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Ideal Affect in Daily Life: Implications for Affective Experience, Health, and Social Behavior

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Abstract

Over the last decade, researchers have increasingly demonstrated that ideal affect—the affective states that people value and ideally want to feel—shapes different aspects of daily life. Here I briefly review Affect Valuation Theory (AVT), which integrates ideal affect into existing models of affect and emotion by identifying the causes and consequences of variation in ideal affect. I then describe recent research that: (1) applies AVT to the valuation of negative states as well as more complex states, (2) examines how ideal affect shapes momentary affective experience, (3) suggests that ideal affect has both direct and indirect effects on health, and (4) illustrates that people’s ideal affect shapes how they judge and respond to others. Finally, I discuss the implications of cultural and individual differences in ideal affect for clinical, educational, work, and leisure settings.

The vast majority of research in affective science has focused on how people actually feel—what we refer to as people’s “actual” affect or emotional experience (for notable exceptions, see [1–4]). Over the last decade, however, researchers have become increasingly interested in the affective states that people *value and ideally want to feel* (i.e., their “ideal” affect) and other related constructs, such as the “valuation of extreme happiness” [5], “attitudes toward negative emotions” [6], the “social valuation of affect” [7], the “perceived utility of emotions” [8], and “negative affect valuation” [9]. Knowing the affective states that people value and ideally want to feel is not only critical to understanding *how* people interpret their actual affective experiences (e.g., what feels right and good to them) [10–11], but also to understanding *why* people behave in the ways they do [12], ranging from what music they prefer to whom they trust and share resources with.

Affect Valuation Theory

Affect Valuation Theory (AVT, see Figure 1) integrates ideal affect into existing models of affect and emotion, by proposing that: (1) how people want to feel differs from how they actually feel; (2) cultural factors shape people’s ideal affect more than their actual affect,

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while temperamental factors shape people's actual affect more than their ideal affect; and (3) people's ideal affect influences what they do in their daily lives [11,13]. Since proposing AVT more than ten years ago, we have not only found strong empirical support for the theory, but we (and others) have broadened the original scope of AVT in various ways. Here I review some of this work and then discuss directions for future research.

Ideal Affect Differs From Actual Affect

In the first study of ideal affect [13], my colleagues and I created a measure of ideal affect (the Affect Valuation Index) based on existing measures of actual affect [14–16], in which we asked individuals to rate how much they actually and ideally wanted to feel a variety of affective states on average or over the course of a typical week.¹ We observed that most people want to feel more positive than negative, and they want to feel more positive and less negative than they actually feel. These findings, coupled with results from structural equation modeling, suggest that actual affect and ideal affect are indeed different, as suggested by the first premise of AVT (see 17–18 for additional supporting evidence).

Cultural Factors Shape Ideal Affect More Than Actual Affect

Consistent with the second premise of AVT, we discovered that whereas European Americans typically want to feel “excited states” (i.e., high arousal positive states [HAP] such as excitement, enthusiasm, and elation) more than Hong Kong Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese typically want to feel “calm states” (i.e., low arousal positive states [LAP] such as calm, peacefulness, and serenity) more than European Americans [13]. We have largely replicated these results in subsequent studies, although the mean levels of ideal HAP and ideal LAP for each cultural group vary across studies [19–22]. Similar differences have been found for other East Asian samples including Koreans and Japanese [23–25]. These differences have been replicated by other research groups [24].

These cultural differences in ideal affect are related to broader cultural differences in independent vs. interdependent models of self [19, 22, 28]. Specifically, independent contexts emphasize influencing others (i.e., altering one's environment so that it is consistent with one's personal beliefs and preferences). Because influencing others involves action, and action requires increases in physiological arousal, the more people want to influence others, the more they value HAP. Interdependent contexts, by contrast, emphasize altering one's personal beliefs and preferences so they are consistent with one's environment. Because adjusting to others involves suspended action in order to assess what the environment demands, and suspended action requires decreases in physiological arousal, the more people want to adjust to others, the more they value LAP. Moreover, influence and adjustment goals predict ideal HAP and ideal LAP more than they predict actual HAP and actual LAP, respectively [13, 19]. By contrast, measures of temperamental factors (i.e., extraversion, neuroticism) predict actual HAP and actual LAP more than they predict ideal HAP and ideal LAP, respectively [13, 18]. These findings support the second premise of AVT that cultural

¹In other studies, we have examined “momentary” ideal affect, or how people want to feel in the moment (e.g., 19, 26, 27); however, the bulk of our work has focused on “global” ideal affect, or how people want to feel on average, or over the course of a typical week.

factors shape ideal affect more than actual affect, whereas temperamental factors shape actual affect more than ideal affect. Recent research (described below) suggests that this may be particularly true for global ideal and actual affect.

