

BRIEF REPORT

Not All Collectivisms Are Equal: Opposing Preferences for Ideal Affect Between East Asians and Mexicans

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Previous research has revealed differences in how people value and pursue positive affect in individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts. Whereas Euro-Americans place greater value on high activation positive affect (HAP; e.g., excitement, enthusiasm, elation) than do Asian Americans and Hong Kong Chinese, the opposite is true for low activation positive affect (LAP; e.g., calmness, serenity, tranquility). Although the form of collectivism present in East Asia dictates that individuals control and subdue their emotional expressions so as to maintain harmonious relationships, the opposite norm emerges in Mexico and other Latin American countries, in that the cultural script of *simpatía* promotes harmony through the open and vibrant expression of positive emotion. Across two studies, we found that Mexicans display a pattern of HAP/LAP preference different from those from East Asian collectivistic cultures, endorsing HAP over LAP.

Keywords: affect, collectivism, culture, individualism

In day-to-day life, most people want to feel good (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), but they achieve these feelings through very different means. Whereas some pursue positive states through painting, practicing yoga, or taking leisurely strolls in the park, others go bungee jumping, dance at raves, or play roller hockey. Why might people pursue positive states in such vastly different ways? Distinguishing between *actual affect* (the states people actually feel) and *ideal affect* (the states people desire and want to feel), Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006) argue that the positive states people pursue are largely influenced by culture. Ideal affect is similar to attitudes toward affect in that it involves the evaluation of emotional states as positive or negative, but also includes a clear ranking of how much one desires and values affective states. Furthermore, because ideal affect is a goal, it can motivate and impact behavior more strongly than actual affect (Tsai, 2007).

In their investigations of cultural differences in ideal affect, Tsai et al. have focused on high activation positive affect (HAP; e.g., excitement, enthusiasm) and low activation positive affect (LAP; e.g., calm, serenity). Among college students, Euro-Americans and

Asian Americans valued HAP more than Hong Kong Chinese did, whereas Hong Kong Chinese and Asian Americans valued LAP more than Euro-Americans (Tsai et al., 2006). Differences in ideal affect are evident early in life, such that Euro-American preschoolers prefer excited over calm states more than Taiwanese preschoolers, and these differences are reflected in the illustrations (e.g., emotional expressions, size of smiles) in popular children's storybooks in the United States and Taiwan (Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida, 2007). Such cultural differences in media representations of happiness are present in material read by adults, with American women's magazines containing more excited smiles than equivalent Chinese women's magazines (Tsai & Wong, 2007).

In their original investigation, Tsai et al. (2006) "chose to focus on individuals oriented to American and East Asian cultures because these cultures clearly differ on the dimension of individualism-collectivism" (p. 290). The form of collectivism present in East Asian cultures dictates that individuals control and subdue their emotional expressions so as to maintain harmonious relationships and not impose their personal feelings on others (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It follows that people in East Asian contexts would place more value on subdued, low-arousal positive affect than on expressive, high-arousal positive affect. As with most of the studies conducted within cultural psychology (Cohen, 2007), research on ideal affect has focused exclusively on those with East Asian and Euro-American cultural orientations. A cost of this methodological approach is that findings that have emerged from one kind of collectivist context (i.e., East Asian) are frequently assumed to hold true in other collectivist contexts. Yet few studies have

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explored whether people from different collectivistic cultures think and behave similarly to each other. In this article, we compared preferences for ideal affect among people from two different collectivist cultures: East Asians and Mexicans.

