

Psychologists examine how culture can guide giving

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How can culture influence giving? Some scholars have argued that people are more likely to share with others who are similar in terms of race or sex, but the evidence for this is mixed.

New research by Stanford psychologists, which appeared this week in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, suggests, however, that similar [emotional expressions](#) can motivate giving, and can do so even more than a common race or sex.

Since culture drives peoples' tendency to value similar emotions in others – a phenomenon dubbed "ideal affect match" – the research clarifies a new way that culture can influence giving and potentially provide organizations insights into their philanthropic efforts.

Cultural differences in ideal affect

Previous research from Jeanne Tsai, an associate professor of psychology at Stanford, has examined the relationship between culture and emotion with a focus on European Americans and East Asians.

This research suggested that while European Americans typically want to feel states of excitement (high-arousal positive states), Asians instead prefer to feel states of calmness (low-arousal positive states). Thus, [people](#) tended to like others who showed the emotional states that they themselves wished to feel – "ideal affect match."

That led Tsai, along with co-authors BoKyung Park, Elizabeth Blevins, and Brian Knutson to wonder whether ideal affect match could influence not only liking, but also willingness to allocate actual money to a stranger.

When will a dictator give?

In the first study, the researchers examined groups of European American and Korean college students. After measuring their actual affect (how people feel) and ideal affect (how they want to feel), the

researchers had subjects play a series of Dictator Games – a game in which one person (the "dictator") decides whether to distribute their money with other players (potential recipients).

While subjects were always assigned to play the dictator, different potential recipients were depicted with computer-generated avatars that varied in terms of their emotional [expression](#), race and sex. Afterwards, subjects rated how much they trusted each of the potential recipients they had encountered.

The researchers found that while European Americans gave more to the recipients whose expressions conveyed excitement (i.e., open, toothy smiles), Korean students gave more to recipients whose expressions conveyed calm (i.e., closed smiles). Further, European Americans rated excited recipients as more trustworthy, but Koreans rated calm recipients as more trustworthy.

However, common race and sex had little effect on sharing or inferred trust.

"These findings suggest that emotional expression – and whether or not it matches people's ideal affect – may play a more powerful role in resource sharing than even race or sex," said Tsai, director of Stanford's Culture and Emotion Lab.

Scanning for answers

So what about ideal affect match could motivate people to share with others? Was it the way that a matching stranger made them feel or the belief that they shared values? To find out, the researchers ran a second study in which European Americans and Koreans played repeated dictator games – this time, while undergoing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Afterwards, subjects again rated potential

recipients' trustworthiness and other characteristics, including friendliness and intelligence.

When subjects saw faces whose expressions matched their ideal affect, the scans revealed decreased activity in the brain's right temporo-parietal junction, which is associated with perceiving that others hold different beliefs, according to Tsai. One interpretation of this decreased activity is that subjects assumed the recipients shared their values. This interpretation aligns with the fact that subjects tended to trust and share more with recipients whose ideal affect matched their own.

Tsai said that, traditionally, it has been difficult for researchers to identify which emotional expressions generate trust. This may be because they vary by [culture](#). These findings help explain why people from different cultures might trust people with different emotional expressions.

"Together, these data suggest that part of the power of ideal affect match is that it sends an implicit signal that someone else shares our beliefs and values, which in turn makes them more trustworthy, and promotes giving," Tsai said.

Enhancing sharing across cultures

The study challenges established research notions about in-group identity, or the cues that people use to identify themselves as belonging to a group. The findings specifically suggest that malleable cues related to mutual emotional values can overpower more static cues like sex and race.

The results imply that when dealing with other cultures, people may overcome traditional categories by understanding and expressing shared emotional values. Since emotional expressions are easier to modify, the

findings suggest more flexible ways of enhancing trust and sharing across cultures.

More information: BoKyung Park et al. Neurocultural evidence that ideal affect match promotes giving, *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/scan/nsx047](https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsx047)

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