How do people learn to value specific affective states? One way is through exposure to popular media, which both reflects and reinforces cultural values and ideas [29]. Our comparisons of the affective content of American and Chinese media find that American media contain more exciting and less calming content than do Chinese media. For example, bestselling American storybooks contain more open, toothy “excited” smiles but fewer closed “calm” smiles than do Taiwanese Chinese storybooks [20]. Similarly, Facebook photos in the United States have wider smiles than do those in Taiwan [30], and the official photos of U.S. leaders are 6.25 times more likely to show excited smiles than those of Chinese leaders in government, business, and academia (See Figure 2) [25].

To ensure that differences in national leaders’ smiles were related to national differences in ideal affect, we collected ideal affect data from college student samples of 10 nations and calculated the average ideal HAP and LAP of each nation [25]. Then, almost 8 years after the college student data were collected, we coded the smiles of each nation’s legislators in their official photos. The more nations valued HAP, the more their legislators showed open, toothy excited smiles, and the more nations valued LAP, the more their legislators showed closed calm smiles in their photos. Critically, the average actual HAP and LAP of each nation did not predict legislators’ smiles, nor did national indicators of development, democratization, or wealth. Together, these data demonstrate that legislators’ smiles in their official photos in part reflect their nation’s ideal affect.

Although we have done less work examining the effects of media exposure on people’s ideal affect, we have found that in the U.S. and Taiwan, preschool children who read stories about characters who are encouraged to engage in activities in either an exciting way or a calming way were more likely to value HAP vs. LAP, respectively [20]. People also learn to value specific states through explicit teaching and engagement in cultural practices. For instance, in our studies examining religion (another source of cultural ideas and practices), we found that Buddhist practitioners valued LAP more and HAP less than did Christian practitioners [31]. We then examined the effects of Buddhist-inspired meditation on ideal affect. People with no previous experience meditating were randomly assigned to 8-weeks of training in Buddhist-inspired meditation or to 8-weeks of training in improvisational theater [32]. At the end of the 8 weeks, people in the meditation class valued LAP more than those in the improvisational theater class, but did not differ in their actual experience of LAP. Interestingly, there were no changes in ideal HAP, perhaps because the study occurred in the U.S. These findings not only support the idea that cultural practices shape people’s ideal affect, but also suggest that ideal affect may be more malleable than actual affect.

Ideal Affect Shapes Everyday Behavior

The third premise of AVT is that people consciously and unconsciously seek out people, experiences, and activities to achieve their ideal affect. Consistent with this prediction, the more people value excited states, the more likely they are to choose stimulating (vs.

soothing) consumer products (e.g., lotions, teas) and to engage in physically rigorous activities such as running (vs. walking) [33, 34]. At the cultural level, European Americans are more likely to choose exciting vs. calm music [19] and to respond more favorably to excitement (vs. calm)-focused physicians compared to Hong Kong Chinese [22].

Broadening AVT

Most of this initial research focused on distinguishing high from low arousal positive states, on demonstrating the importance of ideal affect above and beyond actual affect, and on examining the role of ideal affect in individual behavior. Recent research has begun to broaden this work by examining: (1) the valuation (and devaluation) of negative states as well as more complex emotional states such as empathy and compassion; (2) the links between global ideal affect and momentary actual affective experience; (3) the role of ideal affect in mental and physical health; and (4) the influence of people's ideal affect on their social preferences, judgments of, and responses to other people.

