra-negative orientations to emotions differs across cultures. We review research that examines cultural influences on the valuation, regulation, and experiences of positive and negative emotions. Based on this research, we propose that a pro-positive and contra-negative system of emotion is more prevalent in Western, especially American cultural contexts, whereas a balanced system of emotion is more dominant in East Asian cultural contexts. At the end, we propose directions for future research.

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Introduction

People often view positive emotions favorably and want to increase positive emotions, and view negative emotions unfavorably and want to decrease negative emotions. Although such pro-positive and contra-negative orientations to emotions are found in general (*e.g.*, [1]), there also are individual and situational variations [2–4]. Notably, growing cross-cultural evidence has shown that a pro-positive/contra-negative orientation to emotion is more prevalent in Western, especially American cultural contexts, whereas a more balanced orientation toward emotion exists in Eastern cultural contexts. In this review, we provide an overview of cross-cultural investigations of pro-positive/contra-negative versus balanced systems of

emotion,³ by summarizing cultural differences in the valuation, regulation, and experiences of positive and negative emotions.

Socio-cultural factors shape emotion systems

Culture is historically transmitted patterns of implicit and explicit beliefs and ideas that are embodied in institutions, artifacts, and practices, which are produced and sustained through behaviors [5]. Among various dimensions proposed to characterize different cultural patterns [6,7], most frequently, two factors have been theorized to underlie cultural variations in positive and negative emotions: how people relate to each other (independence versus interdependence [8,9]) and how people think and reason (linear/analytic logic versus dialecticism [10–12]).

Western cultures are characterized by independence [8,9] (but the emphasis on independence is especially strong in American culture [13]). In such cultural contexts, positive emotions historically have been perceived as a sign of an independent, self-reliant individual [14], whereas negative emotions were not tolerated [15]. In contrast, East Asian cultures are characterized more by interdependence. In such cultural contexts, people need to maintain harmony by adjusting themselves to their surroundings or to cultural standards, which may make them more wary of the potential negative social consequences of positive emotions and more aware of the potential benefits of negative emotions [16].

Styles of thinking also differ across cultures. Western culture has been characterized by linear, analytical logic, which has a low tolerance for contradiction [10–12]. On the other hand, East Asian culture traditionally has been characterized by dialecticism, which expects and accepts contradictions. Such dialecticism can lead East Asians to attend to both positive and negative aspects of positive and negative emotions, whereas linear/analytic logic can

³ A pro-positive (contra-negative) emotion system means a positive (negative) orientation toward positive (negative) emotions, whereas a balanced emotion system means both a positive and negative orientation toward positive and negative emotions. Importantly, the distinctions between these constructs are based on the directionality of orientations, independently from their underlying reasons. For example, people can show a pro-positive orientation not only for a hedonic reason but also for an instrumental reason. In other research, various terms (*e.g.*, pro-hedonic, hedonic, contra-hedonic, or dialectical) have been used to capture similar constructs. We use the terms ‘pro-positive and contra-negative’ and ‘balanced’ to separate the constructs from their underlying reasons and socio-cultural roots.

lead Westerners to focus on positive aspects of positive emotions and negative aspects of negative emotions.

These socio-cultural factors have been theorized to underlie how positive and negative emotions are valued, regulated, and experienced in Western and Eastern cultures. Further, the valuation, regulation, and experiences of emotions can mutually shape and reinforce each other as a system of emotion (see Figure 1). In the following sections, each of these elements will be reviewed in turn.

Culture influences the valuation of emotions

One of the core elements of an emotion system is the valuation of emotions. Compared to Westerners who hold a predominantly positive valuation of positive emotions, Easterners tend to hold a more balanced valuation of positive emotions by also attending to negative aspects of positive emotions [17–19]. For example, compared to European Americans, Japanese have been found to perceive more negative effects and less positive effects of positive emotions [20]. Further, such cultural differences in the valuation of positive emotions extend to implicit measures; whereas Germans are faster to associate positive than negative constructs with positive emotions [21], Chinese are faster to associate negative than positive constructs with happiness, suggesting the existence of

