Emotional acculturation: a first review

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When people move from one cultural context to another, their patterns of emotional experience and expression may change; that is, they may acculturate emotionally. In the current article, I review empirical studies on immigrant minorities that provide first evidence for (i) the phenomenon of emotional acculturation; (ii) the co-existence of heritage and new culture emotional patterns and minorities' switching between the two; and (iii) the potential benefits of minorities' emotional fit with culture. In addition, I outline future directions in this emergent field and highlight how the study of emotional acculturation may inform emotion psychology as it calls for a truly socio-dynamic perspective on what emotions are and how they can/should be studied.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2017, 17:67–73

This review comes from a themed issue on **Emotion**

Edited by **Batja Gomes de Mesquita** and **Lisa Feldman Barrett**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.06.007>

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When people come into continuous first hand contact with another culture, their patterns of emotions change — a process we coined *emotional acculturation* [1••]. I start this review by outlining the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of emotional acculturation. Subsequently, I summarize evidence for its existence in immigrant minorities, for how new emotional patterns may relate to old ones and for the potential benefits of emotional acculturation. Finally, I highlight how the study of emotional acculturation may contribute to our understanding of emotions in general as it (i) can be seen as a quasi-experiment on the intertwining of culture and emotion, (ii) provides evidence for the continued and dynamic socio-cultural shaping of emotions in interactions, and (iii) underscores the functionality of emotions in particular socio-cultural contexts.

Setting the scene

Starting point for research on emotional acculturation are the systematic cultural differences in emotional patterns — that are, the patterns of frequencies and intensities with which people experience particular (sets of) emotions. Within these patterns, emotions that match a culture's most salient goals and concerns are experienced more frequently and more intensely than emotions that are not, because culturally congruent emotions tend to be promoted and rewarded [2,3,4•,5–9]. For instance, the experience of 'pride' that matches the European American goals and concerns for being successful and unique, is experienced frequently and intensely by European Americans [2]. It is culturally promoted in the US through frequent practices of giving each other compliments and awards [10] as well as culturally rewarded through European American's tendency to like proud people [11].

People who engage in the same cultural context are thus subjected to the same type of cultural up/down regulation of emotions (see [12,13] for reviews). Therefore, they may experience more similar patterns of emotion than people who engage in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, by engaging in a certain cultural context, people are subjected to the reward structures that are in place in that context (e.g., being liked when showing pride). People may benefit from fitting in emotionally with their cultural context.

Recently, we put these two ideas to a test by having different monocultural samples complete the Emotional Patterns Questionnaire (EPQ; see [Methods Box](#); [1••]) that captures patterns of emotional intensities in response to standardized types of situations. Given a particular type of situation, we then calculated each individual's *emotional fit with culture* through correlating his/her own pattern of emotional responses to the matching average pattern of a cultural group — that is, their *own* or *another* cultural group. Confirming the expectations outlined above, people fitted their own culture's typical patterns of emotion better than those of other cultural groups [14], and, the higher people's emotional fit with their own culture (in specific situations), the higher their relational and psychological well-being [15,16].

But what about cultural minorities — that is, people who migrated, or who juggle two cultures in daily life? Do they experience a (temporal) mismatch between their emotional patterns and those that are typical for, and rewarded by the new/other majority cultural context? And, if so, can their patterns of emotion change upon being exposed to the new culture? That is, do their emotional patterns

Box 1 Methods Box (Emotional Patterns Questionnaire (EPQ) see [1^{••}]).
Step 1: Report on emotional situation
Instruction:

Sometimes, people find themselves in situations that make them **feel A for/about B** (for example, feel X,Y,Z).

Please think about an occasion **at/with C** in which you **felt A for/about B** (for example, X,Y,Z).

Please describe the situation briefly. Provide as much detail as needed for somebody to understand why you felt that way in this situation.

A = good vs. bad (= Valence dimension)

B = for yourself vs. about your relationships with others
(= Social engagement dimension)

C = at school/work vs. at home/with family vs. with friends
(= Social-context dimension)

X,Y,Z = example emotion terms that match with
valence*social engagement

→ 2x2x3 design = 12 possible types of situations

Step 2: Emotional pattern
Instruction:

Please think about the situation you just described. To what extent did you feel each of the following emotions?

	Not at all			A bit		Extremely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
angry							
ashamed							
happy							
proud							
respectful							
etc. (total = 15-30 emotions)							

Calculate emotional fit:

1. **Establish structural equivalence** of emotion items across the samples one wishes to compare
2. **Calculate average pattern** of emotion across all majority members in sample for each type of situation
3. **Correlate** each participant's pattern to the average cultural pattern, given a certain type of situation by means of **profile correlations**. When doing so for majority members: remove own scores from average.
4. **Transform** the correlations into linear variable by means of **Fisher transformation**.

acculturate? And, if so, what are the implications for both minorities' heritage culture emotional patterns and their well-being?

