Influencing and adjusting in daily emotional situations: A comparison of European and Asian American action styles

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Emotions are for action, but action styles in emotional episodes may vary across cultural contexts. Based on culturally different models of agency, we expected that those who engage in European-American contexts will use more influence in emotional situations, while those who engage in East-Asian contexts will use more adjustment. European-American (N = 60) and Asian-American (N = 44) college students reported their action style during emotional episodes four times a day during a week. Asian Americans adjusted more than European Americans, whereas both used influence to a similar extent. These cultural differences in action style varied across types of emotion experienced. Moreover, influencing was associated with life satisfaction for European Americans, but not for Asian Americans.

Keywords: Emotion; Culture; Agency; Experience sampling; Influence/adjustment.

To emote literally means to move or prepare for action. In fact, many contemporary theories of emotion consider the impulse or motivation to change the individual's relationship with his or her environment a central characteristic of emotions (e.g., Arnold, 1960; Frijda, 2007). These theories describe emotions, for example, as involving “actions that establish or modify a particular relationship with an object, event, or the world as a whole, largely to strengthen or weaken a relation” (Frijda, 2007, p. 27).

There is increasing evidence that the prevalent types of action (Markus & Kitayama, 2003) differ across cultures. When interacting with their social
environment, people in European-American contexts tend to construct action in terms of influencing their environments so as to make the environment fit their concerns; people in East-Asian cultural contexts, on the other hand, tend to emphasise adjusting themselves so as to fit in with (the role requirements of) their social environments (Morling & Evered, 2006; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984).

Self-report studies have shown that influence is more endorsed in European-American than in East-Asian contexts; the reverse is true for adjustment (e.g., Ashman, Shiomura, & Levy, 2006; Lam & Zane, 2004; Morling et al., 2002; Tweed, White, & Lehman, 2004). For example, Morling and colleagues (2002) found that European Americans remember more and more recent situations in which they influenced their environments, while Japanese remember situations in which they adjusted to their environments more readily. The evidence from questionnaire research has been corroborated by studies using other methods, such as interviews, dilemma stories, or parent–child observations (e.g., Oerter, Oerter, Agostiana, Kim, & Wibowo, 1996; Trommsdorff & Friedlmeyer, 1993). Moreover, the preference for influence appears to be fostered by the prevalent emphasis on independence and autonomy in European-American contexts; the endorsement of adjustment, on the other hand, appears to be fostered by values of interdependence and relatedness that are characteristic of East-Asian cultural contexts (Ashman et al., 2006; Lam & Zane, 2004).

Not surprisingly, then, European Americans benefit from having influence or mastery over their environment: Many studies conducted in European-American contexts have shown that influencing or making choices has positive effects on their well-being and motivation (e.g., Bandura, 1989; Deci & Ryan, 1985). In East-Asian contexts, on the other hand, behaviour relating to influence may be discouraged and regarded as immature (White & LeVine, 1986). Consistently, personal choice is neither as beneficial nor as desired in these contexts (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999).

Building on these findings, we propose that there may also be cultural differences in the relative use of influencing or adjusting styles of action during emotional episodes. We will refer to these two broad classes of emotional action as emotional action styles. That cultural differences in emotional action styles may emerge, was suggested by an earlier study with European-American and Japanese respondents (Mesquita et al., 2006). In this study, respondents were interviewed in detail about their emotional experiences (i.e., appraisals, action tendencies, actual action, etc.) during situations in which they felt either valued or offended. European Americans tended to portray themselves as the centre of the world to which others had to attend: After having been treated unjustly, they gave others a piece of their mind; after having been successful, they kept telling others about their success—irrespective of the interest that these others had shown. The tendency of European-American respondents to foreground their own experiences and needs can be understood as an emotional action style of influencing. Japanese self-reports, on the other hand, reflected an emotional action style of adjusting. Their emotion accounts focused more on conforming to the expectations and demands of the social context, e.g., by concentrating on the tasks associated with their social roles instead of getting angry, or by continuing to make an effort in order to improve their skills even further upon feeling proud.

