Is there an element of universality when describing emotions and emotional expressions? Do cultures vary in their emotional display rules? Researchers across several disciplines have investigated these questions in an effort to understand the effect of culture on verbal and nonverbal displays of emotion. Recent research has extended these efforts to assess displays of emotion in online settings, which have their own defining characteristics. Applied work in this field offers additional insights, as inherently emotional situations also offer opportunities to study cross-cultural similarities and differences. This entry presents a selection of these investigations and provides recommendations for improving cultural sensitivity.

Communicating emotions and mood: Nonverbal, verbal, and online methods

Using a variety of instruments and methods, researchers have noted many ways in which emotional expressions differ as a function of culture. For example, nonverbal investigations have provided insight into how gestures and expressiveness differ across cultures, while verbal investigations have included not only semantic, meaningful content, but also tone and prosody. More recently, researchers have begun to study emoticon usage in an effort to understand how emotions are communicated in online venues, which are purely visual in their presentation. Cross-cultural differences in nonverbal, verbal, and online emotional expression are discussed further below.

Nonverbal components of emotional expressions

Cross-cultural investigations of nonverbal emotional expressions have assessed posture, facial expressions, and expressivity. In one of these investigations, Kleinsmith, De Silva, and Bianchi-Berthouze (2006) studied cultural differences in recognizing emotion via body posture. Using static posture images (or “affective avatars”), the authors assessed anger, fear, happiness, and sadness recognition. Japanese, Sri Lankan, and American participants were asked to label the emotion represented by the avatars and rate their intensity. Results from the labeling task revealed that these three cultures performed in, for the most part, similar ways. Differences occurred with...
fear and anger postures, which the Japanese participants recognized better than the Sri Lankan and American participants. Very generally, the negative postures were recognized better by the Japanese and Sri Lankan participants. Results from the intensity ratings revealed that the Japanese participants also assigned more intense ratings. Importantly, the actors used in this study were primarily Japanese adults. Though computer avatars were created, and all facial features removed, some trace of cultural familiarity between the Japanese participants and the avatars may have simplified these tasks.

Other studies have controlled for this potential confound by including a variety of cultures within their stimuli set. With a set of facial expressions, Beaupré and Hess (2005) assessed emotion recognition among sub-Saharan African, Chinese, and French Canadian adults living in Canada. Because these cultures were equally represented among participants and stimuli, the authors were able to assess any advantages according to ingroup and outgroup effects. Ingroup advantages were particularly rare and limited to one: sub-Saharan African participants recognized fear more accurately when displayed by sub-Saharan African actors than by Chinese actors. Overall, their data did not endorse any significant ingroup advantage. General effects observed across all cultures included a recognition advantage for happy expressions. Recognition differences according to participant culture were numerous: French Canadians made the fewest errors, while sub-Saharan African participants made the greatest number of errors. Specific error patterns also differed according to culture: French Canadian participants confused contempt and disgust with anger, while sub-Saharan African participants confused serenity with negative emotions.

Beaupré and Hess's (2005) results—particularly their lack of ingroup effects—are quite rare in this area of research. In a large-scale investigation of emotional display rules among 32 countries, Matsumoto et al. (2008) assessed the intensity of emotional expressions across a variety of emotions and contexts. The authors observed more traditional ingroup effects, with participants endorsing greater ingroup expressivity than outgroup expressivity, and this effect was particularly pronounced with individualistic cultures across both positive and negative emotions. Across all cultures, contempt, disgust, and fear were not endorsed according to ingroup or outgroup standards. Together, these results indicate that cultural norms endorse some emotional displays, but not others, and that these emotions are then more recognizable according to body posture, facial expressions, and so on.

