

# 16 Emotional Climate: How is It Shaped, Fostered, and Changed?

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During Christmas, positive feelings are fostered through sharing, and embedded in symbols (e.g. Santa Claus). This symbolic communication generates an affective field. Individuals may react to such celebrations with a spectrum of emotions from excitement and joy to nervousness, anxiety, and loneliness. Nevertheless, this common affective field constantly fosters hope and joy. The emotional climate (EC) of Christmas influences personal and group dynamics. Indeed, being satisfied with Christmas rituals predicts one month later higher levels of well-being and a more positive perception of family climate (Páez, Bobowik, Bilbao, Campos, & Basabe, 2011).

This chapter aims to analyze how EC is different from other emotion-related processes, and to identify the mechanisms that shape and change it. First, we briefly define EC and how it affects behavior, beliefs, and personal emotions. We then focus on processes which may affect EC. Objective and subjective social indicators are factors related to the formation and maintenance of EC. Shared historical experiences of collective violence, as well as dealing with them, can change in EC.

## **Emotional Climate: What Does It Mean and What Purpose Does It Serve?**

ECs refer to predominant collective emotions perceived as shared by members of social groups, such as national communities or ethnic minorities. The term also reflects how an individual thinks that most of the people feel about their ingroup's situation. Unlike emotional atmospheres, which depend on group members focusing on a particular event, ECs involve relationships among them. ECs can be expressed as perceptions of collective and interpersonal feelings of *fear*, used by dictatorships to ensure order and *trust*, essential to the formation of social capital, *security*, provided by adequate attention to human rights, or *anger* and *despair*, aroused by pervasive corruption.

The key to understanding ECs are the dominant emotions perceived in others (De Rivera & Páez, 2007). ECs are socially constructed, yet simultaneously objective, because they exist independently of an individual's personal feelings

(De Rivera & Páez, 2007; De Rivera, 1992). That is, emotions which people sense in others have distinct consequences in contrast to own emotional experience. For instance, individuals tend to feel more positive than negative intergroup emotions, particularly toward the ingroup. However, at times, members of a low-status group perceive more negative than positive emotions toward their ingroup. This perception is often shared by the outgroup. Indeed, research has revealed that Basques perceive hostility towards their ingroup, and this perception is shared by Andalusians—see Table 1 (Techio, Zubieta, Páez et al., 2011).

Importantly, EC serves as a psychosocial context that *influences behavior* (Bar-Tal, Halperin & De Rivera, 2007). The way people behaved after the terrorist attack on Madrid in March 2004 was associated with their perception of the EC. Even controlled for personal emotions, perception of negative EC predicted avoidance of outgroups (e.g. Muslims). In turn, perception of positive EC explained altruistic behavior (De Rivera & Páez, 2007). EC also acts as a context that *influences social beliefs*. Research has demonstrated that the stronger the perception of positive EC after the March 2004 bombing, the higher the perception of interpersonal and collective positive reactions to trauma (e.g. post-traumatic growth as index of positive social beliefs). Finally, EC *influences personal emotions*: perceiving positive EC one week after an event predicts individual positive affect three weeks after the event (Rimé, Páez, Basabe, & Martínez, 2009).

### Emotional Climate: How Does It Change?

*Social development and social status.* ECs are influenced by diverse macro-social factors. Páez et al. (1997) and Basabe et al. (2002) found a direct association between social development and EC balance (quoted in De Rivera & Páez, 2007). An analysis of the relation between human development index (HDI) and EC in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Spain (Table 2) revealed a prevalent perception of negative EC across nations in Latin America (overall mean of positive climate:  $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .61$ ; negative climate:  $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = .78$ ), while in Spain the EC was more positive (Techio et al., 2011). Similarly, EC is

Table 1 Means of perceived emotions in others toward regional in-group and out-group in Spain

Perceived emotions in others towards groups	Basque Participants		Andalusian Participants	
	In-group or Basques	Out-group or Andalusians	In-group or Andalusians	Out-group or Basques
Disgust	2.87	1.98	2.13	3.15
Anger	2.89	1.82	2.05	3.03
Contempt	2.96	2.11	2.32	3.42

Source: Techio et al. (2011).

related to social status and social class: positive EC tends to be more common in upper than in lower socioeconomic classes (de Rivera & Páez, 2007).

*Social identity and internalized values.* Other studies suggest that EC could be affected by more stable psychological aspects, such as collective identity. One context in which people are immersed is national culture, based on a collective identity and the acceptance of predominant values in the social environment. Espinosa (2011) demonstrated that strong collective self-esteem and national identification were related to higher perception of positive and lower perception of negative EC. Similarly, positive national self-stereotyped beliefs (e.g. the perception of Peruvians as reliable, patriotic, and supportive) were associated with positive EC, whereas the perception of Peruvians as unreliable was associated with a negative climate.

