The cultural construction of emotions

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A large body of anthropological and psychological research on emotions has yielded significant evidence that emotional experience is culturally constructed: people more commonly experience those emotions that help them to be a good and typical person in their culture. Moreover, experiencing these culturally normative emotions is associated with greater well-being. In this review, we summarize recent research showing how emotions are actively constructed to meet the demands of the respective cultural environment; we discuss collective as well as individual processes of construction. By focusing on cultural construction of emotion, we shift the focus toward how people from different cultures 'do' emotions and away from which emotions they 'have'.

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Anthropological and psychological research on emotions has yielded ample evidence suggesting that emotional experience is culturally constructed (for reviews, see [1,2,3•,4]). First, the most frequent and intense emotions differ by cultural context (e.g., [5]), and in each context central emotions are those that help individuals to be a good person and act in desirable ways. For instance, anger helps individuals to achieve personal goals, and therefore tends to be more frequent in cultures that collectively value individual goal pursuit compared to cultures that are organized around interpersonal harmony [5,6•,7]. Similarly, the contents and connotations of *particular* emotions fit cultural meanings, and help to achieve cultural goals (e.g., [8–10]). For instance, happiness is a personal hedonic experience in the U.S., where it signals and helps to achieve success; in comparison, happiness has social and ambivalent elements in Japan, rendering it more conducive to harmony-focused relationships [8, see also 11,12]. In addition, the *patterns* of emotional experience appear to be culturally normative: when people reported their emotions in particular situations (on 20–30 emotion scales),

individuals' patterns of emotions fit the average pattern of their own cultural group better than they fit the average pattern of other cultures [13]. The situations in these studies were standardized across cultures, meaning that there are cultural differences in the typical profiles of emotional responses to particular types of situations. Whether the patterning of emotions also reflects differences in culturally central goals is an empirical question that has not yet been addressed.

Second, experiencing culturally normative emotions is associated with higher well-being and lower symptom reporting. This is true both in studies that theoretically stipulate these normative emotions [5], and in studies that infer the normativity of an individual's emotions based on their fit with the cultural average [14–16]. In sum, individuals in a wide range of cultures benefit from experiencing culturally normative emotions; one possible explanation is that these emotions help individuals toward achieving 'collective intentionality', that is, the "power of minds to be jointly directed at objects, matters of fact, states of affairs, goals, or values" [[17, para. 1]]. Culturally normative emotions enable people to navigate the intricacies of their social environments in a coordinated fashion. This may also be the reason why these (patterns of) emotions occur at higher frequency and intensity. In the remainder of this review, we will summarize recent research showing how emotional experience is actively constructed by processes at both the collective and the individual level, which, in unison, achieve collective intentionality.

Cultural construction of emotions: processes at the level of the collective

To the extent that emotions help to perform culturally central tasks (examples are being unique or maintaining harmonious relationships), they will be afforded and promoted. One way through which collectives promote normative emotional states is by emphasizing them in the cultural products that people engage with. Several studies compared the emotions depicted in children's books in different cultures and found them to differ in meaningful ways [18•,19,20]. For example, Tsai and her colleagues showed that best-selling children's storybooks in Taiwan portray more calm than excited smiles, in line with the cultural task of adjusting to others, whereas North American storybooks typically portray their main characters with excited rather than calm smiles, in line with the task of influencing environments [19, Study 2]. Thus, in each culture, children's books modeled the emotions conducive to the central cultural tasks. Similarly, religious texts and religiously inspired self-help books [21] have been

shown to model emotions that are conducive to achieving the culturally valued tasks in a particular culture.

Individuals also select, or even construct, products that afford culturally valued emotions in others. When given a choice between different sympathy cards, European American compared to German students chose cards that can be thought to promote more positive and less negative emotions in others [22•]. European Americans encouraged positive emotions (and the 'can do' mentality that they ensue) that promote both the achievement and the mastery goals that are characteristic of a North American frontier mentality; Germans allowed for more negative emotions as those are more suited for the more pronounced concern with harmony and fitting in (see also [23]).