The current study

While previous research has shown cultural differences in the general preference for influencing or adjusting, the existing empirical evidence for differences in emotional action style is scarce (see Frijda, Markam, Sato, & Wiers, 1995, for an exception). In the current study, we therefore tested the hypothesis that the relative prevalence of influence and adjustment in daily emotional situations differs between European- and
Asian-American students. We compared European-American students, who engage primarily in contexts characterized by European-American ideas and practices, and Asian-Americans students, who engage in European-American ideas and practices in most university contexts and in East-Asian ideas and practices in family-relevant contexts (Tsai, 2006). We used an experience sampling method that allowed us to repeatedly measure emotional action style (i.e., influence and adjustment) in real-life emotional episodes, rather than relying on single retrospective reports of given emotions. Respondents reported their most significant emotional experiences over the last 3 hours and rated for each emotional episode the extent of influencing and adjusting.

Our first research question was whether there were cultural differences in the relative prevalence of influence and adjustment in emotional episodes. We expected that influence would be more prevalent in European-American cultural contexts and adjustment more prevalent in East-Asian cultural contexts. We argued that because European-American students engage primarily in European-American contexts (Tsai, 2006), they should display the prevalent European-American pattern of an influencing action style, whereas Asian Americans, who engage in both European- and East-Asian contexts (Tsai, 2006), may show both influencing and adjusting patterns of emotional action. More specifically, we hypothesized that:

1a) European Americans report more influence than adjustment;
1b) Asian Americans report adjustment and influence to similar extents;
1c) European Americans report influence to similar extents as Asian Americans; and
1d) Asian Americans report more adjustment than European Americans.

Additionally, we addressed the questions whether (2) the differences between Asian and European Americans’ use of influence and adjustment depend on the type of emotion experienced; and whether (3) influence in emotional episodes may be more beneficial for European- than Asian-American students.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 60 European-American (EA) college students (30 female), and 44 Asian-American (AA) college students (24 female). The mean age did not differ between the two groups (EA: \( M = 19.5, SD = 1.44 \); AA: \( M = 19.2, SD = 0.91 \), t(67.8) = 1.47, p < .15.

Of the Asian-American students, 34.1% were born abroad; the remaining 65.9% were born in the United States, yet had at least one parent who was born in an Asian country. On average, Asian Americans born abroad had spent 11.5 years (SD = 5.2, Min = 2, Max = 20) years in the USA. The Asian-American students were of predominantly East-Asian descent; they identified as Chinese American (59.1%), Korean American (18.2%), Japanese American (6.8%), Filipino American (4.5%), South East Asian American (4.5%) and other (6.8%).

The European-American participants were undergraduates at Wake Forest University (76.7%) and Stanford University (23.3%). All Asian-American participants were undergraduates at Stanford University. Participants at Wake Forest University all participated in the study as part of their course requirement for an introductory psychology course. Participants at Stanford University were recruited from paid subject lists.

Instruments

Demographics. Participants reported their sex, age, place of birth, place of birth of mother and father, ethnic identity, and years spent in the USA if born abroad.

Life-satisfaction. Overall life-satisfaction was assessed with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) in the post-session only. This scale consists of five items (e.g., “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal”, alpha = .81 in both samples). Participants indicated their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (doesn’t describe me at all) to 5 (describes me very much). The response
format of the original scale was adjusted in order to be consistent with the one used in the experience sampling questionnaire.

Experience sampling questionnaire. To sample a variety of emotional episodes, and yet guarantee comparability across cultural contexts, respondents reported instances of four defined stimulus types: Situations in which participants felt: (a) competent; (b) not competent; (c) close; or (d) not close. The competent situations were described as situations in which one feels “competent, effective, good at managing and efficacious”; the not competent situations were described as situations in which one failed to feel these things. The close situations were characterised as those in which one feels “close, friendly, or sympathetic to others, or taken care of by others”; not close situations were again those in which one failed to feel these things.

A number of questions were included to check if respondents in different cultural groups interpreted the four stimulus types as intended. These questions pertained to the perceived competence (“How incompetent or competent did you feel?”), the perceived closeness (“How distant or close did you feel to others?”), and also the perceived pleasantness (“How unpleasant or pleasant was this situation?”) of the situation. Participants rated the situations on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (very incompetent/distant/unpleasant) to 5 (very competent/close/pleasant). The situation types were presented in counterbalanced order; half of the participants first reported on closeness-relevant situations, and the other half on competence-relevant situations.

Emotional action style was measured by two questions. For each situation, respondents rated their levels of adjustment (“How much did you adjust to people’s expectations about you?”) and influence (“How much did you influence the situation?”) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The wording of these questions was closely modelled after Morling and colleagues (2002).

