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### The Anglo-American Women's Fight for Happiness: Smiling for Independence

The study of Anglo-American emotions cannot be fully understood without considering the importance of independence in American culture. In order to feel happy and independent, Americans are ironically dependent on constant positive feedback from their peers, which results in the elevated American self-esteem. Thus, Americans have adopted a wide array of distinct mannerisms such as smiling, using positive adjectives in their vocabulary, and constantly complimenting their peers. Recent studies by Summiya Ahmad (2009) have evaluated the difference in culturally accepted emotional expression between men and women in the United States. In the past 100 years, with the Women's Rights Movement, American culture has seen dramatic changes in gender roles and groundbreaking improvements in gender equality. However, recent polls by Jill Suttie (2009) have shown that though American women are making drastic advances in living standards, they are reporting record-low levels of happiness. Despite having broken through the glass ceiling, American women have seen ever-increasing pressure to achieve perfection and display constant emotional stability.

Acceptable American behavioral standards differ between age, gender, and situation. However, in everyday situations and interactions people are generally expected to smile and display a happy persona. More expressive emotions are acceptable in a limited number of situations, but it is always important for the individual to maintain control and some level of composure, as to not infringe on the happiness of those around. People of older ages are generally held to stricter standards while youth are given more leniencies in expressing negative emotions. Many people argue that women in the Anglo-American culture are expected to maintain a happier composure than men. Jill Suttie highlights this phenomenon in her article, *Is There a Happiness Gender Gap?*. She points out, "girls and young women in our culture feel they have to be good at everything—to be great nurturers,

successful at work and school, and attractive, all at the same time.”<sup>1</sup> Suttie attributes the declining level of happiness in the American female population to the greater pressures they face to achieve success and happiness.

The Anglo-American way of expressing emotions adequately represents the American culture, founded on the Protestant value of independence. Anglo-Americans value non-imposition and the capitalistic survival of the fittest. This correlates with the lack of expression of negative emotions in American culture because the individuals do not want to express the “weaker” negative emotions that might make the individual appear more vulnerable and dependent on outside help.

Summiya Ahmad’s study suggests that women may be struggling to find happiness in the competitive independent workforce because they are more reliant on social interactions than men. In addition, women are suffering in the new, more stressful work environment because they are not as cognitively able to handle stress as well as men. Though the female culture has changed dramatically in the past twenty years, the emotional expectations have not. American culture still expects women to be more passive, sensitive, and supportive than men.<sup>2</sup> Thus, women are feeling more depressed recently because they are expected to excel in a competitive workplace while still maintaining an empathetic and composed façade.

Other cultures stereotype Americans with the trademark smile and seemingly insincere cheerfulness, especially among the female population.<sup>3</sup> The basis for this tendency stems from the cultural value for respect, consideration, and non-imposition. In the Anglo-American community, it is seen as rude to impose one’s problems on a peer, or in any way prevent another’s “pursuit of happiness.” This also explains the overuse of compliments in American culture. Anna Wierzbicka notes, “In American English, compliments occur in a very wide variety of situations and the frequency of compliments is

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<sup>1</sup> Suttie, Jill. “Greater Good.” *Is There a Happiness Gender Gap?* N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmad, Summiya. “Emotional Intelligence and Gender Differences.” *Sarhad J. Agriculture* 25.1 (2009): p. 127-130. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Wierzbicka, Anna. *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

often remarked by foreigners."<sup>4</sup> It is the American custom to constantly reassure and make others happy. Americans justify their always cheerful disposition with the rationality that smiling, even when one is sad, will trick the body into believing it is happy. However, Americans are also known to commonly seek therapy counseling and antidepressants to resolving the staggering 9.5% of American adults suffering from depression.<sup>5</sup>

Unique to American culture is the commonality to visit a therapist for an array of emotional stress and "imbalances." Americans are very rational; they seek the need to control their emotions. They achieve dominance over their emotions by first suppressing the undesirable negative feelings, then consulting a specialist to understand them. It is acceptable in American culture to vocalize negative emotions because it displays power over the emotion, but it is not acceptable to display "out of control" emotions. The analysis of emotions allows people to gain distance from their emotions without being consumed and acting irrationally because of them.<sup>6</sup>

Compelling evidence shows that women are especially affected by the depression epidemic in the United States. Marcus Buckingham points out that depression has been declared the second most debilitating disease for women (after heart disease), while it is tenth on the list of male ailments. Women medicate themselves with anti-anxiety and anti-depression medication twice as much as men do.<sup>7</sup> These unfortunate statistics show just how pressured Anglo-American women are to feel happy and maintain their composure in stressful social and work situations.

Members of other cultures are continually surprised by the overuse of positive phrases and adjectives in Anglo-American English. Laura Klos Sokol describes the difference between Polish and American vocabulary by citing a Polish person's opinion, "My first impression was how happy Americans must be. Poles have different expectations.

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<sup>4</sup> Wierzbicka, Anna. *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, Bob. "Depression Facts and Statistics." *Uplift Program*. N.p., 15 Jan. 2005. Web.

<sup>6</sup> Wierzbicka, Anna. *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Buckingham, Marcus. "What's Happening To Women's Happiness?" *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 17 Sept. 2009. Web. 26 Jan. 2014.

When Americans say it was great, I know it was good.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike other cultures that may feel guilt for exaggerating or bragging about their happiness, it is more common for Americans to feel guilty for not expressing their pleasure or even not having enough fun. Hence, the American lexicon has diluted the significance of terms such as “happy,” “love,” “fantastic,” and “good” through using them frequently in their vocabulary. An American would be taken aback by a response to “how are you?” that is anything worse than “good.” In contrast, in other countries it is abnormal to give such a positive response.

The basis of American culture can be evaluated through common parenting styles. In the Anglo-American community, parenting is based on positive reinforcement and constructing a robust sense of self-esteem in the mind of the child. Consequently, Americans have formed false uniqueness bias or an amplified sense of their importance and skill compared to their peers. Because the American culture places such a large emphasis on being liked and viewed as friendly by others, Americans have developed an “obsession with making a good impression.”<sup>9</sup> Summiya Ahmad (2009) maintains that this is especially prevalent among girls because girls are raised to be more empathetic than males, placing more social pressure on women than men to uphold a pleasant composure.

The emphasis of independence in Anglo-American culture plays a key role in shaping the American emotional culture centered on happiness, positive feedback, and acceptance. The odd decrease in happiness reported in the female population corresponding with recent advances in female opportunities and the growth of the female workforce can be explained by the inability for women to meet societal expectations to appear happy while in stressful situations. Although women have proven to be biologically worse at managing stress, they are faced with greater cultural pressures to remain calm and compassionate toward others.<sup>10</sup> The underlying explanation is that with more opportunity, women have set higher expectations for themselves to succeed in their professional, social, and home lives, all while maintaining a bright, Anglo-American smile.

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Klos Sokol, *Shortcuts to Poland*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IPS, 1997. 176.

<sup>9</sup> Wierzbicka, Anna. *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Suttie, Jill. "Greater Good." *Is There a Happiness Gender Gap?* N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2009.