



# Effectiveness of Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Acceptance in Promoting Chinese People's Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

Studies have found that some dimensions of emotional intelligence (e.g. emotional expression or utilization) may vary in their effects on mental health because of cultural factors. The efficacy of emotional intelligence on mental health can be fully realized in Western society; however, it is maladjusted to Eastern society. Compared with emotional intelligence, the positive benefit of psychological acceptance on mental health may have more generalizability across cultures. Psychological acceptance may be more effective than emotional intelligence in improving the mental health of Chinese people. The aims of this study are outlined as follows: to present the relationship between emotional intelligence, mental health and cultural norms; compare the effectiveness of emotional intelligence and psychological acceptance in promoting Chinese people's mental health; and propose possible directions for future research by looking at unanswered questions.

## Keywords

Emotional intelligence, Psychological acceptance, Mental health, Culture norms

## Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health and Cultural Norms

Emotional intelligence refers to a set of emotional abilities that includes accurate appraisal of emotions in oneself and others, appropriate expression of emotion, adaptive regulation of emotion, and utilization of emotions in solving problems [1]. Numerous studies have shown that emotional intelligence can effectively benefit people's mental health or serve as a factor moderating stress [2-5]. However, some dimensions of emotional intelligence may vary in their effects on mental health because of cultural factors. For example, a study found that the utilization of emotions predicted positively the factors of somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, and severe depression [6]. Emotional expression can be a means of alleviating distress and benefiting health [7], but

emotional suppression can preserve interpersonal harmony [8] and enhance well-being for highly interdependent people [9]. These findings reveal that some dimensions of emotional intelligence are highly Western constructs that may be maladjusted to Eastern societies.

Compared with collectivist cultures, individualistic cultures maintain an open attitude toward emotion, in which the individual is constantly encouraged to express emotions (regardless of whether they are positive or negative), in order to reflect his or her true inner feeling and to maintain his or her uniqueness (e.g. self-esteem). A positive attitude towards emotions leads people to have a positive perception of emotional utilization. By contrast, in a collectivist culture, emotions (particularly negative emotions) are often suppressed to avoid destroying a harmonious atmosphere. A negative

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attitude toward emotions leads people to have a negative perception of emotional utilization [6]. If these cultural attitudes are true, Chu's study confirms that the utilization of emotions can be positively associated with negative mental health, and this is different from the results of Western research.

In collectivist cultures, controlling emotions is essential for maintaining group cohesion. Individuals' satisfaction depends on them fitting in with the group, satisfying the objectives of others, and maintaining group harmony, rather than displaying their uniqueness [10]. This indicates that the influence of emotions on mental health depends more on expressing such emotions in a culturally appropriate manner, whether the culture is collectivistic or individualistic, than on whether individuals restrain them or express them freely. In individualistic cultures, an appropriate level of emotional expression benefits mental health; however, in collectivistic cultures, the control of emotions, particularly negative emotions that disrupt or destroy harmony, may sustain mental health.

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#### **Autonomy of Emotional Regulation, Cultural Fit and Health**

In fact, the real cause of mental illness may be ambivalence toward withholding the expression of emotion, rather than inexpressiveness as such [11]. From the perspective of the autonomy or internalization of emotional regulation, people restrain themselves from expressing their emotions either voluntarily or because of coercion, and these different motivations have different effects on the people's physiological and mental health. The controlled withholding of negative emotions correlates significantly and positively with psychosomatic illness, somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction, and severe depression, and the autonomous withholding of negative emotions does not correlate significantly with psychosomatic illness, and even decreases the likelihood and severity of negative mental health outcomes [12,13].

If the extent of the autonomy of emotional restraint indeed plays a key role in influencing physical and mental health, then determining the factors that can effectively moderate the relationship between the degree of such autonomy and health is vital. In recent years,

an increasing number of studies have indicated that various types of cultural norms and practices are likely to either enhance or restrict the extent to which people internalize their emotions [12-15]. This leads to the questions of what types of cultural norms and practices are helpful in satisfying people's basic needs, therefore further enhancing the internalization process, and what cultural norms and practices are not conducive to this process.

