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Abstract

Emotions are not just personal feelings, they are also shaped by the cultures and values we live in. This article explores the question: Are emotions the same everywhere, or do different societies feel and understand emotions differently? Using a philosophical approach, the article argues that emotions are more than biological reactions. They are ways of making sense of the world, shaped by language, tradition, and ethical beliefs. Emotions help us understand what matters, what is right or wrong, and how we relate to others. Focusing on Indonesian emotional concepts such as *malu* (shame), *sungkan* (respectful hesitation), and *sakit hati*(emotional pain), the article shows that emotions are part of moral life. These feelings guide behavior in families, communities, and society. They are not only about what someone feels inside, but also about shared expectations and values. The article compares these with ideas from Western philosophy, such as guilt, pride, and compassion, to show how different cultures express and understand emotions in unique ways. Rather than seeing emotional differences as a problem, the article argues that they can help us grow in understanding and empathy. Recognizing emotional diversity is important for building respectful relationships between cultures. The article concludes that emotions are ethical practices that shape who we are and how we live with others. By paying attention to how emotions work across cultures, we can create a deeper, more humane understanding of what it means to live well in a global world. This research concludes that understanding the plurality of emotional expressions and cultivating emotional awareness is essential for intercultural harmony and mutual respect.

Keywords

emotions, philosophy of emotion, ethics

1 Introduction

Emotions are often understood as spontaneous and instinctive reactions to external conditions. We feel happy to hear some good news, and vice versa. Also, we get angry when something bad happens around us. These emotions sometimes prompt a reaction. However, when examined from a philosophical perspective, emotions reveal themselves as complex experiences intricately intertwined with cultural values, ethical considerations, and social expectations. While emotions like anger or happiness are common across human societies, their meanings and expressions can vary significantly. Let's take, for instance, in many Western contexts, emotions like anger are considered very personal and often disruptive, which requires control or intervention. However, in many Indonesian cultures, emotions are not simply personal reactions but are seen as important moral expressions that sustain social harmony. The concept of *sabar* (patience) in Javanese culture, for example, emphasizes the importance of emotional restraint in maintaining social order (Geertz, 1973). Indonesian people are trying to be patient and control their emotions when it comes to keeping the harmony. Thus, this raises the critical question: Are emotions universal or shaped by cultural practices and values?

This article seeks to explore this question through a philosophical approach, examining both universalist theories of emotion and culturally-specific emotional concepts, particularly those found in Indonesian culture. Martha Nussbaum (2001) helps us see emotions like compassion and indignation not as passive responses, but as active judgments in which we feel them because we care about something or someone deeply. Nussbaum is responding to an objection that emotions like compassion must include more than just evaluative judgments; they must also involve a kind of feeling, such as pain at another's suffering. Critics argue that this pain is an affect (a felt emotional response), not a judgment (a cognitive evaluation), and thus shows that emotions aren't reducible to judgments alone (Hunt, 2006). These emotions are moral

signposts, revealing what we find valuable or unjust. This perspective shares a powerful reminder that emotions are not universal reactions locked into our biology. They are lived, taught, and shared, shaped by the cultures we grow up in and the ethical worlds we inhabit (Beatty, 2013). This view offers a compelling account of emotions as culturally and ethically embedded experiences.

2 Methods

This article uses a philosophical-interpretive methodology grounded in cross-cultural analysis. It draws on classical and contemporary philosophical theories of emotion, alongside culturally embedded concepts from Indonesian societies, to understand emotions as both moral experiences and social practices.

3 Discussion

3.1 Philosophical Foundations of Emotion

Philosophical discussions about emotion often view it not merely as a passive feeling, but as a rational or evaluative response to meaningful situations. For example, in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, emotions such as anger, fear, or compassion are treated as integral to ethical life, insofar as they reflect a person's judgment about what is good or harmful in each context. Aristotle emphasizes that virtue involves feeling emotions at the right time, for the right reasons, and to the right degree, what he calls the "mean relative to us" (Aristotle, trans. 2009, Book II, 1106b–1107a). This perspective frames emotion as neither irrational nor purely instinctive, but as closely tied to moral reasoning and habituated character. Anger, in Aristotle's view, becomes virtuous when it is expressed proportionally and appropriately—an idea that resonates with the Javanese practice of *sabar* (patience) in which emotional restraint is valued to maintain social harmony (Geertz, 1973).

