

Emotional Experiences and Expressions of Individuals in the Sri Lankan Context: The Roles of Gender, Culture and Religion

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Abstract

The present study focused on exploring the emotional experiences and expressions of individuals, the variation in emotional expressions in different social relationships, and their perceptions about the cultural and religious appropriateness of expressing certain emotions. The sample consisted of 54 Sri Lankans who were selected using convenience sampling and the participants were aged between 17 to 64 years. A questionnaire was used to examine how often individuals experience basic emotions and some secondary emotions, to what extent they think that they can express these emotions, the appropriateness of expressing basic emotions to individuals in various relationships, and the appropriateness of feeling and expressing basic emotions according to their cultural and religious backgrounds. Results suggested significant gender differences in experiencing and expressing emotions. There were significant relationships between feeling and expressing some emotions. There were variations in emotional expressions in different social relationships. Findings also suggested that individuals accepted the experience and expression

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of some emotions according to their cultural and religious backgrounds.

Keywords: emotional experience, emotional expression, gender, culture, religion

Introduction

Emotions serve important purposes in human life. Emotional experience can be described as a reaction of the whole organism to an internal or external event (Pettijohn, 1991). Emotions produce physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes. Theories of emotion explain how individuals experience various emotions. Some theories have focused on somatic, neurobiological, and cognitive components of emotions whereas others have investigated the behavioral expressions of emotions. With respect to the expression of emotions, researchers have explored universal as well as culturally-specific patterns of emotional expression (e.g., Ekman et al., 1987, Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, & Jing, 2003). Lately, the focus has shifted to the understanding of individuals' emotions and feelings in daily life (Kang & Shaver, 2004). Considering individuals' emotional experiences, it is important to state two main concerns raised by Frijda (1986). One was what differentiates an emotional experience from other experiences and what allows people to identify their experiences as emotional. The other was, what distinguishes one emotion from another and what allows people to recognize or classify their emotional experiences as happiness, sadness, anger etc. Research has been conducted on various aspects of emotions; however, there is a need for further investigation into emotional experiences and expressions of different groups, particularly those who live in different cultural milieus.

Review of Literature

Emotional Experiences and Gender

Generally, it is believed that females are more emotionally

expressive than males. A considerable body of research has revealed emotional differences between males and females (Parkins, 2012). Particularly, researchers have found gender differences in recognizing and expressing emotions, and gender stereotypes of emotions (Durik, Hyde, Marks, Roy, Anaya, & Schultz, 2006; Simpson & Stroh, 2004; Tracy & Robins, 2008). Previous studies have found that females, compared to males, tend to have greater emotional expressiveness (Fabes & Martin, 1991; Kring & Gordon, 1998; Parkins, 2012; Smith, Brescoll, & Thomas, 2016). They intensely use every category of emotional expressions compared to males. Especially, they tend to use more emotional expression markers when they show their emotions online than males (Parkins, 2012). At all ages, girls and female adults recognize facial expressions of emotions more accurately than boys and male adults do (Olderbak, Wilhelm, Hildebrandt, & Quoidbach, 2019).

Previous research has shown that certain gender stereotypes are related to specific emotions (Kelley & Hutson-Comeaux, 2002; Parkins, 2012). Emotions such as happiness, sadness, and fear are generally related to females. In contrast, certain emotions (e.g., anger) are linked to males (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux, 1999; Parkins, 2012). With respect to positive and negative emotions, females are supposed to exhibit more positive emotions than men, particularly in another-oriented context (Johnson & Shulmans, 1988). However, some studies have suggested little difference with respect to the expression of males and females' emotional experiences (Fabes & Martin, 1991).

It seems that most of the research on gender differences in the category of emotion stereotype was based on beliefs or perceptions about emotional expressions rather than beliefs about individuals' emotional experiences as a whole (Kelly & Huston-Comeaux, 2002). Also, researchers have examined beliefs or perceptions of individuals' emotional experiences rather than their actual experiences of emotions. Therefore, this study aimed to examine how individuals, both males and females living in a more collectivist

cultural setting, feel and express basic and some secondary emotions.

Emotional expressions in Social Relationships

Even though emotion is a biologically manifested component, emotional experiences and expressions can be socio-culturally determined (Mesquita & Walker, 2003; Panayiotou, 2004). Culture plays a significant role in shaping individuals' behavior and therefore, the core of emotions can also be influenced by the socio-cultural environment in which they live (Lutz, 1988; Turner, & Stets, 2005). In addition, culture may have an effect on the way in which individuals experience and express their emotions. As a result, emotional expressions of individuals may vary across cultures.