Horizontal cultures are therefore more effective in satisfying most people's basic psychological needs compared with vertical cultures, which tend to conflict with those needs mostly by controlling behavior with external forces, exhibit a lower degree of autonomy, involve lower perceptions of cultural integration, produce controlled regulations, and engender poorer well-being [14,16].

Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism and has high verticality, or power distance. In this vertically collectivistic culture, individuals not only perceive themselves as a part of the group but are also willing to sacrifice their own individual objectives to accomplish the group's objectives, in addition to emphasizing the existence of differences between the individuals within the group and the existence of a hierarchical relationship. Therefore, it is likely that most employees of Chinese enterprises withhold their negative emotions through controlled self-regulation [12], and the outcomes of such control are likely to be detrimental to the employees' mental health [12,13].

However, some studies have asserted that when people's needs are in harmony with social norms, the people conform to those norms voluntarily [12,17]. Even in a country with a culture that is highly vertical and collectivistic such as Taiwan, people's needs and the cultural social norms must be compatible, with people conforming to the norms voluntarily [12]. Research showed that individual people's values and beliefs are compatible with their country's vertically collectivistic culture, and this culture fit had significant negative correlation with controlled withholding of negative emotions and positive correlation with autonomous withholding of negative emotions [12]. How people effectively internalize each norm to make it their own warrants careful consideration in the future.

When circumstances involve cultural incompatibility, with Chinese people's values and beliefs fitting increasingly less adequately

with the Chinese vertically collectivistic culture, the necessity of strengthening the people's acceptance of controlled withholding of negative emotions is likely; this emotional regulation is unlikely to benefit the people's mental health [12]. When emotional intelligence (e.g., emotional expression or utilization) cannot moderate stress or improve mental health because of cultural factors, other methods must be developed to moderate stress. Recent studies have indicated that psychological acceptance may be a favorable alternative [18,19].

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### Effect of Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Acceptance on Mental Health

Psychological acceptance refers to a person's willingness to experience all psychological events such as thoughts, feelings, or sensations, without trying to avoid, control or change the experiencing of these events [20]. Moreover, psychological acceptance does not refer to toleration [21]. Instead, acceptance refers to actively, directly, and fully contacting, without needless defense, psychological experiences that seem to accompany functionally useful overt behaviors [20]. Many treatments for disorder symptoms (such as anxiety management, thought stopping) are based on the view that control of the form, frequency, or situational sensitivity of maladaptive private events is crucial. Control-based therapies may attempt to reduce undesirable emotions, desires, and cognitive appraisals directly [21]. A considerable body of evidence reveals that many forms of psychopathology can be conceptualized as unhealthy efforts to escape and avoid emotions, thoughts, memories, and other private experiences [20]. Individuals who attempt to suppress targeted thoughts increase the occurrence of these thoughts [22,23].

However, psychological acceptance as a clinical therapeutic model differs from conventional behavioral therapy, which is based on control. According to the theory of psychological acceptance, internal ideas or feelings do not necessarily influence overt behavior [21]. In other words, a person transfers limited attentional resources from controlling private events to keenly observing his or her surroundings and making the appropriate decisions and actions to achieve his or her goals (e.g. paying more attention to task requirements). To achieve acceptance, people must be willing to experience any private event including undesired negative

emotions such as fear; accordingly, people do not waste their attentional resources on how they can change or control undesired negative emotions (specifically, people engage in a behavior not according to their current emotions or ideas but according to their goals) [24]. Numerous studies have revealed that psychological acceptance is associated with the positive outcomes of psychological therapy [20,24,25].

Psychological acceptance may be more effective than emotional intelligence in improving the mental health of employees in the Chinese vertically collectivistic culture. Western individualistic cultures, which value individual independence, self-esteem, and self-worth, have more mature emotional intelligence education than Eastern collectivistic cultures do. In Western individualistic cultures, children are taught to express both positive and negative emotions, to show their feelings, and to display their uniqueness (e.g. self-esteem) [26,27]. Collectivistic cultures value group harmony over personal feelings; therefore, people are often required to control their emotions, particularly those that can negatively influence harmonious relationships [26,28].