The evidence so far
Culture exposure, social contact and emotional change

Four recent studies support the idea of a mismatch between the emotional patterns of first generation minorities and those that are typical for, and rewarded by their majority cultural context. Three of these studies, with Korean Americans ([1^{••}]; Study 1), Turkish Belgians ([1^{••}]; Studies 2 and 2a) and a large, representative sample of minority youth in Belgium [17[•]], calculated emotional fit based on the EPQ. They showed that first generation minorities had significantly lower fit to the majority culture's typical emotional patterns than majority members themselves. A fourth study corroborated these findings in a large sample of minority women in the US while using a different method [18^{••}], namely calculating women's difference from the average European American levels of both experienced and expressed negative affect. These discrepancies were greater for minority women than for majority women. Together, these studies thus suggest that immigrant minorities face a cultural mismatch in their patterns of emotional experience and/or expression.

However, this cultural mismatch may be temporary as all four studies showed that emotional fit with the majority can increase upon minorities' cultural exposure to the new/other majority context. Specifically, the studies using the EPQ documented that with each later generation (i.e., second, third), minorities' fit to the majority patterns increased [1^{••},17[•]] such that by the third generation, minorities' fit levels were not different anymore from those of majorities ([17[•]]; see Figure 1). Furthermore, minorities' emotional fit with the typical majority patterns tended to be higher (i) if they had spent more years in the majority culture and migrated at a younger age [1^{••},18^{••}] and (ii) if they reported more daily social contacts with majority members [1^{••},17[•],18^{••}]. Interestingly, minorities' attitudes towards adopting the values and customs of the majority culture [19,20], were unrelated to their levels of emotional fit with the majority [1^{••},17[•]]. Thus, minorities' patterns of emotion come to change (i.e., *acculturate*) not because of their willingness to be part of a culture but because of their actual exposure and social interactions in that new/other culture.

Following-up on the idea that social contact may drive emotional acculturation, we extended the representative study on Belgian minority youth in two ways. Firstly, we gathered (self-reported) socio-metric friendship data [21] allowing us to link minorities' emotional fit to their class-level friendship networks (2201 adolescents were nested in 184 classes in 37 schools). Multilevel analyses yielded that minorities' emotional fit was positively associated with both their outgoing and incoming majority ties:

Figure 1

Mean levels of emotional fit (i.e., Fisher transformed correlation) with the average Belgian majority pattern of emotions (left panel) and the average Turkish majority pattern of emotions (right panel) for different groups of participants. Results taken from the studies by De Leersnyder *et al.*, 2011 ([1^{••}]; Study 2; left panel) and De Leersnyder *et al.*, 2015 ([23,24]; Study 2; right panel). * $p \leq 0.05$; † $p \leq 0.10$.

When fitting in emotionally, minorities nominated more majority classmates as their friends (outgoing ties) *and* got more friendship-nominations from their majority classmates (incoming ties) [21]. Secondly, we gathered a second wave of EPQ and social contact data, allowing us to investigate their relationship over the course of one year [22]. Cross-lagged analyses showed that (i) minority youth who reported more social interactions with majority peers in year 1 (measured implicitly by asking how much they speak their heritage language at school; reversed scored), had higher emotional fit in year 2; and that (ii) minorities with higher emotional fit in year 1, reported to have more majority friends in year 2 [22]. Minorities' emotional fit with typical majority patterns is thus not only driven by having social contact with majorities, but may also facilitate high quality relationships (i.e., friendships) with them.

Co-existing emotional patterns and frame switching

Upon being exposed to, and socially engaged in a new/other majority culture, minorities thus come to acquire new patterns of emotional experience. Yet, do these newly acquired patterns of emotion 'overwrite' those that were in place or can majority and heritage culture patterns co-exist? That is, can/do minorities still fit their typical heritage cultural patterns of emotion? And, if so, does the co-existence of heritage and new patterns imply that minorities blend them with one another or that they

switch between the two, depending on their context of interaction?

