

The Behavior of Cultural Differences Toward Strangers Between East and West

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Since I immigrated to the United States in 2010, I have noticed several cultural differences between East and West people. The Eastern countries I am going to describe in this paper will be specifically China, Japan, and South Korea. The representative of the Western country will be the United States. From a broad point of view, East and West can be distinguished as collectivism and individualism. Compared to Western countries, Eastern countries tend to prioritize groups over individuals. People from a collectivist country feel happiness when engaging in positive social interaction. On the other hand, people from an individualistic country are highly independent and their happiness comes out solely from themselves. To make the long story short, Eastern is focused on groups, and Western is focused on individuals. However, what I have witnessed was the opposite. While Eastern people avoided colliding with others, Western people were very friendly and even start small talk with strangers whom they have never met. Greetings to random people from the street, making a big smile, holding the door for the next person, and saying 'bless you' when others sneeze seems more people-oriented than individual-oriented. To explain this phenomenon, I chose two psychological theories. First, emotional display rules, (Lim, 2016; Safdar et al., 2009), and second, stigma toward others. (Yum, 1988, 1988; Shin & Napier, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the cultural behavioral difference toward strangers between East and West.

The Behavior of East and West

The behavior of people toward strangers in my home country South Korea can be defined in one word. 'uninterested'. People think spending time and giving attention to strangers is very time-consuming. Everyone on the subway or bus is staring at their phone to avoid unnecessary eye contact with others. It is very rare to hear 'excuse me' or 'sorry' even they bump into others. Although not all East countries are like this. In Japan, 'Sumimaseng (すみません)', meaning thank you, sorry, and excuse me, is a very highly used word. There is even a saying that "If you know Sumimaseng, it works in Japan".

However, this is a polite expression, not an expression of interest toward strangers. On the contrary, behavior toward strangers in the United States is positive and favorable. Even how many times I hear it, greetings from a random person are still surprising me. I sometimes feel like I am a rude and uncaring person when I do not say 'bless you'. Small talk with strangers is quite a culturally shocking thing as well. How can behavior be so different when we are all the same human beings? This behavioral difference is noticed by nearly everyone who traveled East and West or immigrated to the East and West. By using social psychology concepts, it will be more understandable why this behavioral difference occurs.

Emotional Display Rules

There are cultural norms regarding displaying emotions. The way people behave differently can be explained with emotional display rules. Emotional display rules can be defined as cultural rules learned as we socialize throughout life. Depending on the culture, particular emotional expressions could be appropriate or inappropriate (Safdar et al., 2009). In individualistic cultures, positive emotions are regarded as important and dominant. Unhappiness is considered a failure and people are likely to feel the pressure to be happy and to express happiness. In contrast, collectivist cultures perceive such emotions as unappealing and tend to not feel necessary to display intense emotions (Safdar et al., 2009). Because Western people are more likely to express positive arousal emotions, it is possible to explain why they behave differently compared to Eastern people. Western people try to influence others with their emotions. On the contrary, Eastern people feel more comfortable when they adjust their emotions to others (Lim, 2016). Westerners value high-arousal emotions more than Easterners, therefore they encourage activities that generate high-arousal emotions. Even children's storybooks in the West promote high-arousal emotions. By contrast, Easterners are likely to conserve their emotions and consider happiness when being calm and reserved (Lim, 2016). Expressing emotions vary by different cultures. In individualistic cultures, powerful and positive emotions are well shown. Powerful emotions such as anger are considered a tool for protecting one's right as long as it is utilized in an

appropriate situation. While in the Eastern country, it is less likely to be acceptable because it threatens group harmony and relationships (Safdar et al., 2009). Easterners express relatively powerless emotions and try to reserve their emotions to keep peace and get along with others well. Westerners value positive and powerful emotions. They desire to express their emotions and influence others. This well explains my observation of how people behave differently toward strangers. Eastern collectivists maintain calm and low arousal emotions for social harmony while Western individualists make big smiles and talk to others to influence high-arousal emotions.

