BRIEF REPORT

Emotional Fit With Culture: A Predictor of Individual Differences in Relational Well-Being

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There is increasing evidence for emotional fit in couples and groups, but also within cultures. In the current research, we investigated the consequences of emotional fit at the cultural level. Given that emotions reflect people’s view on the world, and that shared views are associated with good social relationships, we expected that an individual’s fit to the average cultural patterns of emotion would be associated with relational well-being. Using an implicit measure of cultural fit of emotions, we found across 3 different cultural contexts (United States, Belgium, and Korea) that (1) individuals’ emotional fit is associated with their level of relational well-being, and that (2) the link between emotional fit and relational well-being is particularly strong when emotional fit is measured for situations pertaining to relationships (rather than for situations that are self-focused). Together, the current studies suggest that people may benefit from emotionally “fitting in” to their culture.

Keywords: emotion, culture, fit, relationships, well-being

There is increasing evidence for emotional fit: People’s emotions are similar to those of others around them. Emotional fit has been found for couples, groups, and cultures (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003; De Leersnyder, Mesquita, & Kim, 2011; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007; Totterdell, 2000). One of the reasons for emotional fit may be that people who interact and share a social identity come to see the world in similar ways.

Consistently, emotions have often been conceived of as views of the world; they reflect a stance (Solomon, 2004) or an intention to act (Frijda, 2007). For instance, anger implies an attitude of non-acceptance and an intention to make others comply with our wishes (Frijda, Kuipers, & Terschure, 1989). In contrast, embarrassment implies a sense of personal failure and an intention to restore social standing (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Experiencing anger toward a boss who neglected you for a promotion reflects a different stance and intention to act than experiencing the same intensity of anger in combination with embarrassment. Thus, how emotions are patterned within situations reflects a view on the world.

To the extent that people share a view on the world, we may expect them to experience similar patterns of emotion. This is the case within a cultural context. For instance, in European American contexts that highlight autonomy and individuality, people tend to experience more emotions that reflect individual self-worth and personal autonomy, such as pride and anger, than emotions that highlight interdependence and social alignment, such as closeness and embarrassment. In contrast, in East Asian contexts that highlight interdependence and connectedness, people tend to experience more closeness than pride and no more anger than embarrassment (e.g., Boiger, Mesquita, Uchida, & Barrett, 2013; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994). Moreover, even when the most intense emotions (e.g., anger) are held constant, the patterns of simultaneously experienced emotions (e.g., embarrassment) tend to be “cultured” in subtle, yet distinct ways. In several studies, we compared individuals’ emotional patterns with average patterns of their own versus another culture, and consistently found a better emotional fit with the own culture (De Leersnyder, Mesquita, & Kim, 2013a, 2013b). Emotional fit appears to stand for an individual’s viewed cultural world.

In the current research we aim to investigate the consequences of emotional fit with culture. Given that emotions reflect a particular view on the world, similarity in emotional patterns stands for a shared view. Previous research has found that sharing a view on

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the world—as measured by people’s attitudes—may be very powerful in establishing or maintaining social bonds (e.g., Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007; Byrne, 1971; Sani, 2005). Building on these findings, we argue that the experience of emotions, as a signal of one’s worldview, may also serve a similar function. Therefore, we expect that people’s fit to their own culture’s patterns of emotion is associated with relational well-being (e.g., Ryff, 1989).

In three different cultures, we tested the hypotheses (1) that people’s cultural fit of emotions is associated with their level of relational well-being (as opposed to other domains of well-being), and (2) that the link between emotional fit and relational well-being is particularly strong when emotional fit is measured for situations pertaining to relationships, given that how people feel in these relationship-focused situations would be more consequential to others than how they feel in self-focused situations.

The current research goes beyond existing emotion research by contextualizing the functionality of emotions. First, it considers the consequences of emotion at the level of patterns of co-occurring emotions, rather than of discrete emotions. Second, this research focuses on benefits of the cultural fit of an individual’s emotions, rather than of these emotions per se.

