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Recognizing Emotions across Cultures

Traditionally it has been assumed by cultural anthropologists, linguists, and philosophers that basic emotions are either invariant across cultures or that they vary according to cultural context. Drawing on a case study in which native Chinese, German, and Portuguese speakers are asked to identify each others' expressions of joy, sadness, and anger, the paper outlines a theory of emotional communication that goes beyond both universalism and relativism.

The proposal differentiates linguistic factors from those of gender, age, and social status. It is shown that these latter factors play a more essential role in emotional communication and miscommunication than those connected to culture and language. Emotional differentiations within a given culture are thus greater than those between cultures. Finally, important policy implications for emotional communication within and between cultures are drawn.