Stigma Toward Others

Collectivist countries are group-oriented and individualistic countries are individual-oriented. There is a hypothesis that group-oriented cultures would be more likely to stigmatize outgroups than individual-oriented cultures. The definition of stigma is the negative or unfair belief of an individual being treated as mentally or physically different and deviant (American Psychological Association, 2023). There is a possibility to explain why collectivists are relatively 'unfriendly' toward strangers with the concept of stigmatization. Unlike uniqueness and showing oneself is considered important among individualists, Collectivists emphasize roles, group harmony, positions, hierarchical relations, and interdependence with ingroup members (Shin & Napier, 2012). Therefore, it is a natural phenomenon that an outgroup member or someone behaving opposite to the cultural norm is seen as deviant and well stigmatized. Individualist cultures like the United States do not strongly distinguish between ingroup and outgroup members. However, East collectivist cultures sharply differentiate ingroup members and outgroup members. To know the relationships of people in the East, it is inevitable to understand Confucianism. Social relationship cultures and habits are occupied with the doctrines of Confucianism. The most important and basic principle of Confucianism is humanism, which means warm human feelings between people (Yum, 1988, 1988). This philosophy has controlled East Asia for thousands of years and therefore it is deeply rooted in people's lives and norms. In the doctrine, it

contains a distinction between ingroup and outgroup. Unlike Westerners who apply the same rules to everyone, Easterners adjust differently with whom they interact. They have social relationships which are very strict and elaborate. For example, linguistic codes show the cultural relationship norms toward people. East Asia languages have complex differentiations with status, intimacy, age, sex, and the level of formality. In addition to referential terms, it is also manifested in verbs, pronouns, and nouns (Yum, 1988). From the perspective of Westerners, these differentiations of people with rules and behaviors could be considered as violating individual fairness and equality which is an essential component of individualistic cultures (Yum, 1988). The theory of stigma toward others fairly explains the behavioral difference between East and West. Because collectivists are group-based and emphasize ingroup members, stigmatization is likely to occur. Therefore, it is hard to get close to strangers who are outgroup members when individualists perceive them as equal individuals.

Discussion

Emotional display rules and stigma toward others were theories or concepts to explain the difference in behavior toward strangers between the East and West. Emotional display rules demonstrate that cultural emotional expression norms are causing the behavior. Stigma toward others describes the behavior occurring because of the Eastern people's strict distinction between ingroup and outgroup eliciting stigmatization toward others. Both theories are compelling; however, emotional display rules seem to be more suited for explaining the behavior. Individualists feel happiness when they are showing out their emotions and influencing others with positive energy, whereas collectivists sense happiness when they are in group harmony by adjusting their emotions to the group. Therefore, there is no need for collectivists to talk to strangers and break the social norm and harmony. Stigma toward others is also a reasonable concept, but it is insufficient for explaining the behavior because although collectivists distinguish ingroup and outgroup, individualistic culture also has forms of addresses that not only convey social distance and social status but also respect and a form of stigma toward ingroup and

outgroup, therefore, behave differently with each individual. It is not just Eastern culture that people behave differently according to social distance. Further research could find out if the behavior solely depends on culture or has biological factors as well. If a collectivist person immigrates to an individualist culture country like the United States and spends the rest of their life, will the person's behavior change like an individualist or will the behavior stay the same? Besides emotional display rules and stigma toward others, other findings and future studies could give insight into a better understanding of cultural differences.

Conclusion

Collectivism and individualism are the most contrasting concept that varies in each country. One interesting observation between collectivists and individualists was different behavior toward strangers. While group-oriented collectivist ignores and is uninterested in strangers, individual-oriented individualists are more favorable and friendly to others. Emotional display rules and stigma toward others were the two concepts to explain the observed behavior. Among these two theories, emotional display rules were more suitable for explaining behavior than stigma toward others. Before applying the social psychological concept, it was difficult to understand why this different behavior was happening. Now it is more acceptable to the behavior and helps to understand the cultural difference. As the world is getting more culturally diverse, it is important to understand other cultures and differences. If we understand that there are different emotional display rules between cultures, we would be less likely to have conflicts and enhance better understanding of others.

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