Valuation (and Devaluation) of Other Emotional States

Most of our initial work on ideal affect focused on positive states because people on average want to feel positive states more than negative states. However, because previous work suggested cultural differences in views of negative affect [35–39] and because negative affect is a central part of emotional life, we began to examine the valuation (and devaluation) of negative states. For instance, researchers had previously argued that European Americans want to maximize the positive and minimize the negative more than Chinese, who instead aim more for a balance between positive and negative affect. However, researchers had not examined whether this was the case when people were asked how they ideally wanted to feel. Therefore, in an experience sampling study, we asked European American, Chinese American, Hong Kong Chinese and Beijing Chinese how much they ideally wanted to feel positive and negative states in the moment, five times day for seven days. Although across cultures, people wanted to feel more positive than negative, European Americans and Chinese Americans indeed wanted to feel positive affect (relative to negative affect) more than did Hong Kong and Beijing Chinese. These differences were also related to the relative value placed on independence vs. interdependence [26]. Maximizing positive and minimizing negative emotion facilitates differentiating oneself from others, which is a goal of independence; in contrast, balancing positive and negative facilitates attention and attunement to others, a goal of interdependence.

Western cultures also differ in their devaluation of negative states. In a series of studies, we showed that European Americans want to avoid feeling negative affect more than Germans do [17]. Why? We reasoned that the Europeans who first immigrated to the New World were people who responded to their negative circumstances at home (e.g., religious persecution, economic despair) by imagining a better life for themselves. In other words, they tried to avoid their negative circumstances by moving to the New World. In contrast, the Europeans who stayed in their homelands were forced to accept and adapt to their negative circumstances. These different ways of responding to threatening events may have fostered different views of negative emotion.

Consistent with these predictions, we observed that European Americans wanted to avoid negative affect more than Germans in part because they endorsed “frontier values” (i.e., valuing achievement and overcoming nature) more [17]. Importantly, these differences in the degree to which people want to avoid negative affect influences how people respond to the suffering of others. While European Americans respond to others’ suffering by focusing on the positive (as a way of avoiding negative affect), Germans respond to others’ suffering by focusing on the negative. These differences are not only reflected in how European Americans and Germans respond to hypothetical scenarios in which the loved one of an acquaintance dies, but also in the emotional content of European American and German sympathy cards: for instance, American sympathy cards contain more positive and fewer negative words as well as more living vs. dying images (e.g., living flowers vs. shriveled leaves) than do German sympathy cards.

Other recent research has examined the valuation of more complex emotional states; for instance, Tamir and colleagues [40] have demonstrated that across a variety of different national contexts, people want to feel the specific emotional states that are consistent with their values. For instance, the more people value self-transcendence (e.g., benevolence), the more they want to feel self-transcending emotions such as empathy and compassion. In future research, it will be important to examine how differences in the valuation of these complex states translate into everyday behavior. For instance, do people in cultures that value empathy more, behave in more empathetic ways?

Links Between Ideal Affect and Momentary Actual Affective Experience

People experience a variety of potentially emotional events every day. As mentioned above, one function of ideal affect may be to shape people’s interpretation of these different events. Indeed, ideal affect may be one way in which culture shapes people’s momentary affective experience (i.e., their immediate responses) to a particular event. For instance, when an activity elicits affective states that match how people want to feel, they may feel more positively during that activity. Indeed, this may explain why people seek activities and objects that match their ideal affect. Consistent with this idea, using both correlational and experimental approaches, we found that across cultures, the more people value LAP, the more they actually enjoy calming (vs. exciting) activities such as low (vs. high) intensity exercise and calming (vs. exciting) amusement park rides (e.g., sky lift vs. free fall) in the moment, even after controlling for their global actual LAP [27].

Although we have found less evidence that mismatches between ideal affect and activities (e.g., valuing calm while engaging in high intensity exercise) lead to less enjoyment, Mauss and colleagues [5] observed that when people were encouraged to value extreme happiness, they experienced less positive affect when they watched an amusing film clip, which presumably did not elicit extreme levels of happiness.

Cultural differences in ideal affect also appear to shape the co-occurrence of momentary actual positive and negative affect. For instance, although there are differences in the degree to which cultures want to maximize positive and minimize negative affect, as described above, across cultures, the more people *want* to maximize the positive and minimize the

negative, the *less* likely they are to actually experience positive and negative affect at the same time [26].

