Cultural Similarities and Differences in Display Rules

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Two decades of cross-cultural research on the emotions have produced a wealth of information concerning cultural similarities and differences in the communication of emotion. Still, gaps in our knowledge remain. This article presents a theoretical framework that predicts cultural differences in display rules according to cultural differences in individualism–collectivism (I–C) and power distance (PD; Hofstede, 1980, 1983), and the social distinctions in-groups–outgroups and status. The model was tested using an American–Japanese comparison, where subjects in both cultures rated the appropriateness of the six universal facial expressions of emotion in eight different social situations. The findings were generally supportive of the theoretical model, and argue for the joint consideration of display rules and actual emotional behaviors in cross-cultural research.

The universality of facial expressions of emotion is no longer debated in psychology. Cultural differences via display rules are also well accepted, despite the fact that there has been only one cross-cultural study that has

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documented their existence (Friesen, 1972; also reported in Ekman, 1972). In that study, American and Japanese individuals viewed a stressful film in two social conditions. Universality was found when members of both cultures exhibited the same facial signs of disgust, fear, and distress when alone. Cultural differences occurred when they viewed the films with an experimenter, with the Japanese smiling to mask their negative feelings.

Ekman (1972) and Friesen (1972) accounted for these findings through their neurocultural theory of emotion. This theory posits the existence of an innate Facial Affect Program, which stores the prototypical emotional expressions accounting for universality, and cultural display rules, which account for culture-specificity. These are learned, culturally determined rules that govern the display of emotion depending on social circumstance.

Many within-culture studies have furthered our knowledge of the social influences on the emotions. For example, developmental research has shown that display rules become differentiated with age (see reviews by Camras, 1985; Cole, 1985; Malatesta & Haviland, 1982; Michalson & Lewis, 1985; Saarni, 1985). The presence of another person has been shown to inhibit both posed and spontaneous expressions (posed: Kilbride & Yarczower, 1980; Yarczower, Kilbride, & Hill, 1979; spontaneous: Blumberg, Solomon, & Perloe, 1981; Kleck et al., 1976; Kraut, 1982; Yarczower & Daruns, 1982). Still other studies have shown that females are more expressive than males (e.g., Buck, Baron, & Barrette, 1982; Buck, Baron, Goodman, & Shapiro, 1980; Buck, Miller, & Caul, 1974; Buck, Savin, Miller, & Caul, 1972).

But despite this wealth of knowledge, to this date no study beyond Friesen’s (1972) has examined spontaneous emotional behaviors cross-culturally (although Ekman and Friesen’s New Guinea research did examine posed expressions), nor has any study examined display rules across cultures. Research is sorely needed to further our understanding of these most important issues.

The absence of research and theory building in this area is due in part to the lack of a conceptualization of “culture” in ways that would help us understand similarities and differences. In psychological research, culture is usually operationalized by country, equating culture with nation. Cultures are not geo-political states, however; they are socio-psychological entities. Most definitions of cultures include shared behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values communicated from generation to generation via language or some other means (Barnouw, 1985). Cultures transcend national borders and require researchers to use meaningful dimensions of variability rather than physical boundaries. Operationalizing culture by country is theoretically useful only when these dimensions are explicated. Below I sug-