General Method

Materials

Cultural fit in emotions. To measure cultural fit, we adopted the Emotional Patterns Questionnaire (EPQ; De Leersnyder et al., 2011). In the EPQ, participants are presented with prompts that are defined by valence (positive, negative), relationship focus (about your relationship with others, about things that happened to you personally) and social context (Family, Work/school, Friends). The prompt also lists sample emotions expected to be most intense in the situation (e.g., ashamed, guilty, indebted for negative relationship-focused situations). Participants first describe a situation from their own recent past that matches the prompt, and then rate the intensity of their emotions in that situation according to a set of emotion scales (1 = totally not – 7 = extremely) that covered the domain of emotional experience (as in De Leersnyder et al., 2011). The intensity ratings of the full set of emotions (20 in Studies 1 and 3, and 34 in Study 2) constitute an individual’s emotional profile for a specific type of situation.

We calculated each participant’s cultural fit by 1) calculating the culture’s average emotion profiles for each type of situation, and 2) running profile correlations between each individual’s profile and the average cultural profile for the corresponding situation.1 We excluded emotion items from the profile if there was no within-sample agreement about their meaning (as suggested by low or cross-loadings on a Principal Component Analysis). Furthermore, each participant’s own scores were omitted from the average cultural profile to which they were compared. Fisher z-transformations of the fit-scores were used for statistical analysis. In each study, we excluded participants when the valence of their self-reported situations did not match the valence of the prompt (Study 1, n = 3; Study 2, n = 9; Study 3, n = 5).

Relational well-being. Participants completed either the long (Studies 1 and 3) or the short (Study 2) version of the World Health Organization’s Quality of Life Questionnaire (WHOQOL-

Study 1

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 31 European Americans from a community sample (60% female; M_age = 38 years (SD_age = 14); M_social_class = 3.17 (SD_social_class = .80) on a scale from 1 = working class – 5 = upper class). Participants were recruited in public places, such as malls, and received $10 for their participation.

All participants completed four versions of the EPQ: two were relationship-focused, and two were self-focused (one positive and one negative for each). Each participant completed all prompts with respect to the same context (Family n = 17; Work/school n = 14). The order of the prompts was counterbalanced, but there were no order effects. In the PCA (explaining 60% of the variance), all emotion items loaded well on three theoretically meaningful factors and were retained to establish the average profiles. Results on the link between relational well-being and emotional fit in positive and negative situations were not different. Therefore, we collapsed the fit scores across negative and positive situations, obtaining one fit score for relationship-focused and one for self-focused situations.

Participants completed the long version of the WHO Quality of Life scale (Relational well-being α = .72; M = 14.28 [SD = 2.84]; Overall Quality of Life α = .89; M = 15.01 [SD = 2.22]).

Results

To test the link between relational well-being and emotional fit in relationship-focused situations we conducted 1) correlational analyses and 2) linear regression analyses in which we controlled for variables that may be related to relational well-being (Carton, Kessler, & Pape, 1999). As expected, emotional fit was positively correlated to relational well-being (H1); yet only in relationship-focused situations and not in self-focused situations (H2; Table 1.

1 Profile correlations have the advantage that they 1) take into account the similarity across a whole set of emotions; 2) capture the idea of emotional patterns (i.e., the relative intensities of different emotions); 3) are not prone to individual differences in scale use. The use of summed absolute difference scores as a fit measure yielded convergent results in predicting relational well-being when these scores were normally distributed. However, the summed difference scores were normally distributed in only one of the three studies.
Study 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 in a different cultural context, and including a larger sample.

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred sixty-seven Belgian psychology freshmen participated in this study (84% female; Mean age = 19 years; SD = 1.86). Socioeconomic status was operationalized as the parents’ highest degree of education (0 = no diploma – 4 = university diploma; \( M_{\text{education\_father}} = 3.59 \) [SD = .58]; \( M_{\text{education\_mother}} = 3.58 \) [SD = .69]).