Past research has found that people in Mexico, and much of Latin America, are more collectivistic than those in the United States or Canada (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). However, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that emotion is viewed and valued quite differently in East Asian and Mexican cultures. In contrast to the East Asian normative pressure to suppress emotional expressions, the opposite norm emerges in Latin American cultures. Instead, happiness is highly valued as it is seen as complementing interdependence, and emotional expressivity is encouraged (Diener, Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Suh, 2000; Diener & Suh, 2003; Klein, 2001). Emotions tend to be more common when they are concordant with cultural scripts (Mesquita, 2003), and indeed, Scollon, Diener, Oishi, and Biswas-Diener (2004) found that Hispanic students score higher on positive affect and lower on negative affect than Asian students. One potential explanation for these cultural differences is the Latin American cultural script of *simpatía* (Ramírez-Esparza, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2008; Triandis, Marín, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984), which promotes harmony through the open and vibrant expression of positive emotion, congeniality, and charm, and the deemphasis of negative emotions. Relatedly, Díaz-Loving and Draguns (1999) report that one of Mexicans' core personality traits is Expressive Sociability, defined as being "extraverted, communicative, fun, outgoing, free, [and] expressive" (p. 17). Supporting this assertion, Mexicans socialize more in public environments than in smaller, more private settings (Ramírez-Esparza, Mehl, Álvarez-Bermúdez, & Pennebaker, 2009). Taken together, it stands to reason that HAP would be more valued than LAP in Mexican culture.

Across two studies, we test the hypothesis that Mexicans display a different pattern of HAP/LAP preference than those from East Asian collectivistic cultures. As partial replications of Tsai's (2007) work, both studies also included participants from Western cultural backgrounds.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Seventy-eight Euro-Canadian students (79.5% women; age: $M = 22.69$, $SD = 6.31$), and 26 Mexican exchange students (30.8% women; age: $M = 20.81$, $SD = 1.06$) in their second month at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and 132 Chinese students (63.6% women; age: $M = 20.85$, $SD = 2.58$) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong participated in this study. Although there were cultural differences in age ($p < .01$) and gender ($p < .001$), inclusion of these variables as covariates did not change the outcome of the analyses we conducted and thus will not be discussed further.¹

Materials. To measure ideal affect, participants were asked "how much you would *ideally* like to feel" the emotions contained in the Affect Valuation Index (AVI; Tsai et al., 2006) "on average" on a scale from 1 (*very slightly, not at all*) to 9 (*very much, all of the time*). To measure actual affect, participants completed a parallel version of the ideal affect measure, in which they rated

how much they "typically feel each of the following items on average." HAP was calculated from participant ratings for "excited," "enthusiastic," and "elated"; LAP from "calm," "at rest," and "serene." Materials were translated into Chinese and back-translated into English by three bilingual Chinese-English speakers; the same procedure was used by three bilingual Spanish-English speakers for the Spanish translation. Disagreements were rare and were resolved by discussion among the translators.

Results and Discussion

To investigate whether there was cultural variability in ideal affect, we conducted a 2 (Affect Type: HAP vs. LAP) \times 3 (Culture: Euro-Canadian vs. Mexican vs. Chinese) mixed-model ANOVA with Affect Type as the within-subjects factor.² Overall, we observed a nonsignificant effect for Affect Type, $F(1, 233) = 2.29$, $p = .13$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .01$, and a significant effect for Culture, $F(2, 233) = 8.33$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .07$, such that Euro-Canadians ($M = 6.72$) had higher overall ratings of ideal affect than Chinese ($M = 6.07$), $F(1, 233) = 16.35$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .07$, but overall ratings for Mexicans ($M = 6.45$) were in-between and not significantly different from Euro-Canadians, $F(1, 233) = 1.19$, $p = .28$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .01$, nor Chinese, $F(1, 233) = 2.37$, $p = .13$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .01$. Most importantly, we observed a significant Culture \times Affect Type interaction, $F(2, 233) = 24.63$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .17$. Mexicans showed a significant preference for HAP ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 1.41$) to LAP ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.33$; see Figure 1), $t(25) = 2.60$, $p = .02$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .21$. The relative preference of HAP to LAP for Mexicans was significantly different from the Chinese pattern of preferences, $F(1, 233) = 16.41$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .07$, but not different from the Euro-Canadian pattern, $F(1, 233) = .09$, $p = .77$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .00$. Replicating previous research, Euro-Canadians and Chinese differed in their relative preference of HAP to LAP, $F(1, 233) = 42.97$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .16$, such that Euro-Canadians significantly preferred HAP ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 1.28$) to LAP ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.35$), $t(77) = 4.17$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .18$, and Chinese instead significantly preferred LAP ($M = 6.46$, $SD = 1.55$) to HAP ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.33$), $t(131) = -5.21$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .17$.

