Chinese and Australian children’s understanding of emotional dissemblance: a cross-cultural study

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Abstract

This cross-cultural study investigated Chinese and Australian children’s understanding of emotional dissemblance. Emotional dissemblance refers to the incongruence between the emotion experienced (real emotion) and the emotion displayed (apparent emotion). Display rules, which specify the appropriateness of the manifestation of emotional expressions, are culturally defined (Ekman, 1972). Decisions to express a genuine or dissembled emotion depend upon the degree of status difference between the interactants (Saarni, 1991). Individuals with lower status often control the expression of genuine emotion when interacting with people of higher status (Underwood, Coie & Herbsman, 1992). Cultures vary in emphasis on power distance (Hofstede, 1980). Societies high in power distance have more rules to preserve status differences and therefore encourage emotional dissemblance (Matsumoto, 1996). Cultural variations also exist in the dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). Collectivistic cultures emphasize the maintenance of harmonious social relationships, and hence have more stringent requirements for the management of facial displays than individualistic cultures (Bond, 1993). According to Hofstede (1980), Chinese culture is collectivistic and emphasizes status differences. In contrast Australian culture is individualistic and minimizes status differences. Participants were 62 six-year-old Chinese children living in Hong Kong and 96 six-year-old Caucasians living in Australia. They were read hypothetical stories in which display rules would apply. Significant cultural differences were found in children’s understanding of emotional dissemblance. Australian children tended to select the same real and apparent emotions, indicating no attempt to hide the expression of genuine emotion. Chinese children, on the other hand, were more likely to regulate their responses. This is consistent with the higher pressure for emotional inhibition in Chinese culture (Bond, 1993). It seems likely that cultural difference in the emphasis on power distance and individualism influence children’s interpretation of emotion-eliciting situations.

Introduction

- “Emotional dissemblance” refers to the incongruence between the emotion experienced (real emotion) and the emotion displayed (apparent emotion).
- Culturally defined display rules specify the appropriateness of the manifestation of facial expressions, which may or may not match the emotion experienced (Ekman, Friesen & Ellsworth, 1972).
Decisions to express a genuine or dissembled emotion are influenced by the degree of status difference between the interactants and the extent of cultural emphasis on individualism.

Lower status individuals often control the expression of genuine emotion when interacting with higher status people (Saarni, 1991; Underwood, Coie, & Herbsman, 1992). Cultures vary in emphasis on power distance (Hofstede, 1980). Those high in power distance have more rules to preserve status differences and therefore encourage emotional dissemblance. Societies low in power distance have a higher level of acceptance for the expression of real emotion (Matsumoto, 1996).

The maintenance of harmonious social relationships is stressed more in collectivist cultures than individualistic cultures (Bond, 1993). This requires increased management of facial displays of emotion.

According to Hofstede (1980, 1991), Chinese culture is collectivist and emphasizes status differences, while Australian culture is individualistic and minimizes status differences.

**Aim**

This study aimed to compare Chinese and Australian children in their understanding of emotional dissemblance in compliance to display rules.

**Method**

**Subjects**

- 62 six-years-old Chinese children living in Hong Kong, China (mean = 75.4 months, 32 girls, 30 boys), and
- 96 six-years-old Caucasian children living in Australia (mean = 77.1 months, 47 girls, 49 boys).

**Procedure**

- Children were tested individually in their native language (Chinese or English).
- Initially they were familiarized with the photographs of children’s facial expressions of emotion.
- Two hypothetical stories were then presented for each of the following four themes. One story for each theme was in a Chinese setting and one in an Australian setting.
- The four themes were:
  1. Getting caught in a transgression (a non-regulation story),
  2. Receiving a disappointing gift (a regulation story),
  3. Boasting to peers but subsequently failing in a competition (a regulation story), and
  4. Amusement at somebody’s misfortune (a regulation story).
- Following each story presentation children were asked to select from an array of five different facial expressions
  - The emotion the child in each story was feeling (real emotion), and
  - The facial expression which the child would show (apparent emotion).
Classification of responses

• For each story, children’s responses were classified into three types:
  1. Dissembled responses = correct identification of the real emotion and masked it with a different apparent emotion.
  2. Genuine responses = correct identification of the real emotion and show it with the same apparent emotion.
  3. Incorrect responses = incorrect identification of the real emotion and the selection of apparent emotion was discarded.
• Stories in themes 2 to 4 required emotional regulation; therefore a dissembled response was regarded as appropriate. Stories in theme 1 required no emotional regulation; therefore a genuine response was regarded as appropriate.

