

17 Dynamics of ideal affect

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“The word ‘romance,’ according to the dictionary, means **excitement**, adventure, and something extremely real. Romance should last a lifetime.”

Billy Graham, Christian evangelist

“I learned that the richness of life is found in adventure. . . . It develops self-reliance and independence. Life then teems with **excitement**. There is stagnation only in security.”

William Orville Douglas, former Supreme Court justice

“To find your own way is to follow your bliss. This involves analysis, watching yourself and seeing where real deep **bliss** is—not the quick little excitement, but the real deep, life-filling bliss.”

Joseph Campbell, mythologist and philosopher

“I just want to be happy. Normally for me that means I would be doing something exciting. I just want to be entertained . . . I just like **excitement**.”

European American college student

“My ideal state is to be **quiet, serene**, happy and positive.”

Hong Kong college student

Whether you are an eminent spiritual leader, outspoken Supreme Court justice, influential philosopher, or typical college student, chances are you have some notion about which feelings you would *like* to feel. As illustrated by the above quotes, however, people vary in the specific feelings that they believe are good, moral, and virtuous. Whereas Billy Graham states that excitement “should last a lifetime,” Joseph Campbell believes that genuine bliss is more than “quick little excitement.” What explains these differences in how people ideally want to feel? Affect Valuation Theory (AVT) posits that much of what we learn about our feelings comes from our cultures—those historically derived and socially transmitted ideas that are instantiated in artifacts, practices, and institutions (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). And whether we realize it or not, these cultural prescriptions influence how we act in the world: how we represent ourselves,

how we perceive others, what choices and decisions we make, and what we think comprises success, health, and happiness.

But are these affective ideals dynamic, and if so, what are the conditions under which they change versus remain the same? Prior to answering these questions, we briefly review AVT and the empirical work testing its predictions. We then discuss four sources of change in ideal affect (daily, acculturative, cultural, and emotional). We conclude with directions for future research.

Affect Valuation Theory

AVT is a theoretical framework that attempts to integrate affective values into working models of emotion (Tsai, 2007). The first premise of AVT is that how people ideally want to feel ("ideal affect") differs from how they actually feel ("actual affect"). "Actual affect" may be an immediate response to an event (state), or an aggregate of responses to different events (trait). The vast majority of the literature on emotion and other affective phenomena has focused on actual affect. In contrast, relatively little work has focused on ideal affect. Ideal affect is a goal or desired state, again either in response to a specific event, or aggregated over time. Although there are times when people feel exactly how they want to feel, our data suggest that across a number of diverse cultural contexts, on average, most people want to feel more positive than negative, and want to feel more positive and less negative than they actually feel (Tsai, Knutson, and Fung, 2006). These findings hold whether we examine people's global ratings of how they actually and ideally want to feel over the course of a typical week, or whether we examine people's momentary ratings of actual and ideal affect over the course of a day (Tsai, Sims, Wang, and Thomas, 2012; Tsai, 2007).

The second premise of AVT is that, although culture shapes both actual and ideal affect, culture shapes ideal affect more than actual affect. In other words, our cultures teach us which feelings to strive for and which feelings to avoid. However, our ability to actually achieve these ideals may depend more on a host of other factors, including our affective predispositions (i.e., temperament), immediate circumstances, and regulatory skills and abilities. Conversely, although culture shapes how we actually feel, decades of studies have observed a stronger link between temperament and actual affect (specifically between neuroticism and the experience of high arousal negative states, and between extraversion and the experience of high arousal positive states). Therefore, we predict that temperament may shape people's actual affect more than their ideal affect.

We have tested these hypotheses using a variety of methods (standardized instruments, open-ended questions, experimental paradigms) and a variety of samples (college students, preschoolers, community adults) in North American and East Asian contexts. Consistently, we have observed that North American cultural contexts value excitement, enthusiasm, and other high arousal positive states *more* and calm, peacefulness, and other low arousal positive states *less*

than Chinese contexts do (see Tsai, 2007). Moreover, we have found that these differences hold after controlling for temperament and for any differences in actual affect. Finally, whereas cultural values account for a greater percentage of variance in ideal than actual affect, temperamental factors account for a greater percentage of variance in actual than ideal affect (Tsai et al., 2006).

