Emotions across cultures: A comparative survey of Nigeria and Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Cultures often shape both ways of thinking and expressing feelings. Emotions are not internal and private. Rather, they are socio-cultural indexes in which personal and social factors constitute an integral part of the subject matter. While it is difficult to ascertain someone’s actual emotional state, there are verbal and non-verbal indicators of emotions which are common across many cultures. Nigerian showed their emotions: positive and negative openly through loudness of voice, apportion blame, using various gestulatory features to indicate both joy and anger. Sri Lankans on the other hand emphasized emotional moderation and control. They showed less intense positive and negative emotional experience and smiled less intently and less frequently while relieving positive emotional events.

Keywords: emotions, cultures, deference, glee, malevolent, besmirch comportment
Introduction

The study of emotional expressions across cultures could be traced to the work of Darwin (1892/1998) that discovers that facial expressions are the residual actions of behavioral responses. According to Darwin (ibid), humans generally regardless of race, culture or gender possess the ability to express some emotions in virtually similar ways, primarily through their faces. Darwin’s work, *the Expressions of the Emotions in man and animals*, is a refutation of an earlier work by Sir Charles Bell. Sir Charles Bell claims that God designs humans in the same way in that they all have unique social muscles to express unique emotions. Darwin’s work does not go unchallenged especially from Margaret Mead and Birdwhistell who note vast differences between expressions of emotions across cultures.

There are contentions on which of the terms should be used while expressing behavior: emotion and feeling plunge the hearts of man. However, many psychologists appear to prefer using the term *emotion* which somehow sounds more *objective* than *feeling*. This is because people associate *objectivity* with *reality* and *emotion* has a biological foundation. So, it can be studied from objective viewpoint. Expatiating on this argument, the English, *emotion* will have the following semantic collocations to ‘feelings’, *thinking*, and reference to a person’s body. For instance, one can talk of feeling of hunger, a feeling of heartburn or feeling of scare because the feelings in questions are not thought – related. Also, one can talk of feeling of loneliness, or feeling of alienation because these feelings are related to thoughts – they do not suggest any association to bodily movement, etc. Based on the clarification above, the more appropriate term is *emotion* hence its adoption in this paper.

A more reliable research on emotional expression is conducted by Ekman (1972) who provides evidence that members of different cultures could accurately and reliably recognize emotions portrayed in a set of expressions, including anger, fear, happiness, sadness, etc. Ekman (ibid) equally demonstrates how people of distinct cultures produce similar expressions spontaneously. After Darwin’s work, several other studies have emerged, measuring facial behaviors which occurred in reactions to emotionally evocative situations. While literature on emotions appears to be numerous, they are deficit in that they come from a sort of controlled, laboratory experiments with people of almost equal social status – a factor that can present different reactions to differing situations. Analyzing emotional state should be conducted in a natural setting, in real – life where subjects exhibit naturalness. Additionally, emotional signaling is just one manifestation of facial expression behavior. There are other emotions produced that are not associated with face especially in conversations.

It is very much unlikely that people across the world demonstrate similar emotional feelings. Rather, as people develop, experiences, and reactions to issues may differ. So, people learn to associate themselves with specific events, which may not be universal. Emotions are behavioral conceptions. Therefore, it posits a great deal of difficulty in rendering an accurate assessment because it includes abstract and complex states such as impulses, physiological
changes, etc. Furthermore, cultures often shape both ways of thinking and ways of feeling and since there is no universal culture, Darwin’s claims may have some deficits. Also, emotions change within and between subjects and cultural contexts also differ.

While it is very difficult to ascertain someone’s actual emotions, there are non – verbal behaviors typical of emotional states which include, smiling, dancing, touching another person, jumping, dancing for joy, sad facial expressions for sadness, hand trembling for anger, etc; and verbal indices of emotions are crying, loudness of voice for joy and anger, etc. All these indices of emotions are culture – specific because cultures have appropriateness of emotional expressions and cultures determine rules governing emotional behaviors. Still with respect to Darwin’s claims, living standards of people across the world are the same because riches vary, opportunities differ and change over time, leadership qualities are dissimilar, and different cultural models promote distinct events. For instance, Americans place high premium to happiness in such a way that they create many contexts in which happiness is likely to occur Cohen (2001). Similarly, Americans praise, complement and encourage one another; give awards, and trophies for a varieties of accomplishments. They equally take delight in fostering positive and optimistic views over themselves and matters that concern their nation D’Andrade (1987).