Martha Nussbaum (2001) further develops this perspective by emphasizing that emotions are judgments: we feel anger, compassion, or joy because we care about something deeply. These emotional responses, she argues, are not mere reactions but reflect our moral values and commitments. Robert Solomon (2003) also suggests that emotions are integral to our ethical lives, shaping how we interact with others and the world. In contrast to these views, Paul Ekman (1992) proposes that emotions like anger, sadness, and happiness are biologically hardwired and universally recognized across human cultures. Ekman's model suggests that basic emotions are innate and universally expressed in similar ways. However, critics such as Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) argue that emotions are not biologically predetermined but are socially constructed. They suggest that emotions are shaped by the cultural contexts in which individuals are raised, challenging the notion of universal emotional expressions.

These different perspectives reveal just how complex and deeply human our emotional lives are. Aristotle and Nussbaum see that emotions aren't just fleeting feelings; they reflect what we care about, what we believe matters, and how we try to live well. When someone feels anger or compassion, it's not just a reaction; it is often a response shaped by values, relationships, and cultural expectations. The Javanese practice of *sabar*, for instance, shows how emotional restraint can be a form of wisdom, rooted in a broader ethical commitment to harmony. These views suggest that emotions are not only about what we feel, they're also about who we are, where we come from, and how we make sense of the world around us.

3.2 Cultural Variations in Emotional Experience

In contrast to universalist theories, it is evident that emotions are often understood and expressed differently across cultures. Three prominent emotional concepts in Indonesian contexts that reflect this are *sungkan*, *ikhlas*, and *malu*. Each plays a crucial role in daily interpersonal interactions, influencing how people behave, communicate, and navigate complex social dynamics. These emotions below are showing the fact that Indonesian culture provides rich concepts that highlight the role of emotions in maintaining ethical behaviour and social cohesion, and harmony:

1) *Sungkan* (Javanese): A sense of hesitation or deference, rooted in respect for others and the desire to avoid conflict. In everyday interactions, *sungkan* manifests in the way people defer to elders, hesitate before making requests, or avoid asserting themselves too strongly. For instance, a

younger person may feel *sungkan* about sitting before an elder does or speaking too directly to someone of higher status. It acts as an emotional boundary that preserves respect and social balance. Far from being a weakness, *sungkan* is viewed as a virtue that helps prevent conflict and promotes courteous interaction.

2) *Ikhlas* (Islamic-Indonesian): A form of spiritual acceptance and surrender, demonstrating moral maturity and the ability to let go of personal desires. It is an emotional and ethical state in which one acts or gives without expecting anything in return, free from ego, resentment, or attachment. Acting with *ikhlas* means one accepts outcomes without resentment and continues to do good even in the face of personal sacrifice. For example, parents may work tirelessly for their children's education out of *ikhlas*, not obligation (Beatty, 2013). This emotion, cultivated through religious practice and community expectations, serves both a spiritual and emotional function: it helps individuals manage disappointment, release attachments, and affirm their ethical commitments.
3) *Malu* (Indonesian/Malay): Shame or embarrassment, which plays a key role in regulating behaviour to align with the most common expectations and social norms. It is a pervasive emotional norm in Indonesian and Malay societies. It is a complex blend of shame, modesty, and social self-consciousness. It acts as a moral check that prevents individuals from engaging in socially inappropriate or self-aggrandizing behavior. For example, a student might feel *malu* to speak in class out of fear of appearing boastful or incorrect. While excessive *malu* can inhibit expression, it also fosters collective identity and social cohesion by encouraging people to be considerate, humble, and aware of communal norms.

These emotions demonstrate that the way Indonesians express themselves is not simply an individual experience, but is shaped by moral and relational values. In these cultural contexts, emotional control is regarded as an essential virtue that upholds social harmony and ethical relationships. By understanding *sungkan*, *ikhlas*, and *malu*, we see how emotions function not only as internal states but as cultural tools for navigating daily life. They offer alternative models for emotional expression that emphasize relational accountability over personal spontaneity. However, if these emotions are continually suppressed and not expressed, they may eventually build up and lead to negative outcomes.

3.3 The Role of Emotional Regulation in Intercultural Understanding

In this increasingly globalized world, cross-cultural interactions are happening everywhere, whether in classrooms, workplaces, international relations, or even online spaces. Emotions, though often underestimated, are at the heart of these encounters. The ways emotions are expressed, interpreted, and regulated differ greatly across cultures, and these differences can lead to miscommunication, discomfort, or even conflict. For instance, in many Asian cultures, including Indonesia, emotional restraint is regarded as a sign of self-discipline, respect, and maturity. Emotions such as anger or disappointment are often concealed to maintain group harmony (*rukun*) and avoid confrontation (Geertz, 1973). In contrast, cultures that value individual expression, such as many Western societies, may interpret such restraint as coldness, avoidance, or lack of authenticity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Conversely, overt emotional expression, which might be seen as honest or passionate in one cultural setting, may be perceived as disruptive or embarrassing in another (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). This underscores the importance of emotional awareness and adaptability, not only as personal competencies but also as moral and intercultural virtues. When people recognize that emotional expressions are shaped by deep ethical and cultural frameworks, they are better equipped to interpret others' emotional signals with empathy and cultural sensitivity. Emotional regulation, in this broader sense, is not merely about suppressing or controlling one's feelings but about aligning emotional expression with shared moral values and social context.