Finally, respondents selected the emotion they felt most in the situation from a list of thirteen emotions (happy, excited, frustrated, relieved, anxious, disappointed, stressed, sad, content, angry, hope, regret, or concerned). These emotions were the emotions that European-American and East-Asian respondents used most frequently in a free listing task of emotion words that served as a pilot study. We divided the thirteen emotions into three emotion types: Positive emotions (happy, excited, content, hope), negative emotions (frustrated, anxious, stressed, angry, sad), and emotions that, although they were either positive or negative, referred to the possibility of an opposite-valence reality; we called these latter emotions therefore “bi-valenced” (relied, disappointed, regret, concerned). This bi-valenced group of emotions stands out from the other two groups in terms of its relation to counter-factual reasoning: All of the emotions included in this group point to the possibility that things could have been good or bad, but turned out the other way.

Procedure

In a first session, participants met with a research assistant who administered the demographic questions and instructed the participants on the use of the palm pilots. Participants were instructed to fill out the experience sampling questionnaires(s) four times a day (at 12 a.m., 3 p.m., 6 p.m., and 9 p.m.) for seven consecutive days. Participants completed only those questionnaires that corresponded to the type(s) of situation that they experienced in the past three hours. If more than one experience qualified for a type of situation, participants were instructed to report the most significant one. This experience sampling study thus combined elements of time- and event-sampling.

Several measures were taken to ensure online reports. First, the research assistant emphasised to the participants that it was important to complete the questionnaires at the times indicated. Participants were encouraged to skip the questionnaires if they were not able to complete them within an hour after the designated time. Moreover, participants came into the lab on day 3 and day 5 to have the data downloaded from their palm pilots. On the last day (day 7), participants came in to return their palm pilots. During this time, participants gave written feedback on their experience with the palm pilots and completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale. Finally, a debriefing session was conducted.

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Response rates

Two respondents were excluded from further analyses because they had completed fewer than 10 questionnaires. On average, participants completed 24 questionnaires. European and Asian Americans did not differ in terms of the average completed questionnaires, \( t(102) = 0.86, p < .40 \). The number of situations reported also did not differ between situation types (within subject) and groups (between subjects), as indicated by the non-significant situation type \( \times \) group membership interaction, \( F(2.76, 281.47) = 0.78, p < .51 \). European-American participants completed a total of 1,479 questionnaires and Asian-American participants a total of 1,041 questionnaires.

General analytic strategy

Multilevel regression analyses were used to test our hypotheses given that repeated measures of experience (level 1) were nested within participants (level 2). These analyses were conducted with the program MLwiN 2.10 (Rasbash, Charlton, Browne, Healy, & Cameron, 2009). For hypotheses that required simultaneous analysis of different levels of a categorical variable (e.g., situation type or group membership), we used a multivariate multilevel-regression approach (cf. Barrett & Niedenthal, 2004). In this type of analysis, the grand intercept is replaced by dummy-coded variables for each level of the categorical variable, resulting in separate intercepts. Predictors can be included by adding product terms between the dummy-coded variables and the predictor of interest. Wald chi-square tests were used to test for significant differences between separate intercepts or predictors (see Goldstein, 2003, Chapter 2).

RESULTS

Participants’ interpretation of the situation types

We first checked whether the reported situations met the situation type profiles. In a set of multivariate analyses (specifying separate intercepts for each situation type), we confirmed that competence-relevant situations were about competence (competent: \( M = 4.14, SE = 0.03 \); not competent: \( M = 2.00, SE = 0.04 \); close: \( M = 3.78, SE = 0.05 \); not close: \( M = 2.82, SE = 0.06 \); joint \( \chi^2(3) = 2284.48, p < .001 \), and closeness-relevant situations about closeness (competent: \( M = 3.23, SE = 0.05 \); not competent: \( M = 2.60, SE = 0.06 \); close: \( M = 4.29, SE = 0.04 \); not close: \( M = 1.98, SE = 0.05 \); joint \( \chi^2(3) = 1348.15, p < .001 \). Post hoc single-pair comparisons revealed that the highest levels of competence were perceived in competent situation and the lowest in non-competent situations, and that the highest levels of closeness were perceived in close situations and the lowest in non-close situations. This pattern was the same across the two counterbalancing conditions and for both cultural groups.

We also found that there were no significant cultural differences in the pleasantness ratings for each of the four situation types. We fitted separate multilevel regressions for each situation type, with group membership (0 = EA, 1 = AA) predicting pleasantness. European and Asian Americans did not differ with respect to the pleasantness of not competent (\( b = 0.02, t = 0.13, p < .90 \), close (\( b = -0.08, t = 0.88, p < .38 \)) and not close (\( b = -0.14, t = 1.17, p < .25 \)) situations. Asian Americans did perceive competent situations as tendentially more pleasant than European Americans (\( b = 0.22, t = 1.95, p < .06 \)).