Generally, societies do not belong to the same cultural models. For instance, high uncertainty avoidance societies are associated with high anxiety, stress, and avoidance of ambiguity, to be more normative, and emphasize rules. Consequently, these cultures more often than not engage in verbalizing their emotions. Typical of such cultures are European societies Hofstede (1991). Contrastively, masculine cultures value independence, competitiveness, power differentiation, rewards and assertiveness. These cultures also emphasize gender differences, even if male and females live in these cultures tend to share a more assertive and instrumental self – other concept.

People living in feminine cultures value social supports quality of life, interdependence and fluid gender roles Hofstede (ibid). By contrast, masculine cultures therefore reinforce gender difference in displaying rules, particularly in the case of anger Matsumoto (1989). So, in view of high concern for interdependence and care for others, feminine cultures control fewer expressions of non competitive emotions. In fact, previous research indicate that people who in Spain and Chile feel and express more strongly than those in masculine – oriented countries such as Belgium and Mexico, Paez and Vergara (1995).

In masculine cultures, the expression of weakness, such as sadness could be de – emphasized, while the expression of assertive emotions like anger or pride could be reinforced. Also, higher gender differences could be expected in masculine cultures and lower differences in feminine cultures. These last ones, which value social support, could accept more the display of emotionality. Also, emotional expressiveness is higher in feminine cultures Paez and Vergara.
(ibid). It is very common to find that females report more non-verbal reactions than males in expressing joy and anger.

Individualistic cultures are associated with more lenient, display rules of negative emotions because individuals value uniqueness and expression of internal desires. So, verbal and non-verbal display of negative emotions like anger could be more tolerated under conditions where expressions such as emotion enhances the individual’s sense of uniqueness and allows the person to be assertive, Matsumoto (ibid).

In high context – cultures, speakers tend to use indirect meanings in their speeches. It is a way to reduce the difference between person and environment. On the other hand, individualistic cultures usually stress the difference between self and others and they only their behavior to express verbal and non-verbal emotions. So, how the speaker is perceived depends on the expectancy of those who listen. An indirect style could be considered manipulative in an individualistic context and direct manners as impolite in a collectivist scenario.

Emotions in conversations

As argued above, one commonest manifestation of emotion is through facial expressions. Roseman and Smith (2001) argue that emotions are mental states which are unique in form and are caused by appraisals of objects or events associated with them. Contending this assertion is the word of Wierbieccka (1999) who explains that language is a key issue in understanding human emotions. This explains that emotions are expressed after an utterance is produced. Contrary to this is the idea is the argument put forward by (Pennebaker et al., 2003:9) who say that, while words themselves have meanings, we are more interesting in what people mean beyond the literal interpretations of what they say. Similarly, it should be noted that words are not important in and of themselves. They are important because they point to a speaker’s feeling and to situations in which they find themselves. Impliedly, these assertions explain that emotions are expressed through other means rather than in linguistic utterances. In a slight dispute with these claims, the present researcher wishes to argue that words and emotions are intertwined and emotions serve as basis for predicting a speaker’s behavior within a context of an event.

Research has proved that most emotional conversations are anchored on personal matters and an emotional discourse is often characterized by shouts, cries, threats, furies, and other manifestations. Yet others use hurtful expressions which may be detrimental to mutual understanding. However, there are situations in conversations where participants resort to silence or smiles. While this strategy may be idiosyncratic, other occurrences are cultural. When conversations are characterized by emotions, there are two possible causes: it is either the partners fail to reach consensus or both partners want to strike out each other’s point. Nevertheless, not all forms of emotional conversations or arguments lead to quarrel because individual reactions or responses vary considerably according to beliefs, cultures, contexts, topics of discussions, social status of the interlocutors and understanding emotional indexes in general.
Conversations are generally difficult social form of interactions especially when the topics are open-ended, coupled with the fact that individuals are entailed to their views and every discussant is liable to be sensitive to an attack, criticism or any form of disapproval. This is usually the case with people who engraing in a particular belief. The best strategy expected of every conversationalist is an understanding of expressions used, people’s right to their feelings within the correct perspective and separate personal feelings from rational issues because a good arguer is one who speaks to the understanding of every lay man, selects right words, and applies them in their appropriate contexts as well as physical and vocal delivery, humor, passion and persuasions which are basis for healthy deliberations.