As mentioned above, ideal affect may influence momentary actual affective experience by increasing enjoyment when there is a match between how people want to feel and the affective properties of the activity. Thus, ideal affect may influence momentary actual affective experience, as outlined in [26], by directing people's conscious or unconscious choices of particular situations, people, products, and activities. However, there are other ways in which ideal affect may influence affective experience. One possibility is that people may focus on aspects of a situation that are consistent with how they ideally want to feel. For instance, when receiving a good grade on an exam, students who want to maximize positive affect and minimize negative affect may focus on their own accomplishments with little regard for students who did poorly on the exam. Another possibility is that people may actively try to alter their affective experiences to be consistent with their ideal affect. For instance, after doing poorly on an exam, students who want to maximize the positive and minimize the negative may distract themselves by thinking about other successes in their lives instead of their bad grade. Future research is needed to examine these possibilities and others.

One question that this research raises, however, is how to reconcile cultural differences in momentary affective experiences with cultural similarities in global actual affect. One possibility is that while culture—through ideal affect—may influence some momentary actual affective experiences, there may be many other momentary actual affective experiences that are less influenced by culture and ideal affect, and more influenced by temperamental factors, physical circumstances, or emotion regulation abilities. As a result, when actual affect is assessed at the global level, cultural differences may be less consistently observed.² Clearly, future research is needed to directly examine the links between global and momentary ideal and actual affect.

The Roles of Ideal Affect in Health

Because emotions play a central role in health, it should not be surprising that ideal affect does as well. For instance, the valuation of negative affect reduces the harmful impact of negative affective experiences on health. In a German sample, the more people valued negative affect, the *less* correlated their actual experiences of negative affect were with various indices of psychological and physical health [9]. In other words, feeling negative emotions appears to be less harmful to people's health the more they value negative feelings. This may explain why the experience of negative affect is less strongly correlated with physical and mental health in Japan compared to the United States [41]; Japan—like China—appears to value a balance of positive and negative affect more than the U.S. [38]. Conversely, in a large multinational study, the more a society valued positive affect, the more strongly experiences of negative affect decreased life satisfaction [7]. Interestingly, the

²Another possibility is that ideal affect may influence aspects of actual affect other than mean levels of actual affect. For instance, in Sims et al. (2015), ideal affect influenced the co-occurrence of positive and negative actual affect rather than mean levels of positive and negative actual affect.

valuation of negative affect did not have similar effects on life satisfaction, perhaps because many measures of life satisfaction do not assess negative states.

In addition to having an indirect effect on health (by moderating the relationship between actual negative affect and health), ideal affect may have a direct influence on health in two ways. First, valuing specific states may put people at risk for particular illnesses. For instance, even in a U.S. sample, valuing extreme happiness was associated with greater depressive symptoms, and was higher among a sample of individuals who had experienced a major depressive episode compared to those who had not [42]. These findings suggest that even in cultures that want to maximize the positive, there are problems with valuing too much positive affect. Future studies are needed to examine whether these effects generalize to cultures that value positivity less.

Second, greater discrepancies between how people actually feel and how they ideally want to feel are linked to poorer health. In our original paper [13], we found that across cultures, greater discrepancies between ideal and actual affect (i.e., the further away people were from their ideal affect) were correlated with greater depression. For European Americans, discrepancies in ideal and actual HAP predicted depression, whereas for Hong Kong Chinese, discrepancies in ideal and actual LAP predicted depression. For bicultural Chinese Americans, both types of discrepancies correlated with depression. Thus, the type of discrepancy that was correlated with depression for a particular cultural context varied depending on the culture's ideal affect.

Since this original report, various studies have also found links between actual and ideal affect discrepancies and other indices of health (i.e., physical symptoms [43], as well as depression and life satisfaction [44–45]) across a variety of cultures. However, it is less clear whether there are cultural differences in the types of discrepancies that matter for health. While ideal HAP, controlling for actual HAP, predicted lower life satisfaction more strongly for White Americans than Taiwanese, greater actual-ideal affect (HAP and LAP) discrepancies predicted greater psychological distress and lower life satisfaction for both White Americans and Taiwanese [45]. In part, these mixed findings may reveal the influence of other important factors. Tamir and colleagues [44], for instance, found that discrepancies between ideal and experienced self-transcending emotions predicted depression and life satisfaction more strongly in highly developed countries than in less developed ones.