Because of certain cultural beliefs and perceptions related to emotions, emotional expressions of individuals may vary across social situations and social relationships. Emotions help individuals prepare themselves to adapt to various situations. They can signal persons to continue actions or conditions that enhance their well-being and to realize that the way they express or manage their emotions can considerably impact on initiating, facilitating and maintaining their relationships with others (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994). Emotional expressions are used to convey individuals' needs and desires to other members in their social context. Researchers have also highlighted the importance of understanding emotional expression in the context of social relationships (e.g., Chaplin, 2015).

Culture, Religion and Emotional Experiences

Each culture has its own cultural values that guide individuals to form their perceptions, beliefs, and behavior patterns within their socio-cultural milieus (Matsumoto et al., 2008; Wong, Bond, & Mosquera, 2008) and these values describe what is good as well as appropriate within their cultural contexts (Schwartz, 2004). The cultural values related to emotions present guidelines for individuals' emotion regulation and emotional expressions, especially in their social relationships (Matsumoto et al., 2008).

Therefore, cultural beliefs, customs, and individuals' perceptions and expectations about their feelings and emotions may influence their emotional expressions (Wong et al., 2008).

Eastern culture has been described as collectivist because the individuals in this cultural setting are expected to adjust to their social group in order to maintain harmony in the society (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Collectivist cultures tend to value low arousal emotions more than high arousal emotions. Therefore, individuals in these cultures experience and would rather experience low arousal emotions over high arousal emotions (Lim, 2016). Researchers have stated that individuals in collectivist cultures believe that they express basic emotions less than people in individualistic cultures (Ekman, 1972; Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001; Pittam, Gallois, Iwawaki, & Kroonenberg, 1995). They tend to rate expressing and experiencing basic emotions less intensely (Biehl et al., 1997; Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989; Matsumoto, Kudoh, Scherer, & Wallbott, 1988). Further, they experience emotions such as shame and guilt more strongly than people in individualistic cultures (Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, 1995). Unlike individualistic cultures, collectivist cultures give more importance to the initiation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and, as a result, people in these cultures tend to build up strong and secure relationships with their family members and friends (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This may cause them not to express certain emotions (e.g., negative emotions) towards other members in their social environment since they want to maintain group harmony (Franzoi, 2015). In addition, culturally specific patterns of behaviors and responses may influence individuals' emotional experiences (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000).

Considering cultural differences in emotional experiences, it seems that emotions are expected to reflect the self with respect to others in collectivist cultures (Mesquita, 2001). Therefore, emotions can be a sign of individuals' relations with others. People in these cultures may hinder certain emotional expressions as they want to maintain

harmony within their social group (as cited in Kang et al., 2003). Particularly, people in some Asian cultures may inhibit certain emotions and emotional expressions when they realize that their emotional expressions may hurt others' feelings or damage their relationships with others (Wierzbicka, 1994).

While western culture emphasizes maximizing positive emotions and expressions, eastern cultures endorse emotional self-regulation and keeping a balance between all extreme emotions (Leu, 2005). This may be due to the impact of their cultural and religious backgrounds. Some religions (e.g., Buddhism) may emphasize the importance of maintaining emotional balance. Research has also found that religion is related to higher well-being (Koenig, 2012; Koenig et al. 2012). Religious involvement may positively influence individuals' well-being since it helps individuals gain emotional support, particularly in dealing with negative emotions (Bergin, 2000; Koenig, 1998) and negative life events (Pargament, 1990). Religious beliefs also have a positive effect on dealing with emotional pain (Santrock, 2004). Therefore, individuals' religious background may influence their emotional experiences and expressions.

In summary, the present research focused on understanding emotional experiences of individuals living in the Sri Lankan context. Also, it explored whether individuals' emotional expressions vary depending on their relationships with other members in the social context. Further, it investigated the impact of religious and cultural background on their emotional experiences.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

A total of 54 adults (26 males and 28 females) who lived in the Western Province, Sri Lanka participated in this study. A convenience sampling method was used for the data collection. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 64 with a mean of 28 years. All participants were Sinhalese Buddhists and they participated in the study voluntarily. A questionnaire was developed to assess

emotional experiences and expressions of individuals and then it was translated into Sinhala language and re-translated into English to check for any discrepancies. The researcher explained the purpose of this study to the participants briefly and they were given instructions before completing the questionnaire.