A close examination of most heated emotional conversations occur between people who have prior relationships such as family members, friends, colleagues, business partners or people of divergent political/religious beliefs. Therefore, understanding and analyzing emotional arguments should have recourse to history of the participants. Legge (1992) explains that without in-depth contextual analyses, it is very difficult to comprehend many of the dynamics of conversations. Gilbert (ibid) puts forward a weak argument where he says people engage in arguments (non-structured) they have delicate issues at stake. The question is: why do people engage in hurtful discussions. The goals of quarrels or hurtful utterances in conversations are to hit out verbally at the other party and if possible, to humiliate. Gilbert (2000: 23) explains that, people exhibit emotional behavior because they hear what they do not want to hear, whether in words or meaning – communicated by tones. If one’s views are unacceptable, it is either they lack convincing substance or it is generally unrealistic. Yet, how does one ascertain a fact? It is a truism that there is no universal definition of reality or fact. Rather, people provide different interpretations based on cultures, beliefs and professions. However, a claim can be factual if it fulfils an agreed condition of the parties contending over a proposition.

People do not just begin to scream, yell, abuse, hit objects around or exhibit awkward behavior. Rather, emotions are responsible. When emotions are better embraced than reasons, it has a consequence, one of which is hampering social relationship.

Reason may look like a rock, and emotion may like water, but both being for good or bad; for agreement or conflict; for honest exploration of the ends of others. That rock is easier to move, hold and inspect does not make them safer…while emotions can rut hot, and can lead to unfortunate consequences and even devastating results, the same is true of reason. Vast injustices and horrible events have been perpetrated in the name of cold reason (Gilber, 2002:30).

What Gilbert tries to explain is the degree of their consequences as both may be crucial in communication. However, they are not expected to be overwhelming. He goes further to say that, emotions, in all forms are integral part of human communication and consequently of human arguments. As such, there are a number of choices to be made…the argument we reach as a result of our argumentation ought not be influenced by feelings, emotional desires
or other non–logical reasons. The main reason for this attitude is that emotional information is inclined to biases.

A balance needs to be stroke. Every arguer ought to be rational in accomplishing his conversational rights using concrete questions. Does an argument offer substantial facts for agreeing with a position or accepting a claim? Does an argument contain fallacies or errors which weaken a support or a claim? This strategy serves a guiding principle for a healthy conversation.

If it is argued that the best argumentation is one in which there is little or there are no traces of manifestations of emotions, there is an unresolved issue which has to do with difficulty in determining genuine or counterfeit emotions in a conversation. Nonetheless, (Gilbert 2001:25), argues that communication takes place holistically and a recipient of a message uses a wide variety of cues and a considerable range of information in order to interpret what is being communicated and the fewer cues available, the lesser reliance one puts on the interpretation. The uses may include uttered words, contexts in which a communication takes place and an emotional intuition deduced from a message. Gilbert’s claims indicate that words rarely convey meaning without at least certain degrees of reliance on paralinguistic aspects of communication because relying on words alone negates other supportive communicative elements. In a conversation, people may show their emotions as a basis for determining their acceptability of a premise. Yet, emotional feelings are difficult to ascertain even when tears trick down one’s cheeks, eyes appear reddish and statements exaggerated in order to attract sympathy.

Why do people have different emotional exhibition?

Living standards, riches, resources, cultural models, and political climates across nations of the world vary. For instance, Americans attach high desirable emotion cultural contexts by creating and promoting many contests in which happiness is likely to occur. Additionally, they praise, compliment and encourage one another; give awards and trophies for a variety of accomplishments and avoid being criticized or inattentive and generally foster a positive and optimistic views of themselves D’Anrade (2008). In a similar vein, cultures such as Japan, Malaysia, etc. tend to reduce the in–group contexts in which anger is likely to emerge Briggs (2007).

