

Emotional Fabric of Society: Emotional Environments, Congruence, and Discrepancies from a Macro Perspective

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Abstract

Emotional life involves not only how individuals feel and express emotions, but also how they think about emotions and perceive what is socially expected of them. While previous research has extensively examined the intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of emotions, less is known about how macro-level emotional environments and societal norms are structured across cultures and how they relate to social structures and well-being outcomes. This dissertation takes a macro perspective, integrating four empirical studies to examine emotional environments, emotional congruence, and discrepancies among emotional experience, expression, and expectations.

The first paper introduces the concept of societal emotional environments (SEE), capturing the extent to which positive and negative emotions are expressed within a society. Using data from 49 countries, this study finds a double-edged sword effect of negative emotion expression: while expressing negative emotions—controlling for emotional experience—is associated with benefits at the individual level, societies with high levels of negative emotion expression tend to show lower levels of individual life satisfaction among their members.

The second paper investigates discrepancies between how frequently individuals experience and express specific emotions, focusing on frequency-based patterns across societies. Analyses of two large-scale multinational datasets reveal that negative emotions—such as anger and sadness—tend to be under-expressed relative to how often they are experienced. This under-expression is especially pronounced in highly developed societies, where

structural factors such as rule of law and civic cooperation are associated with more restrained expression of negative emotions. These findings suggest that emotional expressivity is related to and potentially shaped by macro-level social structures, beyond traditional frameworks like individualism–collectivism.

The third and fourth papers explore experience–expectation congruence and incongruence, focusing on how the match or mismatch between emotional experiences and perceived societal expectations is associated with well-being. Paper 3 uses polynomial regression with response surface analysis to examine this relation and finds no general benefit of emotional congruence. Instead, the direction of mismatch plays a critical role. Individuals who frequently experience negative emotions but perceive low societal expectations (stigmatised mismatch) report the lowest life satisfaction, while those who rarely experience such emotions but perceive high societal expectations (protected mismatch) report the highest. These findings suggest that perceived societal acceptance of negative emotions, rather than simple congruence, may be key to well-being. Paper 4 deepens this by distinguishing between direction-sensitive mismatches (stigmatised mismatch vs. protected mismatch) and showing that their well-being outcomes vary by societal emotional climate. In societies where negative emotions are less expressed (low-NSEE), mismatches are more strongly linked to reduced well-being, while in high-expression cultures, these effects are attenuated. Together, these studies show that emotional fit is a culturally embedded, norm-evaluative process.

Together, these findings underscore the importance of examining emotions from a macro-level perspective. Emotional norms, expressiveness, and incongruence between emotional experiences and societal expectations are systematically associated with both individual well-being and broader societal patterns. By integrating multilevel modeling and response surface analysis across four empirical studies, this dissertation advances our understanding of how emotional regulation and expressive norms interact across cultural contexts. It contributes to broader theoretical discussions on the social and structural dimensions of emotion.