Striving for Social Harmony Reduces Sex Differences in Emotional Intelligence

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Abstract

This paper is a comprehensive literature review, reporting how emotional intelligence depends upon culture and sex norms. The construct of emotional intelligence involves five domains, including expression, perception, facilitation, understanding, and regulation and—in the present context—emotion expressions are defined to mean verbal and nonverbal behaviors used to display emotional states. In the paper, I show how cultural norms influence emotional intelligence, including the impacts that individualistic and collectivist cultures have on emotional intelligence's various manifestations. Further, the published research literature shows that emotional intelligence is influenced by sex norms, both in terms of childhood and adult impacts. Sex norms are not absolute but, rather, they also develop in the context of regional and national cultures. Consideration is given in the presentation to the construct of emotional intelligence from international perspectives.

Review of Literature

Emotional intelligence includes five areas: expression, perception, facilitation, understanding, and regulation (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Emotion expressions are verbal and nonverbal behaviors used to display emotional states (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Perception is the ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others. Facilitation is the use of emotion to accomplish goals. Understanding is knowledge of the relationships between emotions and how emotions change over time. Regulation is the conscious or unconscious modification of emotions (Mayer et al, 2004).

This paper is a comprehensive literature review, explaining how emotional intelligence depends upon culture and sex norms (Fischer, 2000). Individualist cultures (e.g., many European countries, USA, Canada; Fischer, 2000) emphasize the individual, valuing autonomy and independence. Collectivist cultures (e.g., Japan, Korea, China) value the relationships people have within a group: Maintaining social harmony is much more important than asserting oneself (Fischer, 2000; Zhang, Parmley, Wan, & Cavanagh, 2015).

Cultural norms influence emotional intelligence. In individualist cultures, emotional intelligence is used to achieve personal success (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). People are likely to share their personal feelings with others and expect others to express their emotions as well (Masuda, Mesquita, Tanida, Ellsworth, Leu, & van de Veerdonk, 2008). Indeed, people often consciously exaggerate emotions to emphasize individuality (Safdar, Matsumoto, Kwantes, Friedlmeier, Yoo, & Kakai, 2009). People may have difficulty understanding complex emotions, but are relatively good at perceiving what emotion someone is feeling (Shao, Doucet, & Caruso, 2015; Fischer, 2000).

In collectivist cultures, emotional intelligence is used to achieve group success (Mesquita, 2001). People prefer less intense emotions, because they reduce group discord (Shao et al., 2015). People are unlikely to share their personal feelings, particularly feelings that could negatively impact social harmony (Stipek, 1998). They understand complex emotions, but may have difficulty perceiving what emotion someone is feeling, perhaps because emotion expressions are so often muted (Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999; Matsumoto, 1992; Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002; Shao et al., 2015). To display their desire for group approval, people consciously create opportunities to experience shame and self-criticism (Kitayama, Matsumoto, Markus, & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

Emotional intelligence is influenced by sex norms (Fischer, 2000). However, sex differences vary by culture. In individualist cultures, females are thought of as emotional beings. As a result, they express emotions more often and more intensely (Briton & Hall, 1995; Brody, 1993). They learn to perceive emotions earlier in life. As adults, they understand complex emotions better and have more detailed and complex perceptions than males (Barret, Lane, Sechrest, & Schwartz, 2000). Finally, females use both adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation more often than males (Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011). Adaptive emotion regulation includes reappraisal and active coping, while maladaptive regulation includes rumination and suppression.

In collectivist cultures, both males and females are expected to control their emotions to maintain social harmony and thus they express emotions equally (Fischer, 2000). However, the way they achieve these equal expressions differ:

Females consciously regulate their emotions to mirror how males unconsciously regulate emotions, especially through the use of disengagement (Davis, Greenberger, Charles, Chen, Zho, & Dong, 2012). Other sex differences also exist. Females are more adept than males at perceiving negative emotions, understanding complex emotions, and describing their emotions (Igrashi et al., 2011; Miura, 1993; Sohn & Park, 2016).

Although it is important to recognize the differences in sex norms between individualist and collectivist cultures, even these generalizations are too broad. Many different countries are classified as being generally individualist and many as generally collectivist, but each country has its own culture and sex norms. Additional research is needed on how culture and sex norms interact to influence emotional intelligence.

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