From a philosophical standpoint, emotions can be seen as forms of moral communication. Nussbaum (2001) argues that emotions are rooted in judgments about what we value; thus, regulating emotions is part of ethical self-cultivation. We need to learn how to manage emotions in diverse cultural environments, whether by expressing them more openly or tempering them, which is a way of showing respect, building trust, and fostering mutual understanding. Moreover, recognizing the plurality of emotional norms dismantles the assumption that there is a single "correct" or "natural" way to feel or behave. Instead, emotional plurality invites people to appreciate and learn from diverse worldviews. It encourages humility and openness in intercultural engagement, reducing stereotyping and fostering richer, more nuanced human connections. In this way, emotional regulation becomes more than a psychological strategy, it is a deeply ethical practice, central to cross-cultural dialogue, global citizenship, and peaceful coexistence.

By understanding the diversity of emotions across cultures, we create space for learning from different perspectives, breaking down stereotypes, and forming more genuine, meaningful connections.

This emotional flexibility allows us to approach others with humility and openness, helping us build stronger, more empathetic relationships across cultural boundaries. When we practice emotional regulation in this way, we are not only improving our interactions with others but also contributing to a world that's more understanding, compassionate, and well-connected.

3.4 Language-Emotion Connection

Language doesn't merely describe how we feel—it actively shapes our emotional world. The words and metaphors available in a language influence how people experience, interpret, and express their emotions. In this way, language becomes more than just a tool for communication; it is a lens through which we understand and live our emotional lives. As Wierzbicka (1999) explains, each language contains emotion concepts that are deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts, often lacking direct translations in other languages. Take the Indonesian word *sungkan,* for example. It expresses a subtle emotional mix of hesitation, politeness, and respect, especially when interacting with someone of higher status or authority. It's not quite fear, nor is it simply shyness, *sungkan* reflects a deep cultural sensitivity to social harmony.

Another example is *ikhlas*, a term often translated as sincerity, but its meaning runs deeper. Ikhlas refers to a moral and emotional attitude of wholehearted acceptance, letting go without resentment or expectation. In daily life, *ikhlas* is something people strive for—whether in forgiving someone, giving charity, or facing hardship with grace. It's a cultivated emotional state, tied closely to spiritual and ethical values.

Likewise, in Japanese culture, the emotion *amae* refers to a sweet, trusting dependence on someone else's care or indulgence (Doi, 1973). It's not just about needing help, *amae* captures the emotional comfort of being accepted and cared for, especially in close relationships. While familiar to Japanese speakers, this emotion doesn't have a neat equivalent in English, showing how different cultures carve out emotional meanings through language. These examples show that language does more than give us labels for emotions, it guides us in feeling them. When a culture has rich vocabulary for concepts like patience (*sabar)*, shame (*malu*), or respectful hesitation (*sungkan*), people are more likely to notice, value, and regulate those feelings in their lives.

Research on linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, supports this idea. Pavlenko (2008) notes that the way emotions are talked about can influence how they are felt. If a language emphasizes emotions rooted in community, humility, or spirituality, speakers may become more emotionally attuned to those values. For example, Indonesian terms like rasa *hormat* (respect) or *sabar* (patience) not only express emotional states but also carry moral weight that guides behavior in everyday interactions. In this way, emotions are not simply universal reactions; they are deeply shaped by the words we use to express them. Understanding emotions across cultures means paying attention not only to how people feel, but also to how they speak about those feelings. Language, emotion, and culture are inseparably intertwined, and through this connection, we come to understand both ourselves and others more deeply.

4 Conclusions

This article has explored the question of whether emotions are universal or shaped by culture. The evidence suggests that while certain emotions, such as anger or joy, are shared across human societies, how these emotions are understood and expressed vary significantly depending on cultural and ethical contexts. Philosophically, emotions can be seen as moral judgments that expressions of our values and commitments. Culturally, emotions serve as key components of social life, guiding behavior and maintaining harmony within communities. Recognizing the plurality of emotional experiences and learning to regulate one's emotions in culturally sensitive ways is essential for promoting intercultural understanding and respect.

In conclusion, emotions are neither purely universal nor entirely culturally specific. Instead, they are shaped by a complex interplay of biological, ethical, and cultural factors. By recognizing the different ways people express emotions and being more mindful of our feelings, we can create stronger connections and a deeper respect for one another across cultures.

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