Cultural promotion (or avoidance) of certain emotional states also happens in social interactions. Indeed, cross-cultural research on anger and shame supported the idea that the typical interactions in a culture promote emotions that fit the respective collective intentionality [6•,18•,24•]. In one study [6•], Japanese and North American students read vignettes describing interactions that had been reported to elicit anger and shame by previous samples of Japanese and American students. For each vignette, the respondents judged how frequent this type of interaction occurred in their culture, and how much anger or shame it would elicit. Cross-culturally, the interactions thought to be most frequent were those that elicit culturally normative emotions; the least frequent interactions were those that elicit culturally condemned emotions. Anger was normative in the U.S., where it presumably promotes autonomy and independence, and undesirable in Japan, where it presumably violates the goal of relational harmony. Conversely, shame was normative in Japan, where critical self-reflection is thought to realize the ideal of relational harmony, and undesirable in the U.S., where it is thought to undermine the value of positive self-regard. In subsequent studies, we replicated this pattern in Turkey [24•] and Belgium [18•]: in all of these cultures, interactions that elicited culturally normative emotions were seen as frequent, whereas interactions that elicited culturally condemned emotions were perceived to be rare. Normative emotions in all these cases fostered the cultural values and goals, whereas condemned emotions ran against collective intentionality.

Only few studies observed how exactly interactions align individuals' emotions with the collective intentionality of their culture. The clearest examples come from field studies on parenting practices: parents instill socially valued emotions in children who show norm-inconsistent behavior [25,26••], and thus encourage their children to act according to the pertinent cultural norms and social structures. For example, Röttger-Rössler and colleagues found that, in response to children's norm violations, the Bara (Madagascar) use beating to instill strong experiences of fear (*tahotsy*) and the Minangkabau (Indonesia) use social exclusion strategies to instill shame-like emotions (*malu*). Fearful emotions (felt toward the sanctioning authorities such as elders) are functional for the Bara context, where society is segmented and hierarchical; shameful emotions are more suitable for maintaining smooth relations in the more stratified Minangkabau society, where social harmony is the goal. Parents thus use socially valued emotions to override other, less desirable, emotions and behaviors.

Cultural construction of emotions: individual-level processes

Individuals seek out situations that foster emotions that are useful to culturally central tasks [22•,27,28] in the same way that they cultivate emotions that are useful to other types of tasks at hand [29,30]. However, cultural construction of emotions goes beyond either seeking out desired emotions or avoiding condemned emotions. When encountering similar situations, people in different cultures also appraise these situations in ways that help them to fulfill their cultural tasks. For instance, American and Japanese participants remembered situations of success and failure differently [31]. American participants attributed success to themselves and failure to others; Japanese participants attributed success to themselves as well as the situation and failure to themselves. Accordingly, in success situations, Americans experienced pride, a feeling that is conducive to the cultural norm of self-enhancement, whereas Japanese felt lucky, which is compatible with the cultural norm of self-criticism (see also [32]). Differences in attribution served the respective collective intentionality.

Individuals also play an active role in constructing emotional experience from interoception as well as from cognitive and behavioral contents [33,34]. We recently examined the types of experiences most typically associated with anger and shame across three different cultures: the U.S., Belgium, and Japan [35]. In this study, participants indicated for a range of carefully selected anger and shame situations, their appraisals and action tendencies as well as anger and shame intensity. Appraisals and action tendencies are two aspects of emotional experience often distinguished by emotion theorists [36,37]: appraisals are the different ways people interpret events and action tendencies reflect people's motivation to act upon them. We used a bottom-up classification program to identify types of participants who shared a pattern of appraisals/action tendencies that they associated with intense anger or shame. This means that we had no a priori classification in mind, but let the program infer classes of people based on their responses to the appraisal and action readiness items across the various anger and shame situations. The program inferred three person types for anger and two for

shame. Although all person types occurred in every culture, the most frequent types of anger and shame in each culture were those that appeared most conducive to central cultural tasks. For example, the Japanese type of anger (55% of the Japanese respondents were classified under this 'person type') hurts the relationships with others least — nodding and smiling is a prominent response, and so is rumination, whereas an American 'person type' for anger (43% of North Americans) was strongly associated with both blaming the other person and giving them a piece of your mind. One way of understanding these findings is that individuals in each culture foreground those experiences that are important to performing their cultural tasks.