*Verbal components of emotional expressions according to culture*

Other researchers have assessed cross-cultural differences in the ability to detect emotion from speech cues. Sensitivity to emotion in speech has been primarily tested using semantic-free speech samples. In one early example of these investigations, McCluskey and Albas (1981) assessed the developmental course of this ability, testing young children, adult, and elderly Canadian and Mexican populations. Using filtered expressions of happiness, sadness, love, and anger, the authors observed significant age effects. Sensitivity to emotional content improved over time until somewhat decreasing after 25
years of age, and this was consistent across both populations. In terms of listener effects,
Mexican participants were more sensitive to the emotional content of both Mexican
and Canadian stimuli than were Canadian participants. Moreover, both Mexican and
Canadian participants were better able to identify emotional content in Mexican speak-
ers than in Canadian speakers. These results highlight the importance of speech cues in
training emotional sensitivity, considering the wide variance in cultural norms.
Researchers have also compared the importance of nonverbal and verbal compo-
nents of emotional expression. In one of these efforts, Weathers, Frank, and Spell
(2002) assessed emotional sensitivity among African American and Caucasian adults
with both face and voice stimuli. Their stimuli included both adults and children, to
compare emotional expressivity and perceptibility among these age groups. The highest
accuracy rates were observed among Caucasian participants when presented with
Caucasian faces and voices. Thus, there was a strong ingroup advantage for emotion
identification, and this effect was particularly pronounced with the child stimuli. These
results suggest that either children’s emotions are more easily identified than an adult’s
emotions, or that they are more expressive with their emotional displays. Overall, all
participants were better able to identify emotions with face stimuli than with voice
stimuli. Thus, while identifying emotion certainly relies on both nonverbal and verbal
information, facial expressions do appear to provide more information about a person’s
current emotional state than do prosody and tone.

Emotional expressions in online settings
Having described nonverbal and verbal methods of emotional expression, online meth-
ods deserve some special attention. These include the use of emoticons—graphic rep-
resentations of facial expressions—to study emotional expression in text-based social
network services (e.g., Twitter), chat rooms, blogs, and so on (Park, Baek, & Cha, 2014;
Vogel & Janssen, 2009). Recent investigations related to emoticon usage have identified
interesting cross-cultural comparisons, including differences in emoticon preference
and frequency of usage. Moreover, trends in emoticon usage may depend on emotion-
ally charged current events specific to location and culture, as an indicator of political
climate, for example (Vogel & Janssen, 2009).
In their study of positive, negative, and neutral emoticon usage, Vogel and Janssen
(2009) examined Swedish, Italian, German, and English electronic communication
on UseNews over a series of 66 consecutive weeks. Across these four languages, more
German postings included emoticons, and their emoticons were largely positive.
Italian, on the other hand, had the fewest positive emoticons and the highest number
of negative emoticons. The authors also assessed posts according to topic, comparing
political and scientific postings. Within science posts, German, English, and Italian
posts included primarily positive emoticons, while emoticons within Swedish posts
were mostly ambiguous. Differences in political posts were restricted to Swedish and
Italian posts, wherein Italian posts included as many negative emoticons as Swedish
posts included positive emoticons. Regardless of the content of these posts, Vogel
and Janssen (2009) also found that differences in these general trends coincided with
current events. For example, a large spike in positive emoticon usage among Swedish posts coincided with Nobel Week, while a large spike in negative emoticon usage coincided with a drop in Ericsson shares.

A more recent large-scale investigation, assessing usage across 78 countries via Twitter, also revealed cross-cultural differences in emoticon preference. In their study, Park et al. (2014) compared individualistic and collectivistic cultures to examine preferences for horizontal emoticons : ) and vertical emoticons ^_^ . Their results indicated that collectivistic cultures preferred vertical emoticons, and individualistic cultures preferred horizontal emoticons. Thus, it appears to be the case that mouth-oriented emotional expressions, which are far more explicit emotional displays, are more frequently used by individualistic cultures; the opposite is true of collectivistic cultures, who prefer eye-oriented emotional expressions.

