

Suppression of Emotions is Differently Related to Depressive Symptoms Across Cultures: Distinguishing Between General and Empathic Suppression of Emotions

Fabian Schunk^a, Gisela Trommsdorff^a, and Dorothea König-Teshnizi^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, University of Konstanz | ^bFaculty of Psychology, University of Vienna

Background

Associations between emotional suppression and psychological health have been shown to differ across cultures (Ford & Mauss, 2015).

- Suppression was related to more depressive symptoms and lower life satisfaction among Western participants
- ...but unrelated to depressive symptoms among members of East Asian cultures.
- Cultural differences in emotion regulation might be explained by different values for the experience and expression of emotions.

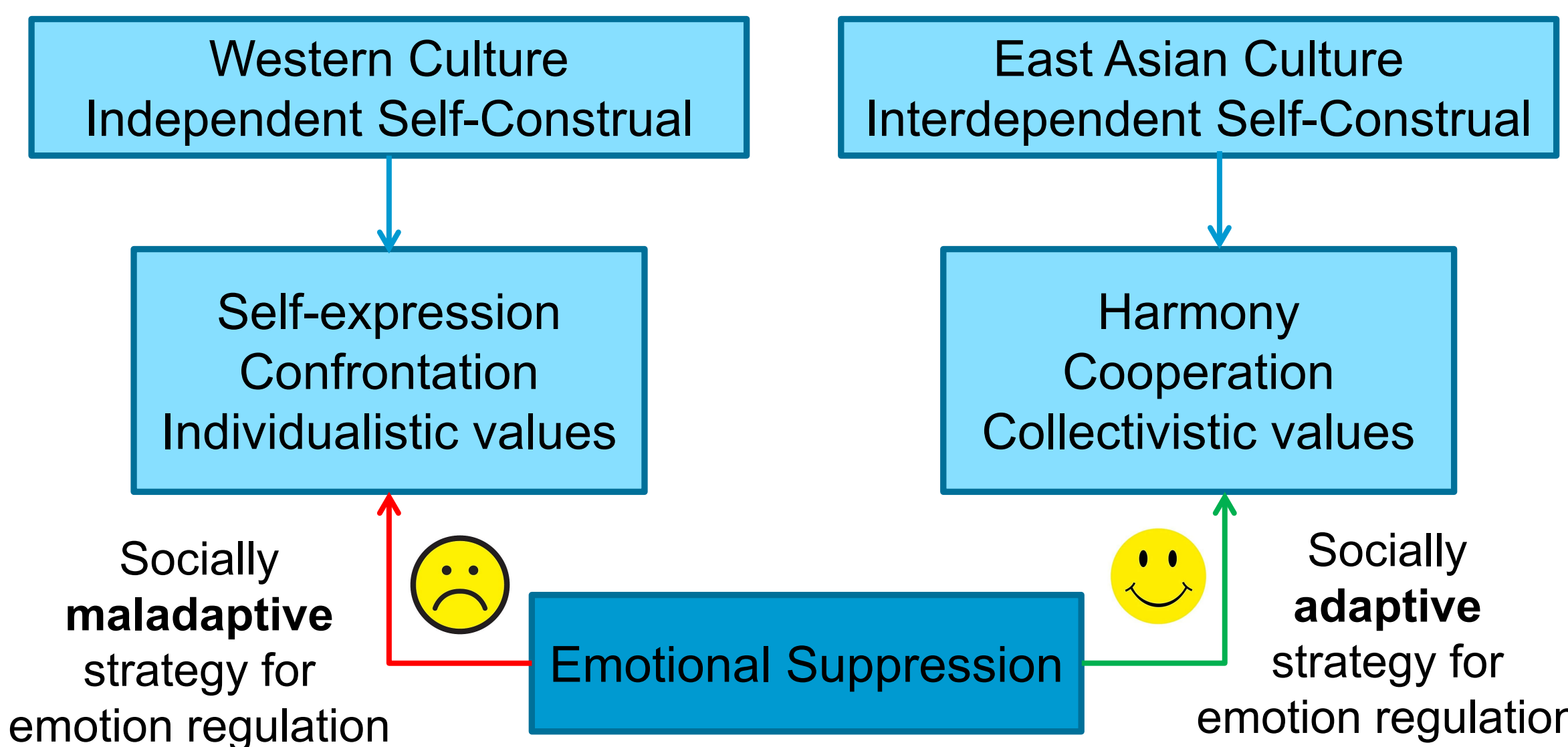


Figure 1. Cultural values underlying emotion regulation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008).

Suppression of emotions might be socially adaptive in East Asian cultural contexts to maintain harmony.

This may be especially the case when negative emotions are masked out of empathic concern for others (= empathic suppression).

Research Objective

We investigated cultural differences in the association between emotion suppression and depressive symptoms among German-speaking (henceforth: “German”) and Japanese participants

- Two types of suppression were examined:
- General suppression, e.g., “I control my emotions by not expressing them”.
 - Empathic suppression of negative emotions, e.g., “When I feel negative emotions, I try not to show them, **so as not to burden anyone else**”.

Hypotheses

- 1) General suppression will be related to more depressive symptoms among Germans, but not among Japanese (in line with previous research).
- 2) Empathic suppression will be related to **less** depressive symptoms among Japanese, but to **more** depressive symptoms among Germans.

