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Culture Display Rules of Smiling and Personal Well-being: Mutually Reinforcing or Compensatory Phenomena? Polish - Canadian Comparisons

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Abstract

Cultures vary in terms of emotional display rules, which include the expression of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In Poland there is a norm of negativity, deriving from a culture of complaining (Wojciszke & Baryła, 2005), whereas in Canada, there is a tendency to express happiness (Safdar, Friedlmeier, Matsumoto, Yoo, Kwantes, Kakai, & Shigemasu, E., 2009). In the present research project, norms and values regarding smiling in public situations, norms regarding the affirmation of life and complaining, as well as individual measures of optimism (LOT-R) and well-being (SWLS) were measured among Poles and Canadians. The results showed that the cultural display rules endorsed by Canadian students affirmed smiling and positivity in social life more than those for Polish students. Contrary to expectations, optimism and the level of satisfaction with their own lives were significantly higher among Poles than Canadians. This may indicate a compensatory mechanism between normative displays and subjective experience. Other potential interpretations are also considered.

Introduction

Every culture has developed what might be described as *rules of demeanour*, which indicate what self-presentation is regarded as appropriate or normal. These rules influence the direction of people's behavior within that cultural context; whether they adopt, for example, an optimistic or pessimistic demeanour in their approach to daily life. Accordingly, cultures vary in behavioral norms for the expression of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. For example, in Poland there is a norm of negativity or overt manifestation and expression of discontent (Wojciszke & Baryła, 2005). The norm of negativity is associated with a perception of the social world as basically evil. People are not trust-

worthy, vice is salient and the social order is unjust and unfair (Wojciszke & Baryła, 2005). This negativity also leads to perception that one is a victim of evil social institutions and people. Such a perception of the world is also accompanied by negative emotions such as sadness, fear, anger, helplessness and indignation at life's injustices (Wojciszke, Pieńkowski, & Krzykowski, 1995). On the other hand, the norm of positivity in Canada and in the U.S. is associated with the expression of positive emotions and a focus on happy situations. In these cultures, being recognized as an unhappy person may be perceived as defeat (Eid & Diener, 2001), an unhappy person is a “loser”. For example, it has been found that Canadians express significantly more positive emotions (*i.e.*, happiness and surprise) than Japanese (Safdar, Friedlmeier, Matsumoto, Yoo, Kwantes, Kakai, & Shigemasu, E., 2009). Similarly, it has been reported that Australians and Americans display more positive emotions than Chinese (Eid & Diener). Matsumoto, Yoo, Fontaine, Anguas-Wong, Arriola, Ataca, *et al.* (2008) argue that individualism is positively associated with more expressive norms in general and for positive emotions in particular. Members of individualistic cultures such as the U.S. or Canada endorse less expression of negative emotions in out-group interactions relative to in-group interactions (Matsumoto *et al.*). Safdar and colleagues suggest that in these cultures, there is a considerable pressure to be happy and to express happiness.

In this paper, we contrast the North American norm of cheerfulness, of being perceived as happy and satisfied with the Polish norm of complaining, whereby being perceived as an unhappy and unsatisfied person is acceptable. It has been reported that a standard response in a Polish conversation contains elements of negativity (Szarota, 2006). On the other hand, Americans are guided by an entrenched convention that shows warm-heartedness in social interaction (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). These cultural differences reflect the specific use and meaning of the expression of a particular emotion in a culture. Culture affects the frequency with which people smile at each other, the proper way of smiling and situations in which smiling is appropriate (Szarota, 2006). Wierzbicka (1999) indicates that a smile in American culture increases the personal well-being and popularity. In Poland, however, it is expected that the face should reflect the actual feelings of the individual to others (Szarota, 2009). Stark realism is preferred over lighthearted and possibly insincere cheerfulness.

Examining photographs from 20 countries on five continents, Szarota (2006) found that Poles did not smile in most of the photos they posted on the internet. Americans, however, generally posted photos of themselves smiling (Szarota, 2006). Doliński (1997) replicated in Poland W.B. Johnson's longitudinal study of daily mood of American students. It was found that the Polish participants more often than not reported feeling „worse than usual“ (Doliński, 1997), whereas Americans more frequently reported feeling “better than usual“ (Johnson, 1937). It has been found that cultural norms related to perception of the social world can explain cultural differences in terms of psycho-

logical well-being (Veenhoven, 2001). This raises the question: Are North Americans more satisfied with their lives than Poles in line with a happier self-presentation.