**Effects of culture and setting on emotional expressions**

Having described the basic and theoretical findings, the following section discusses the more applied research: how emotional display rules differ in a variety of settings and when these differences vary as a function of culture. To focus this discussion on settings that are inherently emotional themselves, cross-cultural differences will be described within relationships, mental health settings, and in the workplace.

**Emotional expressions within relationships**

Cultural variation in emotional displays is particularly interesting within relationship settings. Researchers have examined the ways in which emotion is communicated across friends, family, and romantic partners, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In one early example, Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, and Burleson (1997) compared the significance of emotional support across Asian Americans, African Americans, and European Americans. Their primary goals were to assess the importance of comforting between same-sex friends and to compare emotion-focused and problem-focused goals in situations requiring emotional support. The authors detected several differences across their three populations. For one, European and Asian Americans considered comforting skill significantly more important than did African Americans, and this was particularly pronounced among female respondents. With regard to emotion-focused goals, Asian American males rated them more important than did African American males, while European American females rated these goals more important than did African American females. Among problem-focused goals, Asian and European American males rated these goals more important in social support situations than did African American males. Finally, very broadly, females rated comforting strategies as both more sensitive and effective than did males. Together, these results indicate that both ethnicity and gender affect attitudes toward emotional support in same-sex friendship, though, in this case, ethnicity mattered a great deal more.
Some more recent investigations have compared emotional display rules across different cultures. In one study, Vikan, Dias, and Roazzi (2009) assessed anger, anxiety, and sadness display and concealment preferences in Brazilian and Norwegian populations (collectivistic and individualistic cultures, respectively). Participants were also asked to consider how emotional displays would differ with their spouse/partner, close family and friends, and others. Overall, Vikan et al. (2009) found significant culture-specific preferences. Brazilians, from a collectivistic culture, indicated that they preferred to conceal anger and sadness. Norwegians, on the other hand, preferred to display these emotions. In terms of relationships, Brazilians indicated that they were more open with their friends than with family, and the opposite was true for Norwegians. According to the authors, these results are aligned with what we might expect along the individualistic–collectivistic dimension of cultural identity.

In another investigation of emotional display rules, Caldwell-Harris, Kronrod, and Yang (2013) compared affection and usage of *I love you* and its approximate Chinese translation *Wo ai ni* among American and Chinese students. Using both interview and survey methods, the authors’ pattern of results supported previous investigations with collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Generally, American students felt more comfortable expressing affection to family than did the Chinese students, who felt more comfortable expressing affection to friends. Americans also felt more comfortable saying *I love you* and other verbal expressions of love than the Chinese felt saying *Wo ai ni*. Overall, the Chinese students endorsed more reasons to avoid using this phrase than to use it, with other results indicating that they found the phrase too formal and preferred to express love in nonverbal ways (e.g., talking, doing chores, sharing an activity). Thus, Caldwell-Harris et al. (2013) assert that these cultures reserve strong verbal displays of affection for different relationships. Their results also lend support to the notion that translation equivalencies for emotion words and phrases are quite rare.

**Implications for mental health and hospital settings**

Among applied settings, a few are particularly important to this discussion. Both mental health and hospital settings require advanced training and awareness of cultural similarities and differences. For example, among Hispanic populations, Santiago-Rivera, Altarriba, Poll, Gonzalez-Miller, and Cragun (2009) have noted the importance of linguistically and culturally relevant services, given the likelihood that these populations will be speaking and learning Spanish in their family home, and the importance of the Spanish language to their cultural identity. Thus, it would be particularly useful for counseling practices and therapeutic techniques to adopt a multicultural approach with bilingual elements, rather than purely monolingual elements. In fact, cultural and linguistic considerations will likely improve both communication and treatment outcomes, overall.