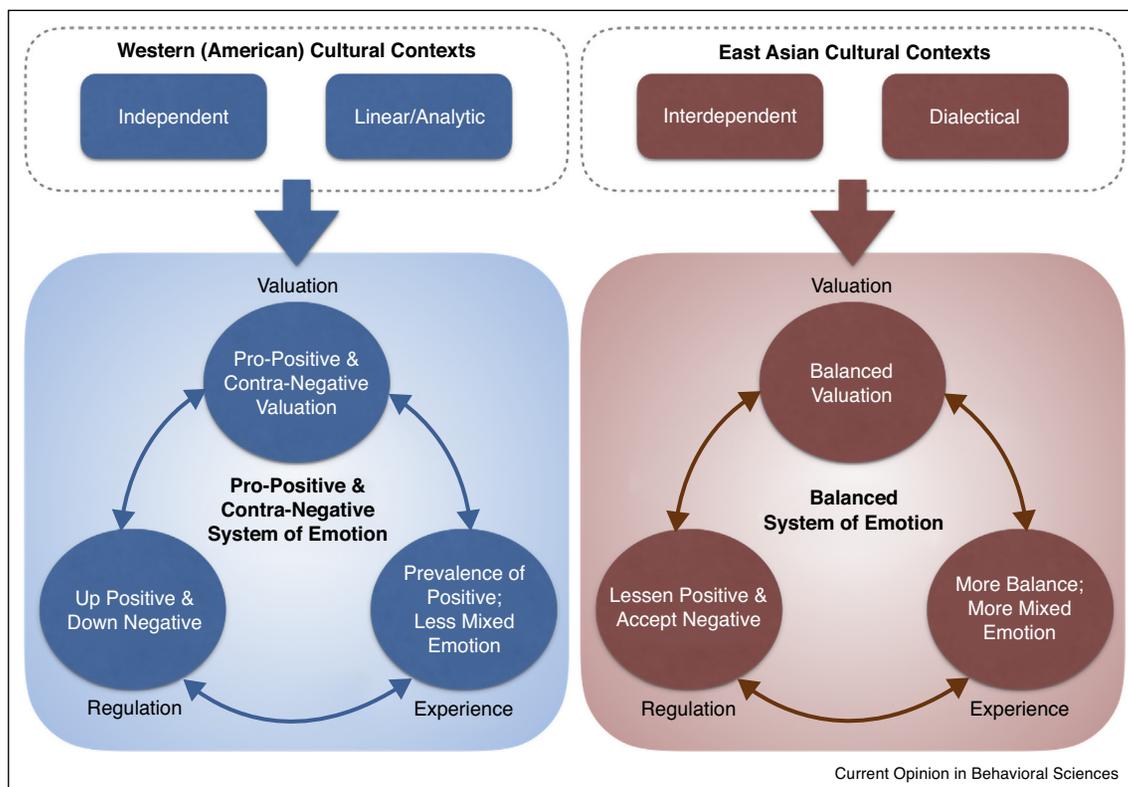
a balanced (even negative) valuation of happiness among Chinese [22].

On the other hand, a negative valuation of negative emotions is more prevalent in Western (especially American) culture than it is in Eastern culture, where a more balanced valuation of negative emotions exists. For example, negative emotions are considered to be more personally and socially undesirable in Western culture than they are in Eastern culture [23]. On the other hand, East Asians are more likely than are European Americans to perceive the utility of negative emotions, such as motivating them to work harder [24]. Furthermore, what people perceive as ideal emotions differ across cultures; whereas Americans consider the maximization of positive emotions and the minimization of negative emotions as ideal, such a tendency is weaker among Chinese ([25], see also Ref. [26]).

Culture influences the regulation of emotions

Another core element of an emotion system is how people regulate their emotions. Previous cross-cultural studies on emotion regulation mostly have focused on the *expression* of emotion (for a review see Ref. [27]). However, the valuation of emotions has been shown to shape how people regulate their emotional *experiences* [21,28,29]. Because cultures differ in the valuation of positive and

Figure 1



Pro-positive and contra-negative versus balanced systems of emotion.

negative emotions, culture also may influence how people regulate emotional experiences.

Some support has been provided by recent studies. After experiencing an unpleasant event and feeling negative emotions, East Asians were less interested in getting out of, and thus were more accepting of, a negative emotional state than were European Americans [24]. Such cultural differences were explained partly by their beliefs about the utility of negative emotions. On the other hand, after experiencing a *pleasant* event and feeling positive emotions, East Asians were more likely than European Americans to dampen their positive emotions, and cultural differences were explained by beliefs about potential negative aspects of positive emotions [18]. Such cultural differences are not limited to field or retrospective studies. A recent study that experimentally induced positive emotions in a laboratory setting also found that East Asians were more likely than were European Americans to dampen their positive emotions in general, and especially when they were expecting to engage in a demanding task [20]. Together, these findings suggest that increasing positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions are the dominant emotion regulation strategies in American culture, whereas lessening positive emotions and accepting negative emotions seem to be the more dominant emotion regulation strategies in Eastern culture.

Culture influences emotional experiences

The third core element of an emotion system is emotional experiences. In both retrospective [30–32] and online reports of emotions [32–34], studies have documented that positive emotions prevail over negative emotions among the emotional experiences of Westerners, but that the prevalence of positive emotions tends to be weaker among Easterners (though also see Ref. [35]). Some studies have found that even though there are no cultural differences in emotional experiences in immediate situations, cultural differences emerge as time elapses ([18,36] though see Ref. [32]).