The aim of the present study therefore, was twofold. Firstly, to compare Poles (as members of a culture of discontent and complaining) and Canadians (as members of a culture of positivity and affirmation) in terms of their cultural display rules regarding complaining and smiling. Second, to compare the subjective well-being and optimism of Poles and Canadians. We hypothesise that, compared to Poles, Canadians will more frequently endorse a desire to smile in social interactions and will more likely express affirmation, because they live in a culture where there is a pressure to express happiness (Hypothesis 1).

Because they live in cultures of complaining and affirmation respectively, we also predicted that Poles would report less optimism and less satisfaction with their lives than Canadians (Hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

A total of 188 Polish (50 M, 138 F) and 265 Canadian (117 M, 148 F) students participated in our experiment from the universities of Łódź and Guelph respectively. The mean age of the Polish sample was 22.32 years ($SD = 2.8$), and for the Canadian sample, it was 19.16 years ($SD = 1.4$). In order to control for the differences in the mean ages of the samples, we treat age as a covariate in all analyzes.

Materials and Procedure

As a measure of optimism, we administered the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier *et al.*, 1994) consisting of ten items, out of which six are diagnostic (*e.g.*, *I'm always optimistic about my future*; scale ranges are from 0 - *strongly disagree* to 4 - *strongly agree*); the reliability of LOT-R was satisfactory: Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$.

Satisfaction with life was measured with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener *et al.*, 1985) consisting of 5 items (*e.g.*, *I am satisfied with my life*; the scale ranges from 1 - *strongly disagree* to 7 - *strongly agree*). Again, reliability was satisfactory $\alpha = .86$.

The actual and preferred frequency of smiling were measured with the Smile Customs Scale (SCS; Krys, in preparation), practices and values; it comprises two 10 item subscales measuring practices, how often people smile at each other ($\alpha = .78$) and values, how often people should smile at each other ($\alpha = .82$). Items are scored on a seven-point scale ranging from 1- *never smiles at me /does not have to smile at me*, to 7 - *always smiles at me/ should smile at me*).

We examined the differences in the expression of positive and negative emotion in daily conversation with the modified Questionnaire of Everyday Conversations (Wojciszke, 2002). It consists of 10 items for expressing negativism (conversational topics associated with negative affect; *e.g.* *How often you talk about: high cost of living/low*

prices?) and 10 items for expressing affirmation (conversational topics associated with positive affect. Items are scored from 1 - *never* to 5 - *always*. The reliability was $\alpha = .76$.

We also recorded participants' family background on three dimensions: (1) the socio-economic status of their family (*low, medium, high*), (2) whether their parents received higher education (*none, one, both*) and (3) family closeness, measured by the frequency of interactions with relatives outside the immediate family unit, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles (1 - *everyday*; 2 - *2-6 times a week*; 3 - *once a week*; 4 - *two or three times a month*; 5 - *once a month*; 6 - *rarely than once a month*).

Procedure

Data were collected in March and April 2014, in both Poland and Canada. Participants were students at mid-size universities in both countries. Some students completed hard copy (paper and pencil) questionnaires measures and some completed an online survey. The study received ethics approval from University of Guelph in Canada.

Results

To test our hypotheses we conducted a MANCOVA with culture and gender¹ of participant as independent variables (although we made no specific hypotheses in relation to gender, the possibility of gender differences should not be overlooked). Optimism, satisfaction with life, smiling norms (both practices and values) and negativism and affirmation were dependent variables. Age and the three family background measures were covariates. Table 1 shows the results of a MANCOVA analysis for both main effects. As predicted there was a main effect for culture on each out of six dependent variables. There were also main effects for gender on smiling norms and optimism. There were no two-way culture x gender interactions (optimism: $F(6,439) = .92, p = .12$; all other dependent variables $p > .34$).

¹Although we did not make a specific hypothesis about the effect of gender on expression of emotion, previous literature, including cross-cultural research, indicates that men and women differ in emotional display. Therefore, we controlled for the effect of gender in our study. Due to limited space, gender effect is not explored in this manuscript.

Table 1*Ratings on six analyzed measures split by culture (Polish vs Canadian) and gender.*

	PL		CA		F	p	η^2_p	F		M		F	p	η^2_p
	M	SD	M	SD				M	SD	M	SD			
Optimism	2.54	.7	2.23	.7	9.8	.002	.02	2.31	.7	2.46	.7	4.0	.046	.01
Satisfaction with life	4.30	1.2	2.26	1.3	35.8	<.001	.08	3.71	1.3	3.85	1.3	1.2	.27	.00
Smile – practices	3.84	.8	4.46	.6	40.8	<.001	.08	4.23	.8	4.07	.7	5.3	.021	.01
Smile - values	5.31	.9	5.06	.7	5.2	.023	.01	5.39	.8	4.97	.7	27.2	<.001	.06
Negativism	3.01	.6	2.77	.6	8.2	.004	.02	2.91	.6	2.86	.7	.8	.37	.00
Affirmation	2.41	.5	3.07	.5	79.1	<.001	.15	2.76	.6	2.72	.6	.4	.53	.00

