



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Theory in Psychology**

## **Gender and Emotion**

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Emotion and emotion-relevant qualities occupy a central place in stereotypes of the “generic” woman and man. Like other gender stereotypes, gender–emotion beliefs influence evaluation of others’ emotion. For example, because of stereotypes about women’s emotion, physicians tend to focus more on psychosomatic symptoms in diagnoses involving women than in those involving men.

Most psychological research that explores the connection between gender and emotion approaches the question in terms of when and why gender differences in emotion occur. Gender differences in emotion-related beliefs and behavior are modality specific and context dependent. That is, the extent to which there are differences depends on what is measured and how the research context is framed. This entry discusses gender difference within different aspects of emotion as well as future directions for the study of gender and emotion. It also notes that the large majority of research on gender and emotion has been conducted in North America and Europe, so readers should be cautious about generalizing to other nations and cultures.

### **Differences and Context**

Although empirical research on gender and emotion shows that there are no appreciable gender differences in people’s knowledge about their own and others’ emotion, there are gender differences in the way knowledge about emotion is deployed. The way a study is designed can create contextual factors that influence whether or not gender differences in emotion are observed. Among the factors influencing gender differences are (a) whether the measured behavior occurs publicly; (b) whether the behavior is identified as “feminine”—such as something girls or women tend to do well; and (c) whether responses are obtained via retrospective self-report.

In the case of self-reports about emotion experience, for instance, gender effects more closely resemble gender stereotypes (overgeneralized beliefs about women and men) when reports are taken retrospectively than when reports about the emotion occur in real time. For example, when women and men are asked about their ability to empathize with others, women tend to report more capacity than do men; however, the difference diminishes or disappears when empathic behavior in an actual situation is measured.

### **Specific Aspects of Emotion** ***Emotional Expression***

Gender differences in emotional expression are intertwined with gendered expectations and socialization processes. For example, by adolescence, women are better at decoding the nonverbal behaviors and expressions of others. However, when people are asked to decode expressions of dominance or other expressions that are stereotypically important for men to decode, these differences disappear.

Another gender difference often reported is that women’s emotion expressions tend to be more easily “read” than men’s. These differences typically disappear, however, when participants, regardless of gender, are motivated to convey particular emotions. In addition, women and adolescent girls tend to smile more than men and adolescent boys do. Importantly, however, gender differences in smiling are larger when people are concerned with acting in a gender-appropriate manner, the situation is ambiguous, or

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emotion is salient. These differences also vary with culture and age.

The facial configuration of men and women, rather than differences in the emotion being experienced, leads to differences in the way emotional expressions are perceived. For instance, perceptual markers of anger (e.g., lowered eyebrows) on an androgynous face are more quickly recognized as male, and markers of happiness (e.g., smiling, which creates a rounder face) and fear (e.g., the eyes appear larger) are more quickly recognized as female.

### ***Emotion Regulation***

Gender differences in the physiological experience of emotion (e.g., heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductance) have been shown to be specific to certain tasks, situations, emotion types, and physiological markers. These differences may be moderated, or explained entirely, by the type of emotion one is experiencing, one's ethnicity, and one's age. In terms of regulating emotion, both women and men engage in social sharing of emotion with equal frequency.

There are reported gender differences in strategies that women and men use to regulate emotion, with men reporting more use of suppression, problemsolving, and externalizing strategies, and women reporting more use of internalizing methods, social support, and emotion-focused strategies (such as rumination). In addition, although gender differences are found in the self-reported tendency to suppress emotions, suppression varies depending on the emotion type and situation (e.g., women report suppressing anger, disgust, and contempt, but men report suppressing fear and surprise). Over and above gender, personality traits and motives also influence individual emotion regulation.

### ***Future Directions***

Current studies of gender and emotion rely largely on U.S. and European samples. It is important to think about how gender–emotion linkages are culturally situated, how they develop, and how they may change over time. For example, although few gender differences are found in children's understanding of emotion, parents' and other adults' treatment of girls' and boys' emotion is gendered. Additionally, neuroscientific research on emotional expression and experience is rapidly progressing. It is important that the investigation of gender and emotion is theoretically grounded and considers the influence of social context on the structure of neural networks and brain functioning.

Emotion researchers have begun to emphasize the interpersonal nature of emotion. In this view, emotion is not a self-contained, private experiential event but emerges from interaction (or imagined interaction) with others. This approach moves the focus of the study of gender and emotion from intrinsic factors in individuals to examining the situational factors that affect people's experiences. For example, researchers can examine how expectations, interaction goals, and online responsiveness of interaction partners modify gendered emotional behavior. An emphasis on cultural aspects is also needed to better understand gender–emotion linkages.

Many questions in the study of gender and emotion call for an alternative to the description of differences that interrogates how gender, as an aspect of social identity, is influenced by and influences understanding of one's own and others' emotion. For example, beliefs about emotion play a role in the formation of a child's, and an adult's,

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sense of gendered identity. How and why does emotion (as beliefs, behavior, interpersonal interaction) take on a substantive role in ideas about self and other as gendered people?

**See also** [Emotion, Detection of](#); [Emotion, Evolution of](#); [Emotion, Expression of](#); [Emotion and Culture](#); [Emotion and Motivation](#); [Emotion and Scientific Reasoning](#); [Emotional Intelligence](#); [Emotions, Universality of](#); [Feminist Approaches to Psychology and Gender](#); [Gender, Evolutionary Perspectives on](#); [Gender and Cognition](#); [Gender and Culture](#); [Gender and Language](#); [Gender and Sex](#); [Gender and Violence](#); [Gender Development](#); [Gender Identity](#); [Gender Roles](#); [Gender Stereotypes](#); [Social Emotions](#); [Social Role Theory](#); [Stress and Gender](#)

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### **Further Readings**

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