A Cultural Perspective on Emotional Experiences Across the Life Span

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Past research suggests that older adults place a greater priority on goals of maintaining positive experiences and distancing from negative experiences. We hypothesized that these aging-related differences in emotional experiences are more pronounced in Western cultures that encourage linear approaches to well-being compared with Eastern cultures that encourage more dialectic approaches to well-being. We compared reports of positive and negative emotional experiences from stratified random samples of Americans (a culture characterized by focus on positive and distancing from negative experiences; samples collected in the Midwest) and Japanese (a culture characterized by its endorsement of dialectical experiences; samples collected in the Tokyo Metropolitan area). In support of our hypothesis, older Americans reported significantly less negative emotions in unpleasant situations, relative to their younger counterparts. Furthermore, both trait-level negativity (i.e., rumination) and interpersonal negativity (i.e., recall of unpleasant relationships and intensity of an unpleasant interpersonal experience) were lower among older compared with younger Americans. However, such aging-related effects were absent in the Japanese respondents. Further, though older and younger Japanese reported the same amount of negative emotions in unpleasant situations, older Japanese also reported more positive emotions in the same unpleasant situations. Yet, we did not observe corresponding aging-related differences among the Americans. Together, these findings highlight the role of culture for understanding how emotional experiences unfold across adulthood.