These cultural differences in ideal affect are reflected in, and transmitted and reinforced by, widely distributed “artifacts” and products. For example, North American women’s magazines and children’s storybooks contain more excited and fewer calm smiles than Chinese magazines and children’s storybooks (Chim, Moon, and Tsai, 2009; Tsai, Louie, Chen, and Uchida, 2007). Similarly, Christian self-help books encourage their readers to experience excitement states more and calm states less than Buddhist self-help books, and these same patterns are reflected in classical texts, such as the Gospels of the New Testament and the Dhammapada (Tsai, Miao, and Seppala, 2007).

The third premise of AVT is that ideal affect has a variety of behavioral consequences. For instance, the more people value excitement states, the more they prefer exciting (vs. calm) music; engage in physically rigorous activities; choose exciting (vs. calm) gums, lotions, and beverages; positively rate physicians who promote energetic (vs. relaxed) lifestyles; and perceive people with excited (vs. calm) expressions as friendly (Moon, Chim, Tsai, Ho, and Fung, 2011; Sims, Tsai, Thomas, and Goldstein, 2012; Tsai, Knutson, and Rothman, 2012). Thus, cultural differences in a number of behaviors are due at least in part to cultural differences in ideal affect.

The dynamics of ideal affect

The findings described above are consistent patterns that we have observed over a variety of studies. And yet, both within and between individuals, we also find significant variability in ideal affect. We discuss the sources of this variability next.

Daily Change. Over the course of a day, we feel a variety of ways. We may feel tired in the morning, alert after drinking a cup of coffee, interested while reading the paper, stressed while reading email, and excited about seeing our friends. Similarly, our ideal affect may also change over the course of a day. We may typically want to feel excited and passionate about what we do, but during a difficult exchange with a colleague, we may want to feel more calm. But despite these changes, we predict that momentary ideal affect should be less variable than momentary actual affect: participants should retain an idea of how they want to feel that holds across situations. Therefore, changes in ideal affect should only occur under special circumstances. In contrast, actual momentary affect may be more susceptible to the whims of the situation.

Consistent with these predictions, in two experience sampling studies, college students and community adults varied in their actual and ideal affect, and the variability in their ideal affect was on average smaller than that of their actual affect (Tsai et al., 2012). These findings held for both European

American and Chinese American community adults. However, we also found interesting cultural differences: Chinese American reports of momentary ideal affect were more variable than those of European Americans. These findings held after controlling for variability in momentary actual affect (European American reports of momentary actual affect were more variable than Chinese American reports of momentary actual affect), suggesting that how Chinese American adults want to feel may be more context-dependent than how European American adults want to feel. This finding is consistent with other work demonstrating that East Asian contexts encourage greater situational malleability than mainstream American contexts (Leu, Mesquita, et al., 2010; Oishi, Diener, Scollon, and Biswas-Diener, 2004).

What specific situational factors might account for daily change in momentary ideal affect? In previously published research (Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung, and Yeung, 2007), we demonstrated that ideal affect varied as a function of individuals' interpersonal goals. When people wanted to influence others (i.e., change others' behaviors to be consistent with their own), they valued high arousal positive states more and low arousal positive states less than when they wanted to adjust to others (i.e., change their own behaviors to be consistent with others'). Although there are cultural differences in the importance placed on influencing vs. adjusting to others, we predict that within cultures, individuals may also vary in terms of whether they are leading a group (influence goal) or listening to their partners (adjustment goal). Thus, across cultures, daily changes in interpersonal goals may result in daily changes in ideal affect.

Acculturative Change. Changes in ideal affect should also occur as a function of enculturation (e.g., a young child learning how to behave in a specific situation) and of acculturation (e.g., a recent Chinese immigrant learning how to live in American culture). In Tsai, Louie, et al., (2007), we demonstrated that short-term exposure (during the experimental session) to exciting vs. calm stories immediately altered children's affective ideals. In Koopmann-Holm, Sze, Ochs, and Tsai (in press) we demonstrated that longer-term engagement in a cultural practice (i.e., participating in an eight-week meditation class) increased the value placed on calm states, but did not affect the actual experience of calm states. Importantly, these changes were not due to expectancy or demand effects. Similarly, we have observed that the more oriented to American culture Chinese Americans are, the more they value excitement states, suggesting that as individuals become more exposed to and engaged with American culture, they value excitement more.