Cultures also differ in how positive and negative emotions are *associated with each other*. Studies that have examined the association between positive and negative emotions across individuals consistently have found cultural differences. These *between-subject* correlational analyses show that positive and negative emotions are associated negatively with each other in American culture, whereas the negative association is weaker, non-existent, or even reversed among Easterners [30,35,37–39]. Studies on *within-subject* correlations (*i.e.*, those that measure emotional experiences across multiple times/situations and examine how positive and negative emotions are associated *within* each individual) have found that the association between positive and negative emotions tends to be more strongly negative, and findings regarding cultural

differences tend to be conflicting; some researchers have found significant cultural differences [25,40], whereas others have found no differences [39,41]. One potential source for this variation across findings could be the nature of situation. For example, cultural differences in studies examining within-subject correlations were larger when participants were in pleasant (than when they were in unpleasant) situations ([42] though see Ref. [25]) or in Asian (rather than European American) cultural contexts [43].

Others also have explored how positive and negative emotions *co-occur* within a specific situation (*i.e.*, *mixed emotions*; *e.g.*, feeling happy and sad at the same time) rather than how they are correlated with each other (see Ref. [44] for the distinction between correlations and co-occurrences). Some studies have found that in general, Easterners experience more mixed emotions than do Westerners [40,45]. At the same time, cultural differences in mixed emotions also have been shown to depend on the nature of situation. For example, highly ambivalent situations (*e.g.*, watching a bittersweet film, the first day of college) tend to elicit stronger mixed emotions both within the U.S. [46,47], and across cultures [48]. On the other hand, consistent with studies examining within-subject correlations [42], cultural differences in mixed emotions tend to be larger in pleasant situations than they are in unpleasant situations ([48] also see Ref. [49,50]; for similar effects of situational valence in *inter-group* contexts, see Ref. [51,52]). It is possible that Easterners are more likely than are Westerners to experience mixed emotions in pleasant situations because Easterners perceive negative aspects of positive emotions more than Westerners do. In contrast, in unpleasant situations, both Westerners and Easterners may experience mixed emotions, though for different reasons; whereas Easterners may perceive positive aspects of negative emotions due to their balanced views of emotions, Westerners may be motivated to increase positive emotions due to their contra-negative orientation to emotions.

Conclusion and future directions

We reviewed recent studies that showed cultural differences in the valuation, regulation, and experience of emotion. These findings show that a pro-positive/contra-negative system of emotion is predominant in Western, especially American cultural contexts, whereas a balanced system of emotion is dominant in East Asian cultural contexts.

There are many important directions for future research. First, different systems of emotions may have divergent implications for mental and physical health. A wealth of studies conducted mostly in Western cultures have shown that negative emotions lead to worse health [53], whereas positive emotions lead to better health [54]. However, the

health effects of emotions could be rooted partly in a pro-positive/contra-negative system of emotions. In fact, recent studies have shown that negative emotions are associated with worse mental and physical health, including an elevated inflammation of interleukin-6 levels in Americans, but not in Japanese [55,56].

Second, although the present review focused on positive and negative emotions in general, it is also important to examine specific kinds of positive and negative emotions. For example, low arousal positive emotions (*e.g.*, calm) are perceived to be more ideal by Asians than they are by European Americans [29], and anger is suggested to be a condemned emotion in Japan but not in the U.S. [57]. These findings suggest that, although Easterners are less likely than are Westerners to hold a pro-positive/contra-negative attitude toward emotions in general, there can be certain emotions toward which Easterners hold more pro-positive/contra-negative attitudes than Westerners do.

Finally, mechanisms underlying cultural differences need to be elucidated. It has been suggested that two socio-cultural factors shape emotion systems; for example, some studies have shown that interdependence is associated with a balanced valuation of emotions [25] and mixed emotions [40], while others have shown that dialectical thinking is linked to mixed emotions [45,49,51]. Of note is that interdependence and dialecticism co-exist in East Asian culture and thus these two cultural factors likely are supporting and sustaining each other mutually [10,58]. However, there are other cultures like Latin American cultures that are characterized by interdependence but not by dialecticism. More systematic explorations of cultures beyond Eastern and Western contexts would be informative in disentangling the effects of interdependence from dialecticism, and identifying other potential socio-cultural factors that influence emotion systems. It also is important to note that the different elements of emotion systems (valuation, regulation, and experiences of emotions) likely are shaping each other, thus serving as another more proximal mechanism that contributes to and sustains culturally divergent systems of emotions (*i.e.*, double-headed arrows connecting the elements in Figure 1; [59]). For example, cultural differences in the pro-positive/contra-negative valuation of emotions have been shown to account for cultural differences in pro-positive/contra-negative emotion regulation and emotional experiences [18,24,25]. Further exploration of the links between the elements of emotion systems would be informative.

We believe that these investigations will contribute to an understanding of cultural differences in emotions, as well as to an understanding of how our emotions are shaped and sustained by the socio-cultural contexts in which we are embedded.

Conflict of interest statement

None.

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This recent chapter summarizes a wide range of evidence on cultural differences in emotional experiences and outlines three ways through which culture shapes emotional experiences: by prescribing norms and ideals about emotions, by providing situations that afford emotions that are in line with cultural norms and ideals, and via the interpersonal regulation of emotions.