In addition, Chinese people are born into an autocratic environment where fatherhood and empire are predominant, and have developed a psychological and behavioral pattern in which they overvalued and excessively dependent on authority. Consequently, when Chinese supervisors maintain omnipotent authority and expect absolute obedience, their subordinates are unlikely to be able to express emotion, despite feeling anger [29]. Research further determined that Chinese subordinates' suppression of negative emotions tends to depend on external rather than autonomous forces [30]. This means that when supervisors exercise more authoritarian leadership, their subordinates may fear that the expression of negative emotions is likely to result in punishment or to violate work ethics, thus prompting them to prefer to suppress such emotions. Specifically, Chinese employees often engage in controlled withholding of negative emotions for a long period, and this can have an adverse effect on their physical and mental health. Accordingly, psychological acceptance is crucial for moderating stress and improving physical and mental health of people in traditional Chinese societies.

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### Discussion and Future Research

The purpose of this study was to discuss the effectiveness of emotional intelligence and psychological acceptance in promoting Chinese people's mental health. The positive effect of emotional intelligence on mental health may vary depending on different cultural norms. Given that emotional regulation is shaped by the culture people live in, possible conflicts between individual values, societal values, and individual as well as societal development are clearly important in a globalized world. Because the process of globalization is associated with communication and mobility behavior, there are many opportunities for mismatches between personal values, internalized norms, and the norms of the respective cultures, possibly affecting mental health and well-being.

Compared with emotional intelligence, the positive benefit of psychological acceptance on mental health may be more generalizable across cultures. Psychological acceptance may be more effective than emotional intelligence in improving the mental health of Chinese people. So far, no specific quantitative study has been conducted to examine the influence of psychological acceptance on mental health from the viewpoint of cultural differences. We suggest further research should be undertaken in this area.

Moreover, in addition to emotional expression and emotional utilization, whether other dimensions of emotional intelligence can be influenced by cultural factors could be further explored. If psychological acceptance can improve mental health in a collectivist culture, then determining how to enhance psychological acceptance is an important aim for future research. We argue people with a greater degree of psychological acceptance not only have a greater ability to be aware of emotions in themselves and others, but also have a greater ability to apply those emotions. Emotional intelligence emphasizes the ability to perceive, understand, and manage personal emotions as well as those

of other people. Psychological acceptance refers to a person's willingness to experience psychological events (e.g. ideas, feelings, or physiological perceptions), particularly negative emotions such as fear, without avoiding negative feelings or allowing them to influence his or her behavior. Because they are not afraid to experience negative emotions, people with high psychological acceptance are more aware of emotions in themselves and others, while also making use of this awareness. In addition, people with high psychological acceptance do not need to expend energy expressing or regulating their emotions (particularly negative emotions) because of their willingness to accept those emotions. The relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological acceptance could be the subject of future research.

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### Conclusion

The cross-cultural generalizability of the positive benefits of emotional intelligence on mental health is uncertain. Compared with emotional intelligence, psychological acceptance may be more effective in improving the mental health of Chinese people. Although psychological acceptance has received substantial attention from Western researchers in recent years, its nature accords with the concepts of Zen Buddhism. The fundamental spirit of meditation is to train people to pay attention to their present states [31]. In particular, mindfulness meditation emphasizes experiencing every feeling, idea, and perception in the present and allowing them to come and go without forming any judgment or preference [32]. Mindfulness exercises (e.g., breathing and meditative exercises) can increase acceptance of unwanted emotions and experiences [33]. The nature of mindfulness could parallel psychological acceptance in Western research. In other words, psychological acceptance is not a foreign term but a concept that has already existed in Zen Buddhism and has been adopted by Western researchers as a new psychological therapeutic method.

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