Materials

A questionnaire was developed to assess a) how often individuals feel/experience basic emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and some secondary emotions: pride, excitement, pleasure, shyness, contempt, pain, embarrassment, shame, frustration, boredom, skepticism, defense, contemplation, and exasperation, b) to what extent they think that they can express these basic emotions and secondary emotions, c) whether they think that it is appropriate to express basic emotions to individuals in various relationships such as one's parents, siblings, spouse, one's own children, friends, neighbors, and males and females in general, and d) the appropriateness of feeling and expressing basic emotions according to their religious and cultural backgrounds. The participants rated how often they experience basic and secondary emotions using a 5-point scale (1 = *never* and 5 = *always*). The other items of the questionnaire were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* and 5 = *very much*). In addition, participants answered demographic questions including gender, age, marital status, religion, ethnicity, living area and education.

Findings

Experiencing Basic and Secondary Emotions

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) revealed a significant effect for gender. Given the significance of the effect for gender, the univariate main effects were examined. The results of a univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed significant gender differences in experiencing both basic and secondary emotions. Accordingly, there were significant gender differences in feeling sadness, anger, pleasure, and shyness. With regard to sadness,

results of Levene's test showed that it was not significant and therefore, the homogeneity of variance assumption was not violated. The main effect for gender was significant for sadness $F(1, 52) = 5.82, p < .05$. Females experienced sadness more often than males. With respect to anger, Levene's test showed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was met. The main effect of gender was significant for anger $F(1, 52) = 6.78, p < .05$, indicating that males feel anger more often than females. Further, a significant gender difference was found for shyness $F(1, 52) = 4.63, p < .05$ and pleasure $F(1, 52) = 5.94, p < .05$. Accordingly, females experienced pleasure and shyness more often than males.

Expressing Basic and Secondary Emotions

Results of MANOVA revealed significant multivariate main effects for gender. Therefore, the univariate main effects were examined. Results revealed significant gender differences in expressing three emotions: anger, shyness, and exasperation. A significant gender difference was found for expressing anger $F(1, 52) = 6.17, p < .05$, indicating that males express anger to a greater extent than females. The main effect of gender was significant for expressing shyness $F(1, 52) = 9.83, p < .05$. Accordingly, females express shyness to a greater extent than males. Also, the main effect of gender was significant for expressing exasperation $F(1, 52) = 5.14, p < .05$. It revealed that males express exasperation to a greater extent than females.

Relationships between Experiencing and Expressing Basic and Secondary Emotions

Correlational analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between feeling and expressing basic emotions. Findings revealed significant positive relationships between feeling and expressing happiness, anger, fear, disgust and contempt for the entire sample. There was a significant correlation between feeling and expressing happiness ($r(54) = .48, p < .01$). There was a positive relationship between feeling and expressing anger ($r(54) = .35, p < .01$). The relationship between feeling and expressing fear was also significant ($r(54) = .51, p < .01$). In addition, there were significant associations between feeling and expressing contempt ($r(54) = .40,$

$p < .01$) and disgust ($r(54) = .28, p < .05$).

Considering secondary emotions, there were significant correlations between feeling and expressing secondary emotions such as pride, excitement, shyness, shame, and exasperation for the entire sample. Among these emotions, the relationship between feeling and expressing emotions were stronger for shyness ($r(54) = .57, p < .01$), shame ($r(54) = .61, p < .01$), and exasperation ($r(54) = .46, p < .01$).

Emotional expressions in Social Relationships

This study also examined whether the appropriateness of emotional expressions varied across individuals' relationships: with one's parents, siblings, spouse, one's own children, friends, neighbors, and males and females in general. There were significant relationships differences with respect to the appropriateness of expressing emotions. Individuals reported that it was more appropriate to express sadness to their spouses ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.46$) compared to their children ($M = 2.37, SD = 1.38$). Furthermore, they stated that it was more appropriate to express anger to their spouses ($M = 2.20, SD = 1.27$) compared to their parents ($M = 1.73, SD = 1.11$) (see Table 1).

Table 1.

The Appropriateness of Emotional Expressions in Social Relationships

Emotions	Relationship	Relationship	Mean Difference
Sadness	Spouse	Children	0.70*
Anger	Spouse	Parents	0.47*

* $p < .05$

Culture, Religion and Emotional Experiences

Further, the present study investigated the appropriateness of feeling and expressing emotions according to their cultural and religious backgrounds. The participants were asked to report whether it was appropriate to feel and express basic emotions, happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and contempt according to their culture/s. Findings suggested that individuals tend to accept the experience of some positive emotions such as happiness within their cultural context. Also, they tend to believe that it is appropriate to feel some emotions such as sadness, surprise, but not anger or contempt according to their culture (see Figure 1).