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, we found that Canadians smiled more ($M = 4.46$, $p = < .001$) and expressed affirmation more ($M = 3.07$, $p = < .001$) than Poles ($M = 3.84$, $M = 2.41$, respectively). Poles also expressed negativism ($M = 3.01$, $p = < .005$) more than Canadians ($M = 2.77$). This supports our first hypothesis. However, counter-hypothetically, the levels of life satisfaction ($M = 4.30$, $p = < .001$) and optimism ($M = 2.54$, $p = < .005$) were significantly higher among Poles than Canadians ($M = 2.26$, $M = 2.23$, respectively). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Discussion

One of the aims of the present study was to compare Polish and Canadian respondents with regard to the frequency of smiling (actual and expected) and the expression of affirmation and negativism. We found support for our hypothesis that Canadians smile more and express more positivity than Poles. The second aim of the study was to examine the relation between smiling and optimism and subjective well-being. Contrary to our expectation, we found an inverse relation, that Poles were more satisfied and reported higher subjective well-being than Canadians. We offer three possible explanations for this unexpected finding.

The first potential interpretation involves the notion of limited resources, or cognitive effort. The expression of an emotion depends upon its specific use and meaning in a culture (Safdar *et al.*, 2009). There exists a pressure to express happiness in North America. As Eid and Diener (2001) indicate, unhappiness is seen as defeat in North America and there is an expectation of happy situations, which are more positively evaluated in individualistic societies than in less individualistic societies such as Poland. Because of this pressure, cultural display rules of smiling and expressing affirmation in Canada, might lead to ego-depletion for individuals. Ego-depletion refers to the idea that self-control draws upon a limited pool of mental resources that can be used up (Baumeister *et al.*, 1998). Acts of will and self-control require effort, and people are able to control a lim-

ited number of them at the same time (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). For this reason, using resources to exercise control may deplete them, resulting in fewer resources available to maintain subjective well-being.

Second, perhaps there is a culture valuing emotional realism in Poland and a culture of emotional control in Canada. North Americans usually use the rhetoric of control; one exercises control in order to cope with feelings. Stearns (2003) reported that in American research emotions have been divided into two groups: bad emotions, which have to be avoided and good emotions that need to be controlled. In American culture, cheerfulness is regarded as beneficial and socially effective (Szarota, 2011). In Polish culture, it is expected that the face should reflect one's actual feelings (Szarota, 2009). If Canadians control their emotions, that is, showing their smiles and expressing more satisfaction than dissatisfaction in public, we may not know that they are not as satisfied and optimistic as they look. Poles with their expression of spontaneity, say exactly what they think but that does not mean that they are less optimistic and satisfied with life. Contrary to appearances, in Canada people might want to keep a distance from others to maintain their independence (*'Look, I'm happy, I don't need anything from you'*), whereas in Poland intimacy (expressed through complaining, unburdening oneself, and giving/receiving advice) is valued more than, possibly insincere, expressions of happiness.

The third explanation is based on a difference between expectations and experience. As was shown in the GLOBE project (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) values may contrast with practices: House *et al.* found substantial negative correlations between values and practices on seven out of nine analyzed cultural dimensions. Therefore, the third possible explanation may be based on the notion that when measuring optimism and life satisfaction we study values (desires), an aspiration towards happiness in the case of our Canadian participants, instead of actual states. The result on the smiling norms scale, the only one in which we explicitly measured both practices and values, may support our reasoning: A large gap between Polish and Canadian practices (Canadians report much more smiling in everyday life than Poles) in line with a reversed gap in values (Poles report higher desire for smiles in everyday life than Canadians) may suggest that in a social context where people generally express happiness, Canadians may be privately aware that they are not as happy as they feel they should be. In contrast, in a context where complaining is the norm, Poles may feel that, in comparison with the apparent norm, they are not doing so badly, leading to a greater sense of well-being.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

One limitation of this study was – the use of student samples, a highly specific and relatively uniform group. For future research directions, we plan a replication in the U.S. and in India. Americans, like Canadians, are expected to declare a frequent desire

to smile and high expression of affirmation, compared with Poles. Indians, on the other hand, share similar cultural norms in terms of emotional expression with Poles and there is not the North American pressure to smile and express affirmation.

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