Methodology

For this paper, both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data came from unstructured interviews; comprising service providers specifically hospitals and clinics. This process was facilitated through the use of a palm - size Sony recorder in which voices of the participants at various points were recorded. For the sake of naturalness, the participants were not informed that a recording was on. Another major source of data collection included observations techniques. Field notes played a very significant role. Other places of observation were campuses, and examination boards in both countries. In all, there were ten university campuses. Other important areas of my observation were the highways especially during long hour’s traffic.
In Colombo, Sri Lanka, I boarded buses at different occasions. The buses were usually full beyond capacity so much that more than half of the passengers were standing, leading to stepping on other’s feet, pushing, and other sorts of discomfort associated with such trips. This is usually the experience after closing from workplaces. In Abuja, Nigeria, a friend drove me around many busy routes in the city, while in Lagos also in Nigeria; I restricted my survey to filling stations and a popular Alaba International Market. The market is famous for electronics, textiles, etc. as it hosts marketers from many African countries.

The fourth place of observation which indicated manifestations of emotion was at funeral ceremonies in both countries where people were expected to demonstrate certain behaviors relating to the demise of dear ones. In view of the complexity of measuring emotions, qualitative method was deemed more appropriate.

Results

The presentation begins with the results from campuses in Sri Lanka. The first day of my survey revealed somehow an unexpected result in that the students from the University of Kelaniya and university of Colombo both in Sri Lanka displayed less general somatic activity. Despite the fact that there were no cases of examination failure on all the notice boards, expressions of joyfulness were rare and less intent. Few students whizzed smiles at one another after cross checking their results. The reason being that indicating happiness openly was seen as potentially disruptive because they may painfully be contrasted with the emotional state of others. I asked a final year law female student how she felt having passed her examinations. She said, ‘I am ok. I asked: what of if you had failed some? She replied, no problem, I will repeat it. I went further to ask: Would your parents scold if you fail? Her reply: My parents will never scold for just that.

In a contrast with the situation in the Nigerian campuses, sympathetic and humorous scenarios were apparent. For instance in Gombe State University, Nigeria, students demonstrated a variety of emotions that involved me into rendering a brief counseling to some of the students (those who failed their examinations). They showed open cry with loud and sharp voice qualities that they became oblivious of the presence of other people around. The following negative emotional utterances characterized most of the students who either failed examinations or did not get expected grades.

I am drowning. I don’t know if I can do this. Please God help me. …please don’t let me die…
I was not made for this academic world. That’s what happened last year. How could I explain this to my father?
Am I sick of University? Is it that I was not made for this academic world or is it that this academic world was not made for me or both?
What did they do? How did they do?
Oh, my God!

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I can’t share the feeling that I am a failure. I found it impossible to stop believing in that value of university education. Every time I tried to forget about it, there seemed to be no point for me to struggle so much.

Consider the following emotive lexicons and phrases: drowning, die, rhetorical questions: How could I explain this? Am I sick? (that I failed again?), making a definitive plea: please, don’t let me die; Uncertain assertions: I don’t know if I can do this; recollecting previous efforts and hopeless presence: Every time I tried to forget about it, it seems to be no point for to struggle.

On the other hand, there were emotional outbursts emerging from joyfulness at the success of the examinations. One indicator of happiness among many Nigerian students was placing of arms or shoulders while expressing their joy, shaking of hands with acquaintances, hitting of objects close by, appreciation of divine assistance, shouting, running around the scene, hugging, etc. Other forms of emotive behavior such as cry, anger, etc. were commonly demonstrated in the open place.