Students participated in the study for course credit. Each student completed the EPQ for two different situations, similar in valence and context, yet one pertaining to a relationship-focused situation, the other pertaining to a self-focused situation. Participants rated their emotional experience on 34 items; 30 loaded well on four factors, including emotional fit scores artificially. The EPQ included a Friends context (context_dum2), in addition to the Work/school context (context_dum1) and Family context (reference category).

Students completed the short version of the QOL. Relational well-being was measured by averaging the items: “How satisfied are you with your social relations?” and “How satisfied are you with the support you get from friends?” (\( \alpha = .62; M = 3.79 \) [SD = .43]). As in the previous study, the Overall Quality of Life index was calculated by averaging all domains not referring to relational well-being (\( \alpha = .85; M = 4.03 \) [SD = .70]).

Results

We adopted the same analytic strategy as in Study 1. Confirming both hypotheses 1 and 2, we found a positive correlation between relational well-being and cultural emotional fit in relationship-focused situations only (Table 1, panel B). Results from the regression analysis strengthened our confidence in this link (Table 2, panel B). Further steps of the regression analysis including two-way (step 5) and three-way (step 6) interactions between emotional fit on the one hand, and the between-subjects factors of valence and context on the other, did not reach significance in predicting relational well-being.

Study 3

Both studies 1 and 2 support the hypothesis that relational well-being is linked to cultural fit in situations that are about relationships. However, both the United States and Belgium are independent cultural contexts, characterized by similar types of relationships. Given the cultural differences in how central social relationships are to the self in independent versus interdependent cultural contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), we examined whether the same link would replicate in an interdependent context, such as Korea. We theorized that emotional fit is an important ingredient for relational well-being for most people at some basic level, and thus anticipated that the general pattern of results would hold.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 75 Koreans from a community sample (60% female; \( M_{\text{age}} = 28 \) years; \( SD_{\text{age}} = 4.25 \)). As an index of socioeconomic status participants reported their highest degree of education (dummy-coded as ‘edu_dum1’ = college \(( n = 41 \)); ‘edu_dum2’ = graduate school \(( n = 9 \)); with “reference group” = high school \(( n = 26 \)).

Participants were recruited through a Christian megachurch and received \( \text{W}10,000 \) for completing the questionnaires. The design and materials were similar to those used in Study 1. Again, there were no order-effects. We collapsed emotional fit scores into one score for relationship-focused and one for self-focused situations, as the patterns of association were similar between the relationship-focused as well as between the self-focused situations. The PCA on the emotion data (explaining 65% of the variance) yielded a clear three-factor structure for all but three items that were consequently omitted from the average pattern.

Participants completed the long version of the Quality of Life Scale from which we derived a Relational well-being scale (\( \alpha = 2 \). The item—“How satisfied are you with your sex life?”—was omitted because it was not normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk test = .870; df = 251, \( p \leq .001 \)).
well-being. Only in the Korean sample did we find a positive association with relational well-being than with other domains of social relations. Relational well-being was not associated with emotional patterns in their cultural context, they report to have better social fit in relationship-focused situations, which was expected, given that relationships. Relational well-being was not associated with emotional patterns in their cultural context, they report to have better social fit in relationship-focused situations, which was expected, given that relationships. Relational well-being was not associated with emotional patterns in their cultural context, they report to have better social fit in relationship-focused situations, which was expected, given that relationships. Relational well-being was not associated with emotional patterns in their cultural context, they report to have better social fit in relationship-focused situations, which was expected, given that relationships. 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either produce better relationship outcomes, or conversely, better relationships may produce better emotional fit; a feedback-loop between the two is likely.

These limitations notwithstanding, the research strongly suggests that the social functionality of emotions depends on their fit with the context.

References


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