Do European- and Asian-American students differ with respect to their relative preference for influencing and adjusting emotional action styles?

We hypothesised that, indeed, there would be differences with respect to the ratio of influencing and adjusting emotional action style between European- and Asian-American students. In order to test these hypotheses, we restructured the variables ‘influence’ and ‘adjustment’ into different cases, such that each emotional instance for each person was represented by two data rows within one ‘action style’ variable. The two action styles and two groups were dummy-coded by four
seperate variables (adjustment: 0 = influence, 1 = adjustment; influence: 0 = adjustment, 1 = influence; (European Americans: 0 = AA, 1 = EA; Asian Americans: 0 = EA, 1 = AA) were each dummy-coded by four separate variables. A multivariate multilevel regression was conducted with four separate intercepts representing the four possible product terms between action style and group membership and $y_{ij}$ being the combined action variable. This model allowed us to test for differences in action style between any two parameters, within or between groups.\(^1\)\(^2\)

**Level 1:** \(y_{ij} = \beta_0j(\text{European American } \times \text{ Adjustment}) + \beta_{1j}(\text{European American } \times \text{ Influence}) + \beta_{2j}(\text{Asian American } \times \text{ Adjustment}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{Asian American } \times \text{ Influence}) + e_{4ij}(\text{European American}) + e_{5ij}(\text{Asian American})\)

**Level 2:** European American \(\times\) Adjustment:
\[
\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}
\]
European American \(\times\) Influence:
\[
\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j}
\]
Asian American \(\times\) Adjustment:
\[
\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + u_{2j}
\]
Asian American \(\times\) Influence:
\[
\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30} + u_{3j}
\]

The random and fixed parameters of this model (see Table 1) can be understood as means and variances for each of the 2 (group membership) \(\times\) 2 (action style) cells. Consistent with hypothesis 1a, European Americans reported significantly more influence than adjustment, \(\chi^2(1) = 94.97, p < .001.\) Contrary to hypothesis 1b, Asian Americans

![Figure 1. European- and Asian-American students' mean levels of adjusting action style for three different types of emotions.](image)

**Table 1.** Estimated parameters (with standard error of estimate in parentheses) of influence and adjustment for European- and Asian-American students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>European Americans</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
<th>Asian Americans</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b_{\text{Influence}})</td>
<td>3.73 (0.06)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.66 (0.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b_{\text{Adjustment}})</td>
<td>2.72 (0.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.00 (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\sigma_{\text{Influence}})</td>
<td>.15 (0.04)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.11 (0.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\sigma_{\text{Adjustment}})</td>
<td>.42 (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.26 (0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\sigma_{\text{Adjustment}}\times)</td>
<td>.00 (0.04)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.07 (0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\sigma_{\text{Adjustment}})</td>
<td>.99 (0.03)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.95 (0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Deviance = 14408.64.

\(^1\)The pattern of results for separate situation types did not deviate from the general pattern of cultural differences, except for non-close situations, in which Asian Americans did not use more adjustment than European Americans, \(\chi^2(1) = 0.098, p < .76.\) We have therefore reported the results across situation types.

\(^2\)No differences were found for European-American students from Wake Forest (WF) and European-American students from Stanford University (SF) in terms of their preference for adjustment (WF: \(M = 2.707, SE = 0.105; SF: M = 2.754, SE = 0.141\)), \(\chi^2(1) = 0.071, p < .79\), or influence (WF: \(M = 3.766, SE = 0.062; SF: M = 3.591, SE = 0.112\), \(\chi^2(1) = 1.597, p < .21\). We have therefore not included setting as a level-2 covariate in the analyses.
reported more influence than adjustment, $\chi^2(1) = 58.33$, $p < .001$. Supporting hypothesis 1c, the use of influence did not differ between European Americans and Asian Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 0.68$, $p < .41$. Finally, consistent with hypothesis 1d, Asian Americans did use more adjustment than European Americans in everyday life, $\chi^2(1) = 5.58$, $p < .05$.