To start addressing these issues, we collected EPQ-data from Koreans in South Korea and Turks in Turkey [23,24] and compared the emotional patterns of Korean Americans and Turkish Belgians [1^{••}] to those that are typical for their respective heritage cultural groups. In addition, we calculated the extent to which European American and Belgian majorities fitted with the typically Korean and Turkish patterns, respectively. We found that emotional fit with the Korean/Turkish typical patterns was highest for Korean/Turkish majority members and lowest for European American/Belgian majority members. Korean American/Turkish minorities' fit levels with their heritage culture patterns fell nicely in between those of their heritage and new majority groups (see Figure 1, right panel). These findings are a first indication that minorities may continue to fit with the emotional patterns that are typical for their heritage culture.³

³ At the same time, these results rule out the alternative explanation that minorities' lower fit scores to the majority patterns are a function of their minority status per se (e.g., less power, lower socio economic status); majority members of the non-familiar *other* culture have the lowest fit to the Korean/Turkish heritage emotional patterns, suggesting that the obtained results on emotional fit have to do with cultural exposure rather than majority-minority status.

When comparing majority members emotional fit with their own versus the unfamiliar other culture's typical patterns of emotion, they fitted much better with their own culture's typical patterns of emotion (cf. *infra* [14]). Yet, when doing the same for minority members — and thus when comparing their levels of emotional fit with their (new) majority versus their heritage culture's typical patterns — the difference in fit levels was much smaller and either non-significant (Korean Americans) or just-significant (Turkish Belgians). Minorities thus fitted roughly equally well to both their (new) majority and heritage culture's emotional patterns [23].

Yet, when breaking down minorities' emotional fit scores according to the socio-cultural context of the reported situation, we found that emotional patterns may be context-specific: Minorities were most concordant to majority patterns in situations reported to have taken place in majority settings (at work) and most concordant to heritage cultural patterns in heritage settings (at home) [23]. These findings resonates with those from an experience sampling study by Perunovic and colleagues [25^{*}] in which East Asian Canadians reported on their positive and negative moods. After interacting in Western contexts, minorities' positive and negative moods were *negatively* correlated, which corresponds to patterns of emotion commonly found in European Canadian contexts. Yet, after interacting in Asian contexts, minorities' positive and negative moods were *not* correlated at all — a pattern that reflects dialecticism and that is typically found in East Asian contexts [26]. Thus, when minorities come to acquire the new majority culture's emotional patterns, these do not necessarily replace the old ones, but may come to co-exist with them, and, different contexts of interaction may activate different emotional patterns.

But why does this phenomenon of context-specific emotional patterns occur? Is it because minorities experience totally different types of situations in majority versus heritage cultural contexts? Or is it because they interpret the same situations differently depending on their cultural context of interaction? That is, because they switch between different cultural frames? (cf. [27]).

In a first attempt to investigate emotional frame switching, we conducted an experiment ([28]; Study 2) in which we randomly assigned 58 Turkish Belgian biculturals to either a Belgian or a Turkish context in which they respectively interacted with either a Belgian or a Turkish confederate who enacted the same set of negative situations. We videotaped biculturals' emotional reactions to these situations and coded them in terms of behavioural cues for anger and contempt (via SPAFF [29] and FACS [30]). Supporting a frame-switching account, we found that (i) the same situations elicited *different* patterns of anger and contempt in biculturals interacting in Belgian versus Turkish contexts; and (ii) that these different patterns were not random, but in line with the typical

patterns found in monocultural Belgians and Turks, respectively ([28]; Study 1). Biculturals thus experience and interpret the same situations differently depending on their cultural context of interaction. This suggests that shifts in emotional patterns — and by extension, the process of emotional acculturation — can be (partially) understood as a shift in minorities' interpretations of situations.

Emotional acculturation and minorities' well-being

Upon being exposed to and engaged in a new/other cultural context, minorities' patterns of emotional experience thus come to change. But are these changes beneficial? Is minorities' emotional fit with culture linked to higher well-being, just like it is for monoculturals? [15,16].

To date, direct evidence for the benefits of emotional acculturation is limited to the US-study on minority women described earlier [18^{**}]. In that study, women's discrepancies from the European American norm for negative affective experience, expression and inhibition were linked to their (self-reported) somatic symptoms. Larger discrepancies from the European American norm in terms of *less* negative affect, *less* expressivity and *more* inhibition, were associated with greater somatic symptomology; yet, deviations in terms of *more* negative affect, *more* expressivity and *less* inhibition, did not impact symptomology. Although it is less clear how we should interpret the findings for negative affect, we can easily understand those for expressivity and inhibition: As European American contexts tend to promote and reward emotional expressivity and discourage emotional inhibition [31,32], immigrant minorities in the US may benefit from adhering to these emotional norms.

Additional, yet less direct evidence for a positive link between minorities' emotional fit with the majority and well-being can be found in the longitudinal study on minority youth in Belgium [22]. There, we found that minorities with higher emotional fit in year 1 reported more majority friends in year 2; considering friendship as an indicator of high quality relationships, this finding implies that minorities' emotional fit with the majority may increase their relational well-being.