It is also possible that bicultural Chinese Americans are exposed to Chinese and American situations in the same day (e.g., being at home with Chinese parents vs. at school with European American friends). As a result, Chinese Americans' ideal affect may change depending on whether they are in a Chinese or American context, and whether their Chinese or American values are more or less salient (Perunovic, Heller, and Rafaeli, 2007). This may explain why the ideal affect of Chinese Americans and other East Asian Americans at times resembles that of European Americans, at times looks more like that of East Asians, and at times falls in between the two groups.

Sociocultural Change. The value placed on excitement in US culture likely stems from the immigrant origins of the United States: people who left their homelands in the hopes for a better life were people who could anticipate gains and rewards, even in the face of incredible uncertainty and adversity. Immigrants had the goal of influencing their circumstances, or changing their circumstances so that they would be in line with their goals and desires for themselves and their families (Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, and Ramaswamy, 2006). Thus, the characteristics of the founding fathers may have created an excitement culture, although the specific expression of this culture may change over time. In contrast, Chinese cultural ideas and practices are grounded in Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist traditions, which emphasize fitting in, adjusting to existing roles and hierarchies, and respecting elders and cultural traditions. These cultural ideas and practices laid the foundation for a calm culture, although the specific expression of this culture may also change with time. These different historical traditions explain why across studies, we consistently find that Northern American cultures value excitement states more and calm states less than Chinese and other East Asian cultures.

However, despite this cultural stability, cultures also change in ways that may alter the degree to which specific states are valued. In addition to consistent cultural differences in the relative value placed on excitement vs. calm states, we also find that the absolute levels of ideal affect vary across studies. For example, in some studies European Americans value excitement more than calm, whereas in others, we see the reverse. Regardless, we always find that European Americans value excitement more and calm less than their Hong Kong Chinese and other East Asian counterparts. What factors might account for these changes in absolute levels of ideal affect? One possibility is the occurrence of significant national events that may change citizens' concerns. For example, the value that European Americans placed on calm states increased after September 11, 2001. Since then, there have been persistent threats on American security. With the constant reminders of the possibility of terrorist attacks, Americans' anxiety levels have increased, resulting in a greater value placed on calm states. Similarly, changes are occurring in Chinese contexts that could alter individuals' ideal affect: in certain corners of China, rapid industrialization and an infusion of wealth might increase the value placed on influence (relative to adjustment), and therefore, increase the value placed on excitement (vs. calm).

Emotional Change. In addition to examining how ideal affect may itself change, we have been interested in how ideal affect affects the unfolding of an emotional event. We have demonstrated that ideal affect and actual affect differ from each other. But to what degree does ideal affect influence how someone responds to an emotional event, especially one that is chosen, like riding a rollercoaster. As others have argued, our responses to an emotional event include much more than just how we feel at one moment. For example, we first anticipate the event ("How will it make me feel?"), then we actually experience the event ("How does it make me feel?"), and then we recall the event ("How did it make me feel?"). Consistent with Robinson and Clore's accessibility model (Robinson

and Clore, 2002), we predicted that people's ideal affect would influence the more reflective aspects of an emotional event (i.e., the anticipation and recall parts of the episode) more than the experiential aspects of an emotional event (the actual experience). We have found evidence in support of this prediction, as have others (Scollon, Howard, Caldwell, and Ito, 2009). Specifically, in a study in Hong Kong examining people's experience of exciting and calm amusement park rides, we have observed that ideal affect is associated with anticipated and recalled reports of affect more than online reports of affect (Chim, Moon, Tsai, Ho, and Fung, 2011). These findings may explain why cultural differences in emotional experience are greater for retrospective vs. online reports of affect (Oishi, 2002).

Future directions

To further examine the dynamics of ideal affect, we are currently using a variety of methods including fMRI, which will allow us to examine the temporal course of ideal affect with greater precision. We are also hoping to capitalize on current technologies like the iPhone, which will allow us not only to examine affect online, but also to link people's desired affect with their concurrent and subsequent choice of activities, music, and videos. We are interested in conducting longitudinal studies to examine how ideal affect changes over the life span. Finally, although most of our work has focused on ideal affect, we have also explored individual and cultural variation in avoided affect (the affective states people want to avoid) and should affect (the affective states people think they ought to feel) (Chim, Tsai, Zhu, and Zhang, 2011; Koopmann-Holm and Tsai, 2011). In future work, we hope to examine how these affective constructs interact with each other to influence people's emotions and behavior across cultures. Together, these studies should give us a richer, fuller, and more dynamic understanding of the cultural shaping of ideal affect.

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