Results

1. Distribution of responses

• Chinese and Australian children giving dissembled, genuine or incorrect responses were compared.

Table 1
Percentage of Chinese and Australian Children Giving Each Type of Response to Each Story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Cultural Context</th>
<th>Culture of Participants</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Dissembled Response</th>
<th>Genuine Response</th>
<th>Incorrect Response</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Transgression (Non-regulation)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>8.327*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Disappointing Gift (Regulation)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33.989***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>32.843***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>80.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Failure (Regulation)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>23.392***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>26.796***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Amusement (Regulation)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
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<td>51.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>23.346***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>17.223**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .005, *** p < .0001.
Regardless of the cultural context of the story, more Chinese children gave dissembled responses than Australian children in both regulation (i.e., theme 2 - 4) and non-regulation stories (i.e., theme 1). Australian children tended to indicate the expression of genuine emotion more often with few giving dissembled responses to any of the vignettes.

Significant differences were found between the responses of Chinese and Australian children on all the stories except the Chinese non-regulation story.

2. Selection of real emotion

- In order to examine children’s interpretation of emotion-eliciting situations, children’s selection of real emotion was examined.
- Any of the negative emotions presented was acceptable for stories with negative emotional valence (i.e., theme 1-3).
- A significant association between the cultural group of the children and the selection of real emotion was evident for the three Chinese stories but not for the Australian stories.
- In the Chinese transgression story, significantly more Chinese than Australian children selected fear as the real emotion ($\chi^2 = 6.79$, df = 2, p < .05).
- In the disappointing gift story in the Chinese context, more Chinese children selected anger as the real emotion whereas Australian children tended to select sadness ($\chi^2 = 7.41$, df = 2, p < .05).
- In the Chinese story of failure in a competition, although the majority of children selected sadness as the real emotion, significantly more Chinese than Australian children selected shame ($\chi^2 = 11.31$, df = 2, p < .005).

3. Selection of apparent emotion

- The selection of apparent emotion indicates the regulation strategy children used to dissemble responses when this was required.
- Only children who understood the need for emotional dissemblance were included in this analysis.
- The children who gave dissembled responses, selected neutralization more often than substitution with the opposite emotional valence.
- No significant association between the culture of the subjects and their selection of apparent emotion was found, except in the amusement story in the Australian context where significantly more Australian than Chinese children selected a negative emotion rather than neutralization ($\chi^2 = 15.502$, df = 1, p < .0001).
Discussion

- Significant cultural differences were found in children’s understanding of emotional dissemblance. Australian children tended to select the same real and apparent emotions, indicating no attempt to hide the expression of genuine emotion. Chinese children, on the other hand, were more likely to regulate their responses. This is consistent with the higher pressure for emotional inhibition in Chinese culture (Bond, 1993).

- Cultural differences were also evident in children’s selection of real emotion in Chinese context stories. In a context involving transgression, the emphasis on status difference in collectivistic culture induced more fear of parental punishment in Chinese than Australian children. Failing in a competition was seen by the Chinese child as shameful but upsetting for an individual Australian child. The Chinese children’s responses were possibly reflective of the whole collective family. A disappointing New Year gift more frequently invoked anger among Chinese children but sadness among Australian children.

- It is possible that the story character’s motivation were not entirely matched between the Chinese and Australian stories, which may have contributed to some of the cultural differences obtained in the present study. Further investigation is required.

- For those who understood emotional dissemblance, no cultural difference was found in their selection of apparent emotion. This may be due to the small number of Australian children who actually indicated regulation of facial display.

- In conclusion, the two cultural groups showed differences in display rules knowledge and they seemed to attach different meanings to the same emotion-eliciting context (Russell, 1989).

References