Similar results can be observed in relation to the appropriateness of expressing emotions including happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and contempt. Individuals believe that it is appropriate to express happiness, sadness and surprise within their cultural setting. However, they do not think that it is appropriate to express, especially anger and contempt according to their culture (see Figure 2).

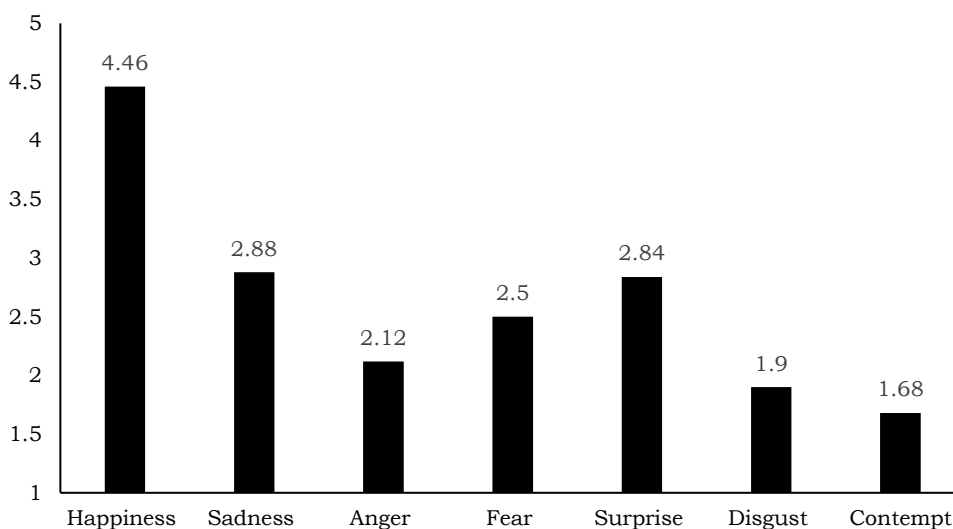


Figure 1. Appropriateness of Feeling Emotions according to Culture

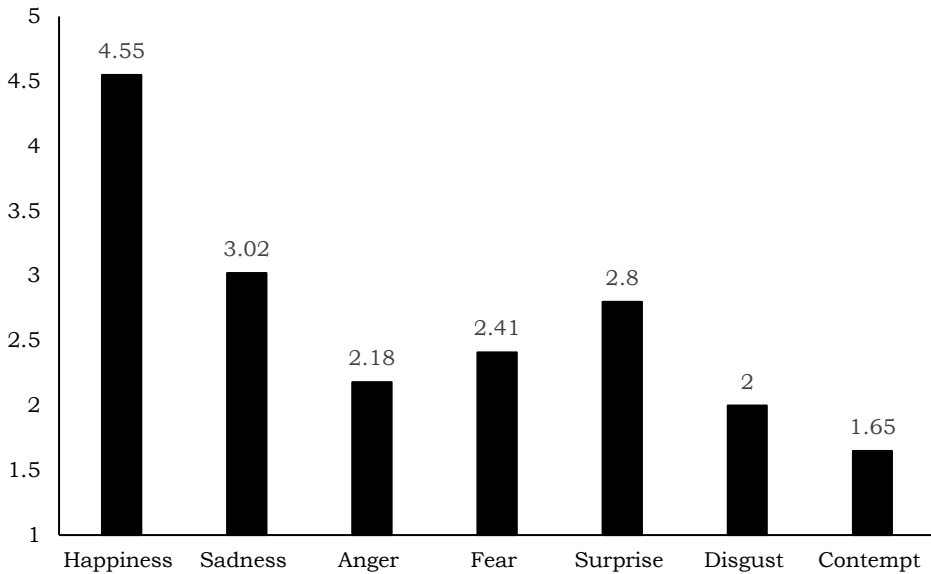


Figure 2. Appropriateness of Expressing Emotions according to Culture

In addition, participants reported that it was appropriate to feel emotions like happiness according to their religion; however, it was inappropriate to feel emotions such as anger, disgust, and contempt (see Figure 3). A similar trend was observed in relation to the expression of these emotions (see Figure 4). That was, individuals were less likely to express emotions such as anger, contempt, and disgust as they thought that it was inappropriate according to their religious beliefs and practices.

