A Cultural Lens on Facial Behavior in Emotions

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Many contemporary psychology textbooks (Gleitman, 1995; Myers, 1998) describe facial expressions of emotions as universal, citing famous studies by both Ekman and Izard and their colleagues (Ekman, 1973, 1994; Ekman et al., 1987; Izard, 1980, 1994). In these studies, respondents from different cultures were asked to identify a number of facial expressions. In the initial studies, respondents selected one emotion from a list. Across many cultures, people chose the 'correct' emotion at a frequency above chance for six to 10 emotions. Our studies replicate the finding of cross-cultural agreement in emotion recognition, but they also show that holding a cultural lens over the classic facial recognition paradigm reveals significant and meaningful differences in the perception of emotions.

We hypothesized that emotion recognition in Japanese and American contexts should differ considerably according to different cultural models of self. The prevalent models of self and relationships in Japan are interdependent, whereas the prevalent models in America are independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1994, in press). An independent model of self characterizes the individual as autonomous and bounded, whereas an interdependent model of the self defines the self as contextualized, particularly by its relationships to other people.

These different views of the self are associated with different ideas about the sources of a person's behavior. Whereas an independent model of self views behavior as internally driven, and thus contingent on an individual's inner states (such as emotions), according to an interdependent model of self, behavior is seen not just as internally driven, but also as responsive to situational and relational demands. Behavior, including expressive behavior, reflects one's obligations to others, and is accommodated to role demands and situational pressures (Markus & Kitayama, in press). We expected that the interpretation of emotional facial behavior would differ cross-culturally according to the different cultural models of self and agency. We expected that Americans would see facial expressions as reflections of an individual's subjective feelings. In contrast, we expected that Japanese would attend not just to the individual, but also to the social environment in interpreting the face.

We adjusted the traditional experimental task to allow for the emergence of cultural differences in the interpretation of facial behavior. In the first study, we asked respondents of both cultures to identify low and high intensity facial expressions of happiness and anger. Our pilot study revealed that, in contrast to the American respondents, Japanese found it hard to identify facial behavior as expression of a particular emotion. We hypothesized that since Japanese judge the meaning of facial behavior in context, a facial expression by itself is inconclusive. It may still take on many different meanings, depending on the precise nature of the context. In order to test this hypothesis, we asked respondents to rate each facial expression on 10 different emotion scales (cf. Ekman et al., 1987). As expected, we found that American respondents associated facial behavior with one internal emotional state. In contrast, the meaning of facial behavior was more complex for the Japanese.

In the second experiment, we tested directly that the social context of facial behavior would influence its

meaning for Japanese, interdependent selves, but not for Americans. The stimuli for this experiment consisted of a target figure with a particular facial expression (happy, sad, angry), surrounded by four people in the background who had facial expressions that were either the same or different from the target's facial expression. As expected, the other people's emotions (social context) did not affect American respondents, but it made a significant contribution to the way Japanese respondents judged the target person's emotion.

Together these two studies suggest that for the Japanese, interdependent group, social context plays an important role in the interpretation of a person's expression of emotion. In contrast, independent group social context is irrelevant to the American. A happy face signals happiness regardless of social context. Moreover, this suggests that the research paradigm traditionally used to study emotion recognition in the face faithfully mimics the process of emotion recognition that actually takes place in an independent context. The original paradigm for emotion recognition consisted of reading one emotion from a face in isolation. This is the task in which our American respondents engaged spontaneously. Our research suggests that emotional recognition is very different in an interdependent context in which facial expressions reflect ways of relating with the environment. The prevalent process of emotion recognition in interdependent contexts thus includes consideration of the face-in-context.

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