

Mixed emotions a sign of emotional depth, not indecision, say researchers

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Experiencing mixed emotions shows emotional complexity, not indecision, and people living in different parts of the world vary in their ability to distinguish between multiple feelings they're having at once, according to new research.

A project from the University of Waterloo examined how people across 16 cultures vary in their tendency to see situations as either all good or all bad, or in a more complex fashion by seeing a little of both. Previous studies have linked lower [emotional](#) complexity with a reduced ability to control one's emotions, and higher incidence of depression.

"People in many western countries see mixed feelings as undesirable—as if to suggest that someone experiencing mixed feelings is wishy-washy," said Igor Grossmann, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Waterloo, and lead author of the paper. "Actually, we found that both westerners and non-westerners who show mixed feelings are better able to differentiate their emotions and experience their lives in an emotionally rich and balanced fashion."

The research indicates that people living in self-oriented cultures—such as Canada, the United States, Australia or Great Britain—were less emotionally complex than people living in other-oriented cultures with a greater emphasis on feelings of duty and familial bonds. People in various parts of Asia and Russia showed considerably more complexity in their emotions. Western Europe and South Africa fell in the middle.

"People in those other-oriented cultures are more likely to experience emotional complexity because they are able to see different perspectives," said Grossmann. "For example, they might see a job loss as disappointing, but also as an exciting opportunity to spend more time with family or to try something new. Someone from a culture that is oriented towards personal achievement is more likely to see it as all negative."

This project involved three studies. One of them used a text-analysis tool to measure the prevalence of mixed emotional expressions in 1.3 million English-language websites and blogs. The other two studies focused on the ways in which people report their emotions across a range of daily experiences, examining whether they report experiencing mixed feelings, and whether they differentiate between different types of positive and negative experiences.

"Across the entire project, the degree to which a culture promotes focus on other [people](#) rather than the self, including greater awareness of others, was positively associated with all of the markers of emotional complexity," said Grossmann. "Further, when we looked at individuals who focus on others within each culture, they also showed greater emotional complexity on a personal level."

The paper appears in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

More information: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2015-57060-001/

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