**Do European- and Asian-American students differ in their use of influence and adjustment across different emotion types?**

The observed differences in action style were related to the emotion that participants experienced most in each situation. We again conducted multivariate multilevel regression with separate intercepts for each emotion type (positive, negative, and bi-valenced emotions), and added group membership ($0 = \text{EA}, 1 = \text{AA}$) as a level-2 predictor. Figure 1 shows the mean levels of adjustment that European- and Asian-American students reported for each emotion type. Asian Americans used more adjustment than European Americans when experiencing positive ($b = 0.37$, $t = 2.45$, $p < .05$) and bi-valenced emotions ($b = 0.41$, $t = 3.05$, $p < .01$), but not when experiencing negative emotions ($b = 0.03$, $t = 0.27$, $p < .79$). There were no significant differences between Asian and European Americans across emotion types for influence.

**Does influence predict well-being for European-American students to a larger extent than for Asian-American students?**

The action style in real-life emotional situations was differentially associated with life satisfaction for European- and Asian-American students. We specified multilevel models for influence and adjustment with life-satisfaction (grand-mean centred), cultural group ($1 = \text{EA}, 1 = \text{AA}$), and the interaction term of the two as level-2 predictors. Although this model treats life-satisfaction as a predictor in the statistical sense, a significant relationship with influence or adjustment can be also interpreted in the opposite causal direction. Whereas adjustment was not significantly associated with life satisfaction ($b = -0.02$, $t = 0.31$, $p < .76$) for either group, influence was associated with life satisfaction ($b = 0.13$, $t = 2.63$, $p < .01$). However, influence was significantly related to life satisfaction only for European Americans ($b = 0.20$, $t = 5.46$, $p < .001$), and not for Asian Americans ($b = 0.05$, $t = 0.72$, $p < .47$). The group membership $\times$ life-satisfaction interaction term showed a trend in the predicted direction, but did not reach statistical significance ($b = 0.08$, $t = 1.61$).

**DISCUSSION**

The present study is the first to investigate cultural differences in action style during daily emotional episodes using an experience sampling paradigm. Drawing on previous theorising and empirical research on action styles, we hypothesised that European- and Asian-American students would differ in their relative use of influence and adjustment as two emotional action styles. Moreover, we proposed that this difference might depend on the type of emotion experienced and that influencing should be beneficial for European-American students to a larger extent than for Asian-American students.

Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that when dealing with daily emotional situations, Asian-American students adjusted to people’s expectations more than did European-American students. Contrary to our expectations, Asian-American students did not use adjustment to the same degree as influence; instead, both Asian and European Americans used influence to a larger extent than adjustment. Since Asian-American university students also engage in the European-American ideas and practices prevalent at American universities (Tsai, 2006), we expected no cultural differences with respect to influencing. The results supported this prediction too. However, the study did not assess the contexts in which the emotional episodes were experienced, and we were therefore not able to test whether the unexpected prevalence of influencing in the
Asian-American group was possibly due to an over sampling of emotional episodes in European-American (university) contexts and if these contexts particularly afforded influence. Therefore, future research is needed to establish which contexts exactly give rise to influence and adjustment across cultural contexts.

The relatively higher preference for adjustment among the Asian-American students was restricted to some types of emotions. Only in situations in which they felt positive or bi-valenced emotions, did Asian-American students use more adjustment than European-American students. One possible explanation is the particular function that positive emotions serve compared to negative emotions. Positive emotions have been argued to play an important role in building, among others, social resources (Frederickson, 1998). The relational engagement associated with positive emotions might in turn entail a more adjusting action style in (interdependent) East-Asian than in (independent) European-American contexts.

Finally, the results suggested that while influencing during emotional episodes is beneficial for European-American students, it does not have the same wholesome impact for Asian-American students. This finding fits well with previous research on well-being that has shown the importance of, for example, socially disengaging feelings (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000) or independent goal pursuit (Oishi & Diener, 2001) for European-Americans’ well-being. It is interesting to note that adjustment in daily emotional situations predicted well-being neither for Asian nor for European Americans.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the cultural difference in the association between life-satisfaction and influence may have failed to reach significance due to the small sample sizes. Moreover, the near absence of Asian-American students at Wake Forest University made it impossible to control for the potential confound between location and cultural group. However, the pattern of results did not differ between locations for European-American students. Another shortcoming is the lack of an East-Asian sample: Such a sample could have further elucidated the patterns of emotional action style in East-Asian contexts as well as have shed light on any differences in the emotional action styles of East Asians and Asian Americans.

In conclusion, this study emphasises the importance of investigating emotion and its underlying action components within a sociocultural framework. As people’s ideas about normative, desirable, and effective agency differ across cultural contexts, so do the most prevalent action styles accompanying emotions.

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