Why are linguistic considerations so important for clinical interventions? For one, with an English-speaking counselor, a client whose English proficiency lags behind their Spanish proficiency will prioritize pronunciation and syntax over content (Marcos
This trade-off will likely lead to misunderstandings and misdiagnoses. It is also possible that clients’ verbal expressions and emotional displays will be either conflicting or mismatched, causing some confusion for counselors. As a result, these communication difficulties affect the expression of psychopathology. However, it is also the case that bilinguals sometimes prefer to discuss negative or difficult topics in a nonnative language. In a native language, emotion words have more complex representations, as they have been applied in more settings and across a greater variety of experiences. Activating an emotion word in a native language will then activate more feelings than activating that word in a nonnative language. A client’s feelings will likely be more vivid in a native language, as well, as speaking in a nonnative language can lead to feeling “split off” from the emotional experience (Marcos & Urcuyo, 1979).

Thus, with bilingual populations, accuracy may suffer when expressing emotional experiences in a nonnative language, while anxiety is heightened when reliving these experiences in a native language. Given these complex issues, these researchers have made some important recommendations. First, effective treatment plans can greatly benefit from a language assessment during the initial phase of treatment, such as the intake process. Ideally, this assessment would survey a variety of background and proficiency variables, including the length of time spent in the host culture, the number of languages spoken at home, the age of spoken and written language acquisition, and several fluency dimensions. The assessment should also be used to determine language dominance, as well as the client’s own preferences when discussing emotional topics, feelings, and symptoms.

Additional recommendations have been made about the language used within therapy, as both interpreters and strategic language-switching can assist bilingual clients. Having a carefully trained bilingual interpreter can help bridge the linguistic gap between the bilingual client and their monolingual counselor (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2009). With ongoing training, having a third person present in counseling may not interfere with or detract from treatment. Having access to both languages, the interpreter can better evaluate and communicate the client’s emotional status to the counselor in a complete affective formulation (Farini & Barbieri, 2009). Finally, a bilingual approach that allows the client to freely switch from one language to the other may also be highly beneficial. In this approach, the client is able to choose the most meaningful words, without sacrificing content or associations because of translation difficulties (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2009). Because many words do not have exact translations, it would certainly be useful for bilinguals to have access to a bilingual mode within therapy sessions. With this bilingual mode, the client chooses how to communicate and express their emotions, while simultaneously aiding the counselor in understanding their personal experiences, culture, and identity.

**Emotion and culture in the workplace**

Another emotional setting that necessitates cultural awareness and understanding is within the workplace. As multicultural and multinational companies and organizations become more common within an interconnected world, both coworker
emotions and expressions across cultures

relationships and supervisor–worker relationships can benefit from understanding cultural differences. In addition, businesspeople, diplomats, foreign students, and other individuals who are new to a culture will likely experience great difficulty with both verbal and nonverbal elements of communication. Perhaps the greatest difficulties they will encounter are those in the workplace, including, debates, subtle exchanges, negotiations, and bargaining (Furnham, 1989). For these new employees, stressful and anxiety-provoking experiences can incur a particularly negative form of culture shock. Furnham (1989) has argued that, across a variety of intercultural skills, companies should emphasize social skills training above all others. In other words, teaching employees how to understand cultural differences related to social behaviors may be the most effective strategy for companies wishing to support their new employees.

However, even with training, workplace conflict due to cultural differences can still occur. Other differences may still be present and problematic, such as differences in status or communication style. For example, people from low-context cultures (often in Western, individualistic cultures) communicate their emotions directly, with facial expressions and body movements, while those from high-context cultures (often in Eastern, collectivist cultures) are more likely to hide these outward expressions, using a more indirect and implicit manner of communication (Hall, 1976). As a result of these differences, conflict management also differs cross-culturally.