As predicted, Mexican participants showed a pattern that was highly distinct from the Chinese sample; they preferred HAP to

¹ If age and gender are included as covariates in the main analyses, the effects of theoretical interest remain significant. Age had an effect on affect, $F(1, 231) = 8.63$, $p < .01$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .04$, such that younger individuals had overall higher ideal affect ratings, but this did not significantly interact with culture.

² There are multiple ways to calculate ideal affect, and there are different trade-offs associated with these. Tsai et al. (2006) used an analytical strategy that includes ipsatizing preferences for HAP, LAP, and general positive emotions and directly comparing ideal HAP and LAP across cultures. Ipsatizing has the benefit of reducing response styles, but it bears the cost of reducing the interpretability of cross-cultural comparisons (Fischer, 2004). Our approach of focusing on within-culture patterns is consistent with recommended alternatives to ipsatization (Fischer, 2004). In addition, Tsai et al. (2006) used a mixed-model ANCOVA where typical HAP and LAP are added as covariates, which has the effect of partialing typical HAP from *both* ideal HAP and ideal LAP. We think the analyses are more justified without covarying typical HAP and LAP and that is the way that we conducted them. Nonetheless, if we use the analytic strategy of Tsai and colleagues, we still obtain the same pattern of overall preferences for HAP and LAP across cultures for both studies.

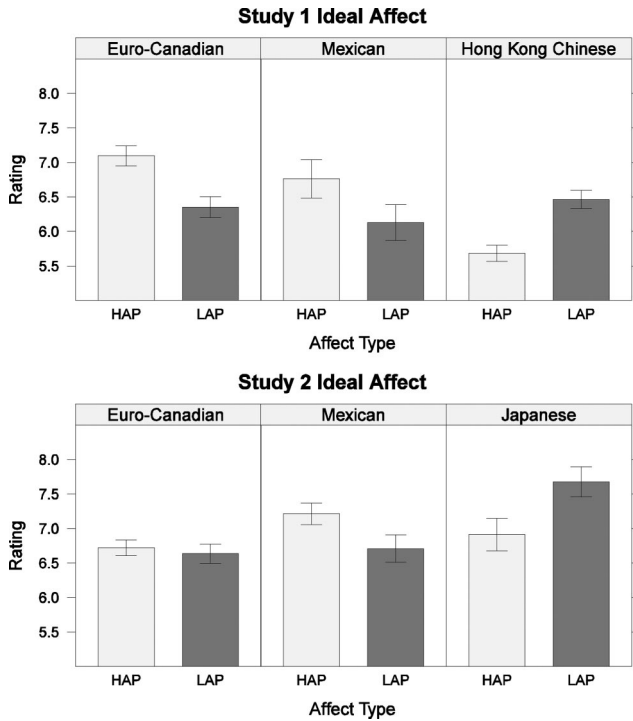


Figure 1. Means of ideal High Activation Positive and Low Activation Positive Affect ratings for all cultural groups in Studies 1 and 2. Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

LAP, in contrast to the Chinese preference for LAP over HAP. The Mexican pattern of ideal affect looked highly similar to that observed among the Euro-Canadian sample. One possibility for this similarity is that because the Mexican participants in this study were exchange students who had chosen to study abroad in Canada, they may be more similar to Euro-Canadians both as a function of self-selection or acculturation effects. It is possible that this sample of exchange students might exhibit different affective preferences than those who chose to remain in their host culture. Also, our Mexican sample size was small. Thus, in Study 2, we recruited twice as many Mexican participants, all of whom were currently studying in Mexico. Furthermore, to examine whether participants in a different East Asian culture would also prefer LAP to HAP, we recruited participants from Japan.

Study 2

Method

Participants. Ninety-four Euro-Canadian students (79.8% women; age: $M = 21.19$, $SD = 3.68$) at UBC, 54 Mexican students (63.0% women; age: $M = 21.35$, $SD = 1.83$) at Universidad Panamericana, and 34 Japanese students (61.8% women; age: $M = 19.91$, $SD = .90$) at Kyoto University participated in this study. Although there were cultural differences in age ($p < .05$) and gender ($p < .05$), inclusion of these variables as covariates did not change the outcome of the analyses we conducted.³

Materials. As in Study 1, participants indicated how much they would ideally like to feel and how much they typically feel,

the emotions contained in the AVI (Tsai et al., 2006) “on average” on a scale from 1 (*very slightly, not at all*) to 9 (*very much, all of the time*). Translation was conducted in the same manner as Study 1.