Together, these findings have important implications for assessment and treatment. First, they suggest that when assessing a person (or nation's) health, clinicians and scientists must consider the affective states that people ideally want to feel. Second, they suggest that certain ideals (i.e., extreme happiness) may be detrimental to one's health. In other research, we have also demonstrated how people's ideal affect shapes their preferences for and evaluations of physicians, their adherence to physicians' recommendations, and even their recall of physicians' recommendations [22, 46, 47]. This work suggests that clinicians should also consider how patients' ideal affect may influence how patients respond to them.

Links to Social Judgment and Behavior

Most recently, we have been interested in the role that ideal affect plays in social judgment and behavior. At the interpersonal level, ideal affect might drive people towards some people and away from others. Decades of research shows that people make quick judgments to ascertain whether others are likely to be a friend or foe [48]. But on what are these “snap” judgments based? We believe that ideal affect may provide intuitive signals for reading others: when a target’s emotional expression matches a person’s ideal affect (“ideal affect match”), the person may judge and respond to that target more favorably. For instance, in a facial preference task where European Americans and Hong Kong Chinese viewed pairs of excited and calm faces and were asked to choose the one they wanted to see again, European Americans chose the excited faces more than did Hong Kong Chinese [21].

But what are the mechanisms that might account for these preferences? For instance, do people visually attend to faces that match their ideal affect more; do they find such faces more rewarding; and/or do they perceive such faces as having shared thoughts and feelings? To answer these questions, we used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to track these multiple levels of processing (e.g., visual attention, affective, cognitive) simultaneously and dynamically as participants viewed pictures of excited and calm faces. Compared to European Americans, Chinese showed reduced activity in areas of the brain associated with reward (ventral striatum) in response to excited vs. calm faces (Figure 3). This activity predicted subsequent preferences for excited vs. calm faces months later, suggesting that Chinese subjects found excited vs. calm faces to be less rewarding than did European Americans, and therefore, preferred them less [21].

In another study [23], we examined whether ideal affect match influences how much money people are willing to share with strangers. European Americans and Koreans played multiple trials of a “Dictator Game” (in which they could share part of a windfall with a stranger) with excited and calm recipients, again indicated by a picture. Consistent with their culture’s ideal affect, European Americans offered more money to excited vs. calm recipients, while Koreans offered more to calm vs. excited recipients (see Figure 4).

Again we used fMRI to isolate the mechanisms underlying this effect. Ideal affect match predicted decreased activity in areas associated with greater mentalizing (i.e., right temporoparietal junction [rTPJ]), in particular, greater mentalizing when targets behave in ways that differ from perceivers’ beliefs [49–50]. Thus, when people viewed faces that did not match their ideal affect, they showed increases in rTPJ, which suggested greater perceptions of different beliefs and values, but when people viewed faces that matched their ideal affect, they showed decreases in rTPJ, which suggested greater perceptions of similar beliefs and values. Importantly, decreases in rTPJ predicted higher offers. Thus, people may give more to recipients whose expressions match their ideal affect because those recipients seem to share their values. In both fMRI studies, there were no cultural differences in activity for areas associated with visual attention, suggesting that in these studies, culture worked through affective and cognitive processes rather than attentional ones.

In the above study, the relationship between ideal affect match and giving was also mediated by judgments of trustworthiness. Participants judged the faces that matched their ideal affect as more trustworthy, which predicted reduced rTPJ activity (implying greater perceptions of shared beliefs and values), which predicted increased giving. Although we collected other social judgments (e.g., intelligence, financial neediness), only trustworthiness mattered for these effects. This is consistent with our finding that people chose physicians who matched their ideal affect in part because they trusted them more [46]. Together, these findings support the notion that ideal affect match results in more positive social judgments, which result in more prosocial behaviors. In our current work, we are examining cultural differences in emotion-based social judgments beyond trustworthiness (Tsai, Blevins, Bencharit, Chim, Yeung, & Fung, under review) as well as the moderators of the effects of ideal affect match on prosocial behavior.

Importantly, in the above studies, ideal affect match predicted preference and giving, regardless of target race or gender. Because ideal affect is culturally shared and implicit, and because responses to others are often rapid, people seem largely unaware of how their social judgments and behavior partly depend on their ideal affect. This raises the intriguing possibility that ideal affect match may provide a less obvious but even more potent sign of ingroup identity (and potential source of bias) than race or gender.