However, since minorities navigate both majority and heritage cultural contexts throughout their daily lives (e.g., work vs. home settings), their well-being may not only be a function of fitting in emotionally with the new/other majority culture, but also of fitting in to their heritage culture. Future research should thus not only investigate if emotional acculturation towards the majority culture benefits minorities' well-being, but also if maintaining fit with the heritage culture and/or engaging in emotional frame switching does so.

Implications for emotion psychology

The study of emotional acculturation is intriguing in and of itself. But, it may also contribute to our understanding of emotions in general. Firstly, it is uniquely positioned to contribute to the long-lasting debate on the universality versus culture-specificity of (specific aspects of) emotion [3,33–36]. This is so, because acculturation can be considered a naturally occurring quasi-experiment on the intertwining of culture and psyche [14,37]: Studying emotional acculturation tests if changes in cultural context bring about changes in emotion. The studies conducted so far, provide evidence for plasticity in people's patterns of emotional experience [1^{••},17[•]] and expression [18^{••}], long after initial socialization. Thus, emotional practices — that is, *when* we experience/express *which* emotions [38] — are not hardwired (nor in the brain, nor during childhood socialization), but continuously shaped by culture.

Secondly, the study of emotional acculturation may contribute to our understanding of emotions by providing empirical support for a socio-dynamic perspective [39,40] in which emotions 'emerge' from culturally-shaped interactions that both constrain and afford certain emotions over others. Specifically, the finding that minorities come to fit in emotionally with the majority upon repeatedly interacting with majority members, supports the *social* shaping of emotion: Patterns of emotional experience/ expression are (re)calibrated to (new) cultural standards during social interactions. Furthermore, the finding that minorities switch between cultural frames and, therefore, experience different cultural patterns of emotion depending on the socio-cultural context of interaction, supports the *dynamic* shaping of emotion: Emotions are dynamically construed in the moment. People thus rather *do* emotions than they *have* them [3,41,42].

Finally, the study of emotional acculturation speaks to the functionality of emotions in particular socio-cultural contexts. Our studies on monoculturals [15,16] already suggested that individuals benefit from experiencing emotional *fit* with culture *rather* than from experiencing some particular emotions *per se*. Future studies on biculturals' emotional fit with their cultural contexts of interaction (i.e., heritage vs. majority), may further elucidate how the *same* emotion — such as pride that reflects one's uniqueness and success — can be functional in one cultural context but dysfunctional in the other. I would expect that emotions are neither functional nor dysfunctional in and of themselves, but bring about positive consequences to the extent that they fit a particular (cultural) context (see also [12,13,43]).

Conclusions and directions for future research

When people change socio-cultural contexts, their emotions change as well. Specifically, and upon engaging in social interactions in a new/other culture, people's

tendencies to experience and express emotions are recalibrated to new/other cultural standards. Multiculturals may, therefore, internalize different patterns of emotion that get activated depending on their socio-cultural context of interaction — an adaptive psychological tendency, as emotional fit with culture tends to be rewarding.

However, as the field of emotional acculturation is only in its infancy, the current review may raise more questions than it can answer. Future research may provide some of these answers by proceeding into at least three different directions. Firstly, future research may focus on emotional acculturation in *other aspects of emotional functioning* than people's self-reported experience and expressivity. Specifically, it could investigate acculturative changes in (i) people's abilities for, as well as practices of, producing and recognizing emotional expressions [44–46]; (ii) in the specific constellations of appraisals and action tendencies that constitute experience (such as in [47]); (iii) in the representations of emotion concepts, either in more abstract [48] or in linguistic terms [49]; and (iv) in the extent to which specific types of emotions are (not) valued (such as in [50]) and, accordingly, regulated up or down. Secondly, future studies may focus on the *specific content* of acculturative changes in emotion. Currently, we do not know if acculturation affects specific (sets) of emotion(s) only or if it affects the emotional patterning as a whole. Similarly, we do not know yet if higher well-being is linked to acculturation in specific (sets) of emotion(s) or to acculturation in the co-occurrence and/or patterning of emotion (but see [51]). Finally, future research may aim to uncover the specific mechanisms underlying emotional change, thereby tackling the question *how* people's emotional systems get recalibrated during (intercultural) interactions.

If anything, the emergent field of emotional acculturation calls for a truly dynamic and socio-cultural emotion science in which emotions are neither universal nor hardwired, but are flexibly attuned to the (changing) socio-cultural contexts in which we engage.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Acknowledgements

Preparation of this article was facilitated by a postdoctoral fellowship by the Research Foundation Flanders to Jozefien De Leersnyder.

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Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

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