Results and Discussion

To investigate whether there was cultural variability in ideal affect, we conducted a 2 (Affect Type: HAP vs. LAP) \times 3 (Culture: Euro-Canadian vs. Mexican vs. Japanese) mixed-model ANOVA with Affect Type as the within-subjects factor. Overall, we observed a nonsignificant effect for Affect Type, $F(1, 179) = .23$, $p = .63$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .001$, and a significant effect of Culture, $F(2, 179) = 4.75$, $p < .01$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .05$, such that Japanese ($M = 7.29$) had higher overall ratings of ideal affect than Euro-Canadians ($M = 6.68$), $F(1, 170) = 8.99$, $p < .01$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .05$, but overall ratings for Mexicans ($M = 6.96$) were in-between and not significantly different from Euro-Canadians, $F(1, 179) = 2.60$, $p = .11$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .01$, nor Japanese, $F(1, 179) = 2.20$, $p = .14$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .01$. Of primary interest, we again observed a significant Culture \times Affect Type interaction, $F(1, 179) = 7.37$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .08$. Similarly to Study 1, Mexicans displayed a significant preference for HAP ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 1.16$) versus LAP ($M = 6.71$, $SD = 1.46$; see Figure 1), $t(53) = 2.20$, $p = .03$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .08$. Again, this relative preference of HAP to LAP was significantly different from the pattern of preferences of Japanese, $F(1, 179) = 14.65$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .08$, but not different from Euro-Canadians’ pattern of preferences, $F(1, 179) = 2.65$, $p = .10$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .01$. Consistent with previous research, Euro-Canadians and Japanese differed in their relative preference of HAP to LAP, $F(1, 179) = 7.82$, $p < .01$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .04$. Whereas Japanese significantly preferred LAP ($M = 7.68$, $SD = 1.27$) to HAP ($M = 6.91$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(33) = -3.38$, $p = .002$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .26$, Euro-Canadians displayed a slight but nonsignificant preference for HAP ($M = 6.72$, $SD = 1.09$) versus LAP ($M = 6.64$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(93) = .55$, $p = .59$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .003$.

As in Study 1, Mexicans exhibited the predicted preference for HAP over LAP, and Japanese showed the pattern previously found with Chinese with their preference for LAP over HAP. Unexpectedly, Euro-Canadians did not significantly differ in their preference for HAP over LAP, but this is concordant with past research by Tsai and colleagues (2007), in that Euro-Americans sometimes equally valued HAP and LAP.

General Discussion

Drawing on historically understudied populations, the present research provides a greater understanding of the role of emotion in Mexican cultural contexts. Across both studies, we demonstrated that Mexican participants preferred HAP to LAP—a pattern in stark contrast to East Asian participants’ preference for LAP to HAP. In addition, the pattern of East Asian versus Western ideal affect preferences largely replicated the findings by Tsai et al.

³ If age and gender are included as covariates in the main analyses, the Culture \times Affect Type interaction remains significant, although this was qualified by a significant and noninterpretable four-way interaction between Culture, Affect Type, Gender, and Age, $F(2, 170) = 4.21$, $p = .02$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .05$.

(2006) using novel Western (Euro-Canadian) and East Asian (Japanese) samples. Most importantly, this research provides initial evidence that a preference for LAP over HAP is not a feature common to collectivist cultures; the Mexicans and East Asians showed diametrically opposite patterns. This suggests that either the kinds of collectivism are different between East Asians and Latin Americans (see Heine & Raineri, 2009; Triandis et al., 1984) or that cultural differences in ideal affect are not best understood as a product of differences between individualism and collectivism. Given the motivating role of ideal affect in seeking to understand cultural differences in everyday behaviors, it is critical to consider how people want to feel. Future research across a broader array of cultures, drawing from juvenile and community samples and including analyses of popular media and cultural products, will further enrich the field's understanding of how culture shapes ideal affect and the implications these cultural differences in ideal affect have for everyday behaviors.

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