Future Research Directions

Over the last decade, significant research has not only supported the central premises of AVT but also advanced our understanding of the role of ideal affect in people's daily lives. At the same time, there remain aspects of AVT that require further exploration. One question is how to best study cultural differences in ideal affect and at the same time capture the variation and change within cultures. For instance, in most of our studies, we employed strict cultural criteria when deciding whom to include in our data analyses; however, other studies do not. This may explain why some variation in ideal affect emerges across studies. Moreover, we have not yet explored the effect of significant political and economic events on mean levels of ideal affect, even though we believe that they exist. For instance, we informally observed significant increases in mean levels of ideal LAP among European Americans after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and more recently, since increased perceptions of terrorist threats in the United States. Because perceiving one's life as limited in time increases the valuation of calm [51], it is likely that when threatening events occur, people consider the possibility of death and value LAP more. In future work, it would be important to examine whether ideal affect induced by current events drives behavior as much as ideal affect shaped by cultural factors.

Another understudied aspect of AVT is how ideal affect develops over the life span, and the roles of cultural and temperamental factors in this development. Although we have shown that cultural differences in ideal affect exist among preschoolers as well as adults in their 80s [20, 56], this work is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. In addition, it would be important to examine how ideal affect influences people's responses to aging. In current work, for example, we are examining the links between valuing excitement and people's views of old age (Tsai, Sims, Thomas, Jiang, & Fung, under review).

Another under-examined issue is how different aspects of ideal affect relate to each other. For instance, it would be important to examine how global and momentary (i.e., situation-specific) ideal affect interact to influence behavior. At any given moment, how do people negotiate their global and ideal affect if they conflict? It would also be important to examine how global and momentary ideal affect are similar or different from other related constructs. For instance, what is the relationship between the affective states that individuals value and those that they think their society values? Finally, most research has focused on self-reports of ideal affect, but we theorize that people are often unaware of the affective states they value. Does implicit ideal affect exist, and if so, what is the relationship between explicit and implicit ideal affect?

Implications for Applied Settings

Finally, future research should examine the implications of cultural and individual differences in ideal affect for clinical, educational, work, and leisure settings, especially in multicultural societies like the United States. As mentioned above, in clinical settings, we have found that the more people value excited states, the more likely they are to choose but also to adhere to the recommendations of a physician who wants to help patients lead “dynamic” vs. “relaxed” lifestyles [47]. Indeed, compared to European Americans, Asian Americans respond less favorably to excitement vs. calm focused physicians: they are not only less likely to choose them, but also less likely to recall their recommendations and evaluate them positively [22].

More generally, cultural and individual differences in ideal affect or avoided affect may moderate the impact of interventions designed to reduce distress, promote well-being or prosocial behavior (e.g., empathy, compassion) [52–53]. For instance, the less people want to avoid negative affect, the more they want to focus on the negative when responding to others’ suffering as well as when they are coping with their own [17]. Thus, interventions aimed at focusing on the positive (the “silver lining” or the “bright side”) may be less effective among people from cultures that are more accepting of negative emotions.

Future studies should also examine how differences in ideal affect play themselves out in work and educational settings. For example, employers and teachers may unconsciously and inaccurately judge employees and students based on whether their expressions match employers’ and teachers’ ideal affect. Indeed, this may explain why many European Americans perceive Asian Americans to be cold or stoic, and why many Asian Americans complain about the “bamboo ceiling,” and other barriers to success in top level leadership positions [54–55]. Thus, educating teachers and employers about cultural differences in ideal affect may prevent them from inadvertently misjudging (and perhaps, mistreating) employees and students from cultures that value different affective states.

In summary, our initial work demonstrated that how people ideally want to feel (their “ideal affect”) is distinct from how they actually feel, and that people’s ideal affect is largely culturally shaped. Since then, over a decade of research has extended this work to negative and more complex emotional states and has demonstrated the significant impact that people’s ideal affect has on what they do to feel good, their responses to activities and

events, their physical and mental health, and their social judgments and behaviors. In these ways and others, ideal affect plays a central role in people's daily lives.