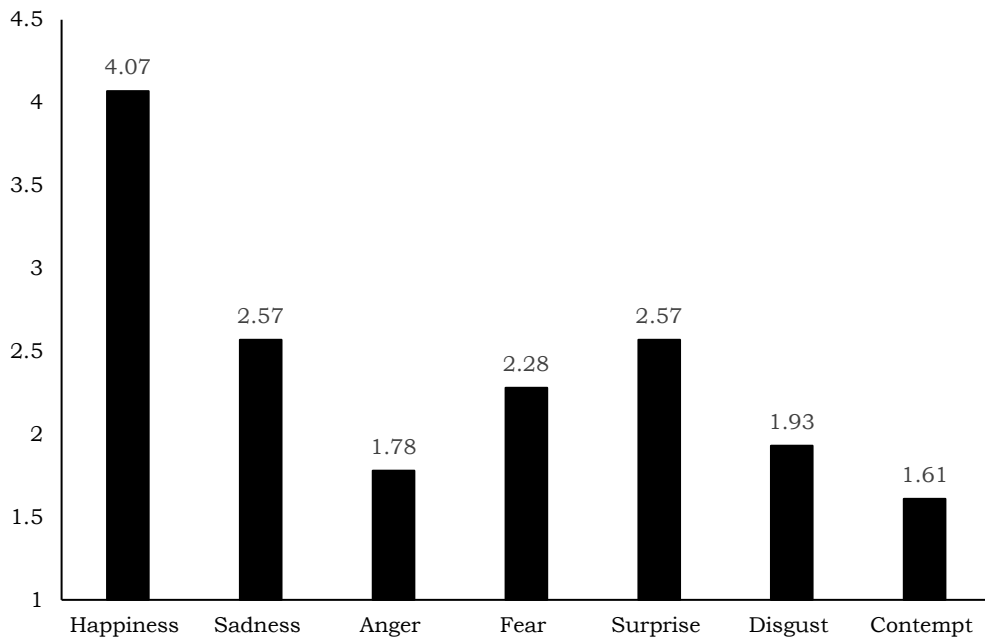


Figure 3. Appropriateness of Feeling Emotions according to Religion

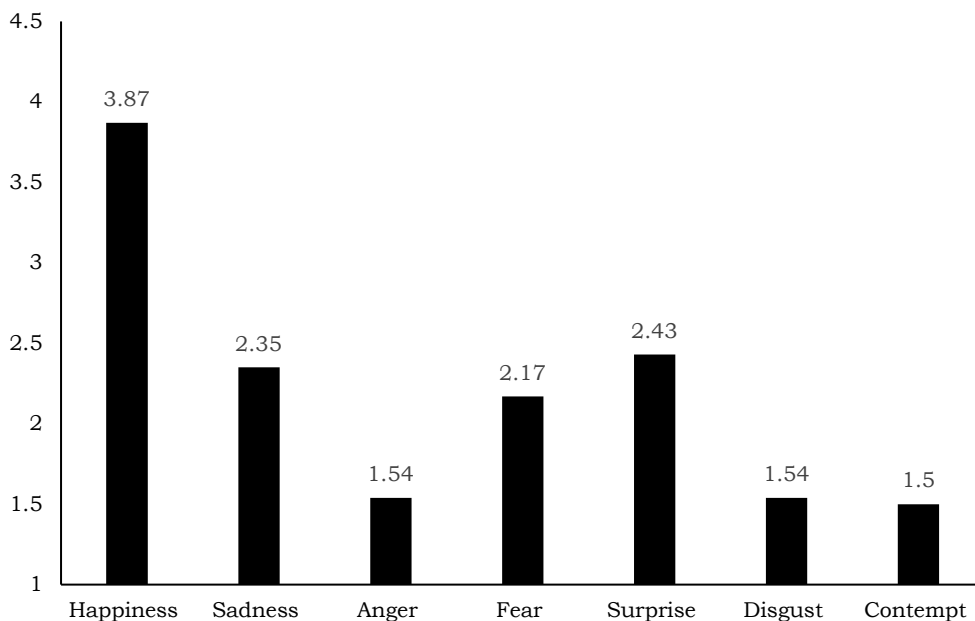


Figure 4. Appropriateness of Expressing Emotions according to Religion

Discussion and Conclusion

The current research focused on understanding the emotional experiences and expressions of individuals, the variation in emotional expressions in their social relationships, and their beliefs about the cultural and religious appropriateness of expressing certain emotions within their socio-cultural context. Considering the experience of basic and secondary emotions, findings suggested that females experienced sadness more often than males and males experienced anger more often than females. Previous research has revealed gender stereotypes in relation to some emotions (Kelley & Hutson-Comeaux, 2002; Parkins, 2012). Accordingly, sadness was generally associated with females and anger was related to males. Findings of the present study support the previous findings with respect to the gender difference in experiencing certain emotions. Considering the secondary emotions, females reported that they felt

shyness and pleasure more often than males. Prior research has also suggested that females experience emotions such as shyness, shame and embarrassment more strongly than males (Miller, 1999, as cited in Mandal, 2008).