In their study, Brew and Cairns (2004) tested these differences, as well as other workplace constraints (e.g., deadlines, workplace status, etc.) for their effect on conflicts. Using both urgent and non-urgent scenarios, they assessed communication and conflict management styles, among Western expatriates (primarily Australians) and Asian host-nationals working in Singapore and Bangkok. Their results indicated that, while cultural norms matter a great deal, so do specific situational factors, though these differed across their populations: Australian expatriates considered both the urgency of the scenario and the cultural identity of the conflicting individual, while the Asian host-nationals considered urgency and the status of the conflicting individual. Thus, cultural awareness training with these populations should consider how understanding these factors can lessen conflict and promote a company’s goals for its employees.

Semnani-Azad and Adair (2013) have also investigated the effect of culture on emotional situations in the workplace. Their study assessed negotiation strategies for staff and advertising issues across Canadian and Chinese populations. The authors were particularly interested in paralinguistic components of business negotiations: warmth, expressiveness, calmness, and speech rate. Understanding these components can provide insight into how businesses can promote relationships and trust among multicultural employees. Their results revealed several important distinctions between the Canadian and Chinese participants. For example, the Canadian negotiators expressed emotions by varying vocal tone and increasing speech rate. Chinese negotiators, on the other hand, were more likely to inhibit emotions, by exhibiting calmness and concealing verbal emotional expressions. One additional finding was particularly important: Active engagement in the negotiation process is also displayed differently, as Canadians appeared highly expressive, while the Chinese appeared very calm and exhibited low expressiveness.
Together, these studies indicate that differences in cultural norms are also apparent in workplace settings, with Eastern and Western cultures possessing different display rules in conflict and negotiation situations. There are important implications for companies, as both supervisors and employees should be mindful of how others display emotion and engagement. Because errors in perceiving engagement can lead to negative outcomes for the company, cultural awareness training should certainly include opportunities for improving communication and reducing ambiguity among coworkers.

Conclusions

Studying the relationship between culture and emotion is an important and fruitful endeavor. Findings have been informative for both researchers and laypeople alike. Implicit knowledge about one’s culture and emotional display rules lessens the burden of perception and interpretation. Recognizing emotion in other cultures, however, is often more difficult. This review has outlined several settings in which misunderstandings can be particularly damaging; errors in the workplace, for example, can lead to employees thinking that their coworkers are disengaged or uninterested in their work responsibilities. Understanding cross-cultural differences in a variety of relationship settings is also important, as expressing emotion with others—be they family members, close friends and romantic partners, or mental health counselors—will vary in their appearance. Taken together, cross-cultural differences in these settings necessitate a greater need for understanding, perhaps via additional training and education in the appropriate settings, to fully appreciate the norms and display rules characteristic of the populations regularly encountered.

SEE ALSO: Bi- and Multilingualism; Conversational Norms across Cultures; Cross-Cultural Communication Theory and Research, Overview; Cultural Communication, Overview; Ethnography of Cultural Communication; Identity and Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Communication in Healthcare; Rhetoric and Intercultural Communication

References


**Further readings**


Jeanette Altarriba is a professor of psychology and vice provost and dean for undergraduate education at the University at Albany, SUNY, as well as the director of the Cognition and Language Laboratory. Her research interests include psychology of language, bilingualism, eye movements and reading, survival memory, and cognition and emotion. She has published her work in numerous scientific journals such as the *Journal of Memory and Language, Cognition and Emotion*, and *Memory & Cognition* and has coedited seven books on cognition, memory, and bilingualism. Dr. Altarriba has also received various distinguished awards in the realm of teaching and mentoring.

Stephanie A. Kazanas is an assistant professor of psychology at Tennessee Technological University. Her current research interests include adaptive memory, emotion word processing, and second language acquisition. Her dissertation examined the role of emotion in face recognition and face–name pair learning. As a doctoral student, she was awarded the President’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, a university-wide award recognizing consistently superior teaching. Recent publications appear in the *American Journal of Psychology, Evolutionary Psychology, Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, and *Language and Speech*. Currently, she is teaching upper-level coursework in experimental psychology, cognitive psychology, and emotion, as well as mentoring undergraduate research.