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affect. Using a variety of calming (vs. exciting) activities including exercise and amusement rides, this series of studies demonstrates that the more people value calm and other low arousal positive states, the more they enjoy calming (vs. exciting) activities. Thus, this paper illustrates one way in which ideal affect shapes momentary affective experience.

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1. Affect Valuation Theory distinguishes how people ideally want to feel (their “ideal affect”) from how they actually feel (their “actual affect”).
2. People want to feel more positive and less negative than they actually feel.
3. Across and within cultures, people differ in the types of positive and negative states they ideally want to feel.
4. These differences in ideal affect shape how people respond to specific events, what impact emotions have on their mental and physical health, and how people judge and respond to others.

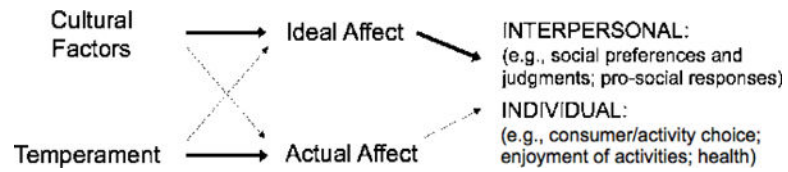


Figure 1. Affect Valuation Theory. Darker lines indicate stronger relationships.

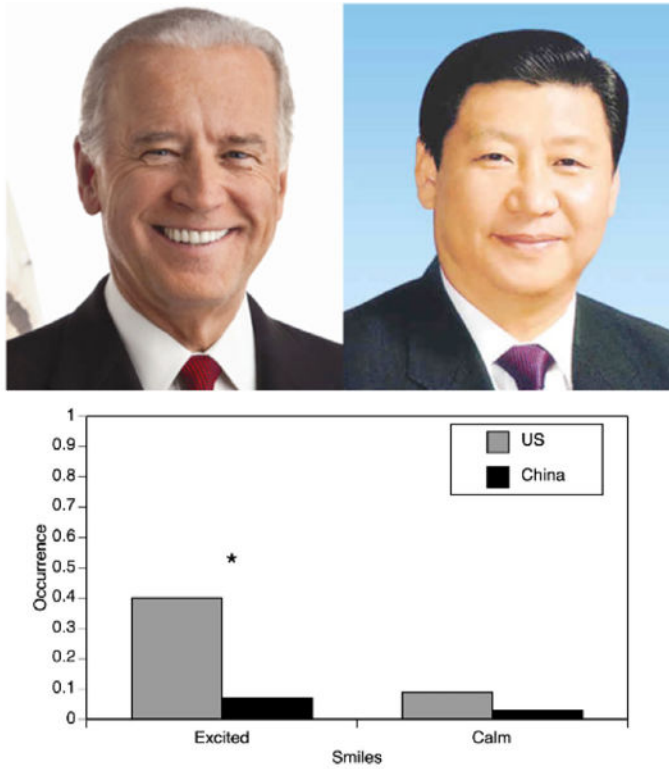


Figure 2.

Top: Excited (left) and calm (right) smiles. *Bottom:* Adapted from Tsai et al. (2015). American leaders in government, business, and academia are 6.25 times more likely to show excited smiles than Chinese leaders * $p < 0.05$