Cultural differences in the types of phenomena recognized to constitute an emotion *itself* point to a process of cultural construction in the service of performance of cultural tasks. Several studies have found emotions in the United Sates to be understood as arising from the individual, but in Japan as arising from the relationships between individuals [38,39]. These differences in conceptualization are important to both experience and perception. Japanese athletes reported more emotions when they described their relationship with others than did American athletes. Japanese respondents also perceived more emotions in athletes who were surrounded by others than did American respondents [38]. Moreover, in several emotion perception studies in which participants judged a target person's emotions [40,41], Japanese used the surrounding people's facial expressions to establish the target person's emotions, but Westerners did not. For instance, Japanese judged the smiling target to be less happy if the surrounding people portrayed angry or sad expressions.

That cultures differ in what constitutes an emotion is also suggested by experimental research that primed either the individual self or a family member, and then measured positive emotions during an amusing film or upbeat music [42]. European Americans rated their emotions as more intense after the individual-self prime, whereas Asian Americans considered their emotions as more intense after the family prime. In each culture, experiences that were essential to the cultural mandate were foregrounded, and in a consequent emotion-eliciting task recognized as emotions. One way to understand these findings is that in each culture emotions are constructed based on information that is most consequential to agency. Agency in European Americans is based within the individual, whereas agency in Asian Americans may be grounded in the family or group [43] (see also Markus, in this special issue). Complementary evidence for the idea that different ways of constructing emotions reflect differences in agency comes from recent studies on emotion perception in the Himba, a remote culture in Namibia. The Himba construct emotional behaviors in the face not

as primarily subjective feelings, but rather in terms of what is going on in the environment [42]. An explanation is that agency in this culture is based on situational prescriptions, rather than located within the individual.

Recent neuro-scientific research on emotion similarly points to a process of cultural construction: an fMRI-study with Chinese, Asian American, and European American participants recorded different correlates of emotion during emotional film clips [44•]. The mean intensity of reported emotions, the cardiac arousal, and the magnitude of BOLD signals were all similar across cultures. However, cultural differences existed in the relative association of ventral and dorsal activity of the anterior insula (AI) with feeling strength. In Chinese, feeling strength was associated more with activation of the ventral than the dorsal AI; in European Americans, feeling strength was associated more with activation of the dorsal than the ventral AI; and feeling strength in the bicultural East-Asian American group showed an intermediate pattern of activation, with brain activity equally divided between the ventral and the dorsal AI. The study is consistent with the idea that cultural learning influences the types of information selected or highlighted when 'constructing' emotional feelings [4,44•,45,46]; we would expect that the selection is driven by the particular tasks (goals for action) within a particular culture. It is unclear as yet how these particular selections serve the particular goals for action within the respective cultures. The authors propose that Chinese relied on dorsal AI, because monitoring autonomic changes provides better clues about culturally valued low arousal states; by contrast, they suggest that European Americans tapped the ventral AI for somatosensory cues that may matter more for the culturally valued expressivity of emotion.

Emotional acculturation
The emotions of people who move to another culture change. This is suggested by research showing that the emotional fit of immigrants to their new culture is predicted by the exposure they have had to that culture: the number of years spent and the number of contacts with majority members of the new culture [15,47•]. We have not yet examined the nature of the changes in detail, but would expect that emotional patterns change to better fit the ideals and values of the new culture (see Ward and Geeraert, in this special issue). These changes are probably brought about by both collective and individual-level processes. The data with immigrants suggest that engagement in a culture plays an important role in the cultural construction of emotions. Moreover, they suggest that cultural construction happens throughout life, and is not restricted to early socialization. People's emotions thus continue to be updated, providing the individual guidance on how to act in the current environment throughout the life span.

Conclusions and directions for future research

The combined research on cultural differences suggests that emotions emerge through processes of construction [48–51]. Emotions are iterative and active constructions that help an individual achieve the central goals and tasks in a given (cultural) context. Adopting a perspective of action means that the research naturally shifts to the ways cultures afford and constrain how people 'do' emotions, and away from culture as a one-time socializing force that shapes the emotions people 'have'. Culture, then, becomes a framework within which people jointly and collectively do emotions: in interactions and collectives, people construct *those* emotions that help them achieve 'collective intentionality'. Future research should map the precise ways in which people in different cultures jointly and collectively do emotions, thus providing insight in the social mechanisms underlying cultural differences in emotions.

Acknowledgements

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