Although there fewer vehicles in Sri Lankan highways compared to Nigeria, reckless driving, traffic violations and other forms of rule – breaking behavior were apparent in both countries. However, people’s reactions vary significantly. For instance, Sri Lankans showed stoicism, occasionally smiled even at unpleasant situations on highways, while unnecessary vehicle horns, abuses, and other uncultured tendencies were rare. I watched with keen interest in buses where I often saw passengers who could not find seats, but had to stand gave their luggage to those seated to keep even if there was no relationship; age variations did not matter in this respect as a young person could give an elderly person her/his bag to hold until a seat was found and the person whose help was sought dare not refuse. In the event of breakdown of vehicles during trips, bus drivers would abandon their buses to unknown destinations for the sake finding repairers/solutions and when they returned, apologies were never tendered, yet passengers rarely indicated their feelings of discontent. My investigations revealed that Sri Lankan cultural model stresses relational harmony that individuals take their proper place. These cultural models discourage them from occupying too much ‘space’ in the relationship with anybody in the society. Thus, expansive behavior such as somatic activity is a signal that an individual is taking more than his ‘proper space’, hence, the use of fewer hand gestures and arms placing while expressing emotion is highly discouraged.

Sri Lanka and Nigeria may share some similarities in terms of individuals driven themselves by explosive feelings of emotions such as anger, frustrations, humiliations, etc. Furthermore, both Nigeria and Sri Lanka may present a similar scenario in terms of standards of living of rural dwellers. Homes have neither have pipe water, nor electricity and more many rural people are able to acquire only basic education. Rural schools are poorly equipped, understaffed, traditional farming has been the major occupation and unemployment is high. These include changes in women’s gender roles, threats to men’s dominance in the family. These challenges push women into violent or sexually abusive husbands or father Gamburd (2000). In both
countries, when a daughter, wife or sister sought for a paid employment, there was likely to be disagreement about this in the family: the disagreement may involve whether she was allowed to work, who would do the family labour? Who would receive the money she earned and whether the family’s reputation would be besmirched by labor force participation. Moreover, when women and girls stepped out of the protection custody of home, anxiety about their sexual morality and reputation was under jeopardy. This category of women/girls often clashed with their elders/parents over their choice dressings, cosmetics, hairstyles, etc. Furthermore, increased freedom of movement and time spent at home meant those family members no longer able to regulate women’s interactions with men. This opened women and girls to charges of sexual impropriety and loss of their virginity, because these women/ girls carried the taint of infidelity, wanton sexuality, rape, prostitution, etc.

Changes in men’s roles have also been a source of conflict in families. Debts and loss of economic productivity led men to shame and despondency. There were reports that men’s suicides have synergy with difficulties in paying back loans and failures in cropping. Below were extreme cases of emotions among some Sri Lankans emerging from family – related conflicts.

Vidyamali who was 15 years old was accused by her mother of speaking a boy in a bus which she denied, but when her mother persisted, she, my head became hot and I felt it would explore. She went into a room and poured kerosene on herself.

Nilmani was married to a man who was a drunkard. One evening, he demanded for a meal. Out of rage, she threw a plate containing rice on the man’s face, took a bottle of rat poison and gulped it immediately.

Mulhumenike, 45 years old was fed up with her 27 years old son’s unstoppable drinking habit. She took a lethal dose of poison and left a note which, ‘Sunil’ (name), ‘putha’ (my son) drinks daily and fights with people. I sacrifice my life to you so you can drink in peace.

Rameela was 19 years old lady from a poor family. She wanted to take a job at a garment firm, but her elder brother objected it. After several appeals without a positive response, she swallowed rat poison.

Shanthi, a woman in her 30s returned from the Middle East where she had worked as a housemaid. When she found out all the money she sent home could not be seen, she resorted to drinking poison.

In Sri Lanka, dramatized expressions of emotion, whether hearty - laughter, exuberant glee or profuse gratitude were discouraged. Self – control, emotional restraint and equinity was the valued modes of self – presentation. Lajja, a term in Sinhalese language whose meaning ranges from shyness, modesty and restraint to shame is a desired quality that is assiduously cultivated.
Similarities between Nigerian and Sri Lankan cultural restraints on emotions

In Sri Lankan culture, norms of behavior associated to *lajja* prescribes that women and ladies remain in the background of social interactions, avoid eye contacts and restrain from any form of confrontation or utterances that are inflammable.