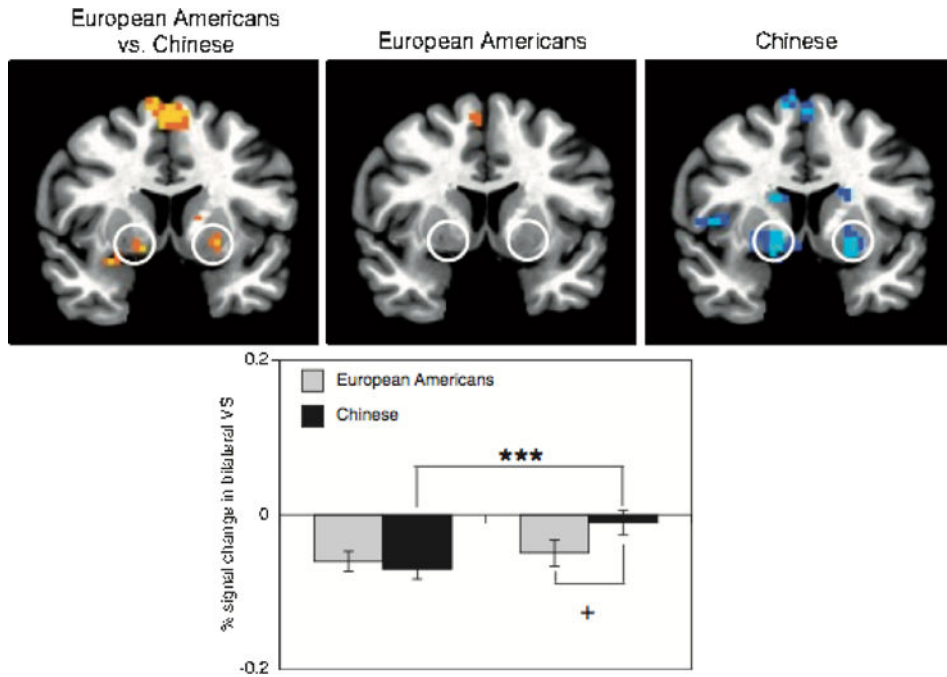


Figure 3. Ventral striatal (VS) activity in response to excited vs. calm expressions for European Americans vs. Chinese (top left), European Americans only (top middle) and Chinese only (top right). VOI percent signal change in bilateral VS by cultural group and target expression (bottom). Asterisks indicate significance of simple effects. *** $p < .001$, + $p < .10$. Warmer colors indicate positive associations; cooler colors indicate negative association (thresholded at $p < .005$ uncorrected, cluster > 13 voxels, $p < .05$ corrected). From Park et al. (2016). Neural evidence for cultural differences in the valuation of positive facial expressions. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 11, 243–252, reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.

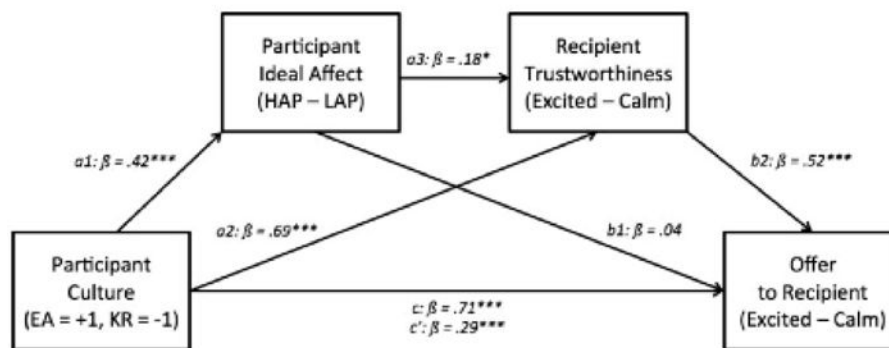
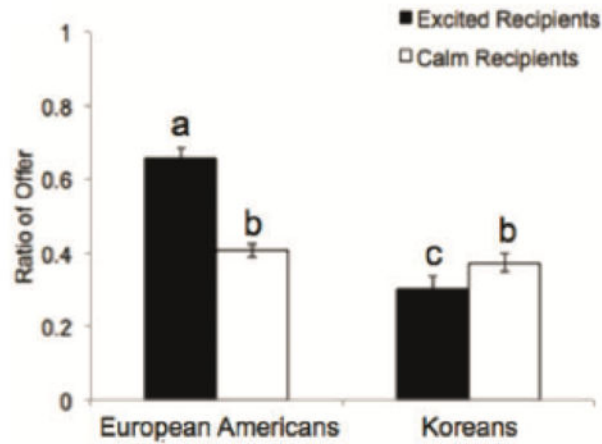


Figure 4.

Top: European Americans gave more to excited (vs. calm) recipients, whereas Koreans gave more to calm vs. excited recipients. Different letters indicate significant differences ($p < .05$). Bottom: These cultural differences were mediated by ideal affect and judgments of trustworthiness. We report standardized beta values and unstandardized culture codes (European Americans [EA] = +1, Koreans [KR] = -1) for ease of presentation. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$. Adapted from Park et al. (2017). Neurocultural evidence that ideal affect promotes giving. *Social Cognitive Affective Neuroscience*, 12,1083–1096. doi: 10.1093/scan/nsx047, reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.