

# Emotional expression is about fostering connections, not asserting individuality

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When someone expresses their emotions, they show their passion and authentic individuality. As self-evident as it might seem, this may reflect a cultural bias, says a University of Michigan researcher.

A new study by University of Michigan psychology professor Shinobu Kitayama and colleagues focuses on the [emotional expression](#) of Latin Americans, U.S. residents, and Japanese. Specifically, the researchers tested the participants' independence and feelings of closeness to others, also described as interdependence.

By knowing these differences, people can have a better understanding and acceptance of other cultures, said Kitayama, the Robert B. Zajonc Collegiate Professor of Psychology and director of the Culture & Cognition Program at the Department of Psychology.

"Much of the research in psychology is based on the notion that emotional expression is a display of one's passion," he said. "But this whole notion may have been deeply ingrained into what one may call a Western perspective."

Latin Americans expressing positive emotions seem to be more about fostering connections and strengthening social bonds rather than asserting individuality, the research showed.

In two separate analyses, Kitayama and colleagues tested whether Latin Americans possess an open expression of positive emotions related to social engagement.

In Study 1, with nearly 600 participants who were asked about their [emotional responses](#) to different situations, researchers compared Latin Americans from Chile and Mexico with U.S. residents, a group known to be highly independent.

Latin Americans expressed positive socially engaging emotions, particularly in response to negative events affecting others. U.S. residents favored positive socially disengaging emotions, such as pride, especially in response to personally favorable circumstances.

In Study 2, which involved about 550 participants who completed the same questionnaire found in the first study, researchers looked at the responses by Latin Americans from Colombia, comparing them with U.S. residents and Japanese citizens.

Japanese participants expressed [positive emotions](#) less than others, but displayed a higher tendency to express negative socially engaging emotions, such as guilt and shame, compared to both groups.

Latin Americans were expressive of positive socially engaging emotions, whereas Japanese were less expressive overall. Moreover, when Japanese expressed emotions, they emphasized negative socially engaging emotions, the study showed.

**More information:** Paper: [Emotionally expressive interdependence in Latin America: Triangulating through a comparison of three cultural zones. doi.org/10.1037/emo0001302](#)

Preprint: [scholars.duke.edu/publication/1490221](https://scholars.duke.edu/publication/1490221)

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