Making a contrast between the two countries, traditional norms of both cultures prescribe deference to those in the family hierarchies. Thus, children, even adults children should not confront or disagree with their parents as they are enjoined from florid displays of emotions in their parents’ presence because such displays are deemed respectful. Elder siblings should also be accorded deference and obedience. With regard to gender hierarchies, women are expected to defer to men at least in terms of public behavior. Furthermore, when conflicts occur in both cultures, direct confrontations by the person in the subordinate position are emotionally fraught and shameful. Standing up to or shouting down at one’s parents, elders’ siblings or husbands violates norms of finial respect. For women, it goes against norms of feminine comportment that counsel retracts, modesty and amiability. In lieu of over confrontations suicide or self – harm may offer a way to express what they cannot say aloud: they have been unfairly treated, wrongly accused or virtually false impugned. Consequently, suicides of self – harms communicate in effect. In both cultures, to be publicly held accountable for person’s crime is distressing. Also, fear of social disappointment or public criticism is powerful and condemnable. So, when self – harm is arranged, it is done to bring public shame to an antagonist so that he can experience profound pains. Another similarity between the two cultures with respect to expressing emotion is through the device of retaliations against others. It is a common practice for people to send to their offenders such as bosses, teachers, potential marriage partners etc. poison pen letters, bullet pen letters, etc. Another possible means is through sorcerers, malevolent deities, and macro – religious specialists to bring ill – fortunes, diseases, etc. to their enemies.

Nigerian emotional behavioral tendencies

The most prevalent behavioral output among many Nigerians especially on the highways consisted of blame, insults, physical fights, aggression of various sorts and distancing oneself from chaotic situations even if they were responsible. Blaming another person explains self – esteem maintenance by discounting the possibility that the offense or humiliation is/was deserved. Aggression serves individual gain as it is an attempt to influence the offender into confirming to the wishes of the respondent. Distancing oneself from the relationship with the other person and thus, discounting exposure to a person that is potentially humiliating and offensive benefits the individual at the expense of the relationship. Moving away and distancing oneself is consistent with Nigerian cultures.

It was a common practice among many Nigerians to raise their voices and agitate even when in normal conversations especially at clubs, motor parks, sport arenas, marriages, etc.
Nigerian discussed national issues openly. As a result, more often than not, these issues generated great passions such that a third party could interrupt and make his/her contributions, defending a particular group because most Nigerians felt that the government has failed them. So, there were common national issues to discuss. Regarding driver – passengers’ relationships on highways in Nigeria, the paper unveiled some dramatic scenarios where passengers seemed to ‘control’ drivers’ speed limits, and where to stop for passengers to relieve themselves/refuel vehicles, etc. and if the drivers took these crucial decisions without consulting the views of the passengers, it might lead to serious scolds, abuses, and other painful remarks. For instance, in one my trips between Jos – Bauchi Road in Nigeria, a female passenger warned the driver of high speed and when the driver could not heed, she started shouting loudly that passers-by thought an accident had occurred or she was ill – fit. On the other hand, drivers who drove too slowly were accused of conniving with armed robbers on the highways. These ill-mannered utterances characterized many trips on the Nigerian roads especially in the southern part of the country. Usually, a loud voice quality could be regarded as indication of emotions and hostility while indifference could imply ignorance or incapacitation.

This is the opposite case in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan culture emphasizes receptivity, which means to be receptive to both positive and negative features of the contexts. In fact, in most of trips which lasted from six to eight hours were characterized by long silences except for the bus conductors who intermittently mentioned names of locations for the affected passengers to alight. Occasionally, close relations sited together muttered short conversations which could imply lack of common issues among interlocutors. My study indicated that Sri Lankans emphasized emotional moderations and control. These norms were reflected in their lack of emotional experiences as well as in facial expressions. They showed less intense positive and negative emotional experiences, and smiled less intently and frequently while relieving positive emotional events.

On other hand, a typical emotional index of Nigerians was blaming oneself. Both students at various campuses and highway drivers manifested this tendency. Furthermore, Extreme cases of emotions were indicated among Nigerians at the demise of dear ones. For instance, women whose husbands and other relations were killed by unknown gunmen in Sanga Local Government of Kaduna State appeared nude in demonstration of their anger. Similarly, a bus driver in Lagos, Nigeria stripped himself naked in order to avoid being arrested for traffic violation.

Conclusions

Cultural models of self and relationship imbue behavior. Sadness and joyful expansiveness may be universal, but individuality and self – other boundaries are cultural – specific.
References