Present findings indicate gender differences in expressing emotions; that is, males tend to express anger and exasperation to a greater extent than females. Prior research has found that some emotions like anger (e.g., anger) are related to males (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux, 1999; Parkins, 2012). Also, the evidence suggests that expression of anger is desirable for males but not for females. Generally, it is believed that males and females have norms of appropriate emotional expression (Smith, Brescoll, & Thomas, 2016). Previous research has demonstrated significant gender differences in emotional expressions in adults. It was evident that females are more emotionally expressive (Brody & Hall, 1993; Kring & Gordon, 1998), particularly for positive emotions than males (LaFrance, Hecht, & Levy Paluck, 2003). Also, they tend to internalize negative emotions (e.g., sadness) compared to males. On the contrary, males exhibited greater emotional expression, particularly for anger than females (Archer, 2004). Results of this study support the previous findings in relation to the gender differences in expressing anger. Additionally, the present findings suggested that females tend to express shyness to a greater extent than males.

With respect to the relationship between experiencing and expressing basic emotions, correlational analyses revealed significant positive relationships between feeling and expressing some positive and negative emotions such as happiness, anger, fear, disgust and contempt for the entire sample. Accordingly, individuals who felt these emotions thought that they could express these emotions to a greater extent. In addition, present findings suggested that individuals who felt secondary emotions including pride, excitement, shyness, shame and exasperation also are more likely to express these emotions to a greater extent.

Regarding the appropriateness of emotional expression in social relationships, it seems that individuals tend to choose what is

appropriate and inappropriate in relation to their relationships with other members in the social environment. Individuals reported that it was appropriate to express their sadness to their spouses but not to their children. Previous research has revealed significant cultural differences in norms and beliefs related to the appropriateness of expressing emotions in social relationships (e.g., Aune & Aune, 1996; Matsumoto, 1990). Further, several studies have indicated that parents play a vital role in the development of children emotional self-regulation and expression (Frankel et al., 2012). Some parents may consider that negative emotions are not good and therefore, they may believe that these emotions need to be controlled and should not be expressed to others (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998).

In addition, individuals believed that it was inappropriate to express anger to their parents compared to their spouses. In a South Asian cultural setting, respect for elders is thought to be an important social norm (Dissanayake, 2018). Also, within the family, children seek advice from their parents and elders, particularly in special occasions in their family settings (Siddhisena, 2005). These cultural values and norms may influence emotional expressions of individuals within their family settings. Also, collectivist cultures consider maintaining connectedness and harmony with family members and friends (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and therefore, they may not express certain negative emotions (Franzoi, 2015). Findings of this research suggest that the appropriateness of expressing certain emotions, especially negative emotions, may vary across social relationships.

The present study also examined whether cultural and religious backgrounds of individuals influenced their beliefs regarding feeling and expressing emotions. The participants were asked to report whether it was appropriate to feel and express emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and contempt according to their culture and religion. Findings suggest that individuals tend to accept the experience of some positive emotions such as happiness, sadness, surprise, but not anger or contempt according to their

culture and religion. Individuals in collectivist cultures tend to value low arousal emotions. As a consequence of these cultural influences, there is a difference in actual arousal levels of emotional experience (Lim, 2016). For example, previous research has found that Asians exhibit low arousal emotions compared to Caucasians (Kacen & Lee, 2000). According to Silberman (2003), religion helps individuals decide what is appropriate and inappropriate in relation to emotional expressions and also the appropriate intensity of these expressions. This suggests that both cultural and religious background have an impact on individuals' emotional experiences and expressions.

To conclude, although emotion has a biological base, individuals' emotional experience is also influenced by the socio-cultural environment. Culture shapes the way individuals experience and express emotions in different social situations. Current findings strengthen the evidence of the influence of different socio-cultural factors on emotional experience and expressions. Thus, a cultural approach would be helpful in understanding emotional experience and expressions of individuals in a given culture.

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