Method

Sample

- 1 000 university students from Japan and German-speaking countries (Germany and Austria)
- 524 Japanese: $M = 19.00$ years, $SD = 1.14$; 36.8% female
 - 476 Germans: $M = 21.71$ years, $SD = 2.85$; 60.9% female

Measures

Variable	Questionnaire
General suppression	Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003)
Empathic suppression	Emotion Regulation Inventory (König, 2011)
Depressive symptoms	Center of Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977)

Results of Moderation Analyses (Gender and Age as Covariates)

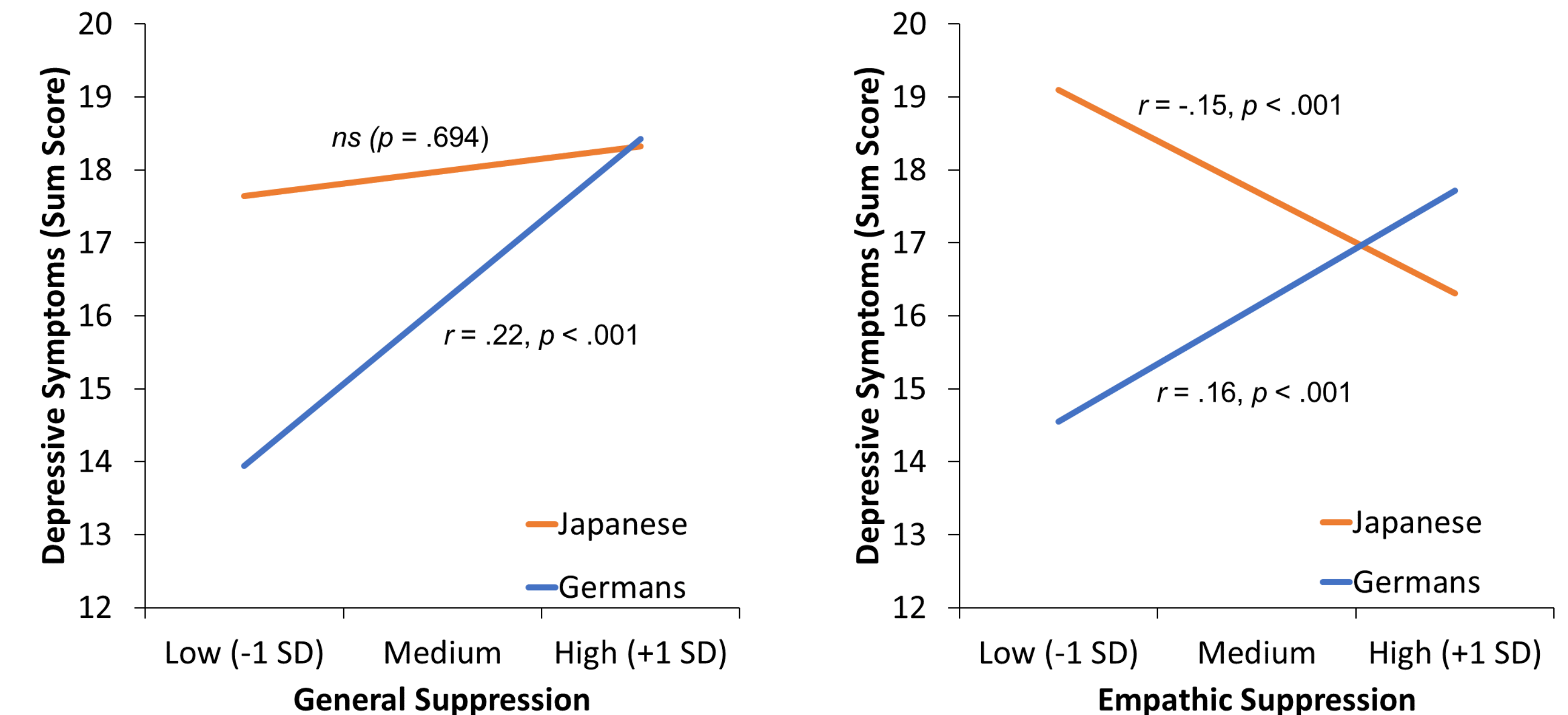


Figure 2. Link between depressive symptoms and general suppression (left) and empathic suppression of negative emotions (right) among Japanese and Germans. Pearson correlations are given to improve interpretability.

Summary and Conclusion

Emotional suppression – whether in general or out of empathic concern for hurting others – was related to more depressive symptoms among Germans. But not among Japanese!

Japanese who suppressed negative emotions out of empathic concern (empathic suppression) reported fewer depressive symptoms.

Contrary to the common view, suppression might not always be an unhealthy emotion regulation strategy – quite the opposite: In the Japanese cultural context, suppressing emotions out of empathic concern might be a socially adaptive strategy to maintain harmony.

References

- Ford, B. Q., & Mauss, I. B. (2015). Culture and emotion regulation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 3, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2014.12.004>. Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348–362. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.348>. König, D. (2011). *Die Regulation von negativen und positiven Emotionen. Entwicklung des Emotionsregulations-Inventars und Vergleich von Migränikerinnen mit Kontrollpersonen* [The regulation of negative and positive emotions. Development of the Emotion Regulation Inventory and comparison of migraineurs with controls] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Vienna. Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.98.2.224>. Radloff, L. S. (1977). The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement*, 1(3), 385–401. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014662167700100306>. Trommsdorff, G., & Rothbaum, F. (2008). Development of emotion regulation in cultural context. In M. Vandekerckhove, C. von Scheve, S. Ismer, S. Jung, & S. Kronast (Eds.), *Regulating emotions: Culture, social necessity, and biological inheritance* (pp. 85–120). Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444301786.ch4>