Culture expressed in values also plays an important role in relation to EC. At a collective level, research has demonstrated that nations with egalitarian and individualistic values exhibit better ECs (De Rivera & Páez, 2007). This occurs because in these contexts there are fewer stressful events and more equity, social support, autonomy, and mastery. All of these factors tend to promote well-being and positive collective affect (De Rivera & Páez, 2007). At an individual level, studies have also confirmed that individualistic and egalitarian values are linked to positive affect because they enhance positive emotions, a sense of mastery, and life satisfaction (Espinosa, 2011). In contrast to the case of collective-level studies, studies at the individual level found a positive association between collectivistic values and positive affect. Tradition and conformity values tend to bring meaning and increase satisfaction with the social environment. In line with this, research has found that collectivistic values are related to positive EC. However, negative EC has also been associated with conservative values, suggesting that collectivist values emphasizing tradition and conformity erode EC by constraining people (Espinosa, 2011).

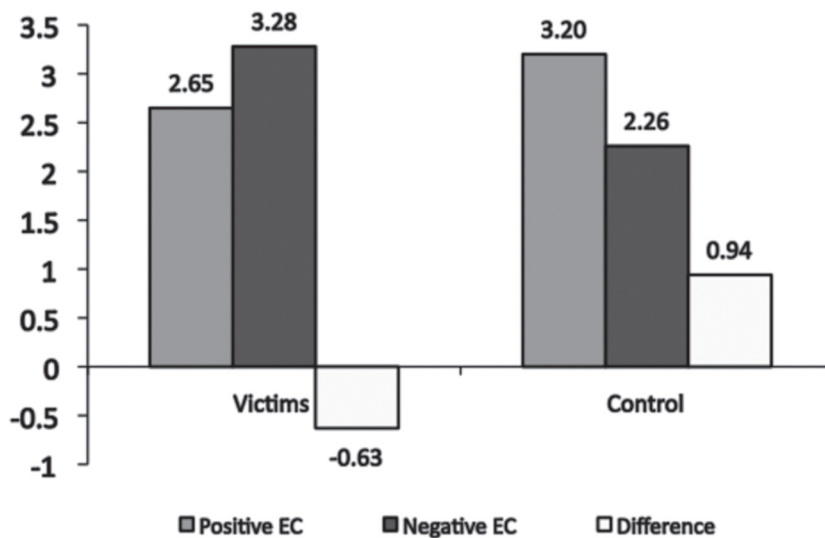
*Table 2* Means and Standard Deviations of EC according to nation and its development

	<i>Spain</i> ( <i>n</i> = 122)		<i>Chile</i> ( <i>n</i> = 299)		<i>Argentina</i> ( <i>n</i> = 101)		<i>Brazil</i> ( <i>n</i> = 149)		<i>Peru</i> ( <i>n</i> = 200)	
<i>IDH Rank Position</i>	<i>1</i>		<i>2</i>		<i>3</i>		<i>4</i>		<i>5</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Security	3.94	.69	3.15	.77	2.46	.70	2.62	.75	3.08	.70
Confidence	3.38	.70	3.17	.80	2.86	.69	2.87	.84	2.87	.73
Hopelessness	2.84	1.13	3.87	1.29	4.78	1.19	4.81	1.17	4.51	1.08
Fear	2.91	1.20	3.28	1.31	3.0	1.28	4.14	1.33	3.43	1.16
Anger	4.10	1.32	5.21	1.14	5.63	1.10	5.77	1.06	5.44	1.07

Sources: Techio et al., (2011), Espinosa (2011). Scale: 1–7.

*Shared experiences.* Also socio-economic and political events can change and shape EC. For instance, Pinochet's coup in Chile in 1973, in which hundreds of people were killed when he seized power, gave rise to a powerful affective field. Some people were delighted by the success of the coup, and others quite relieved. Yet there was also an overall climate of fear (De Rivera, 1992). People were perceived to be afraid because it was dangerous to say certain things in public, and an unexpected visit was more likely to lead to fear than pleasant anticipation. Social distrust affected emotional relationships. People could not speak about relatives who had disappeared, or publicly state their political opinions. The fear created social isolation. This prevented people from knowing how others thought, and prevented the organization of political opposition against the regime. Other examples confirmed by research are numerous: overcrowding within prisons in Colombia negatively impacted EC; massacres created a negative climate in Mayan communities in Guatemala, where a policy of impunity impeded efforts to restore a climate of trust (de Rivera & Páez, 2007); and victims of collective violence in the Basque Country reported lower positive and higher negative EC compared with controls (Figure 4).

However, psychosocial processes reflected in the behavior of ordinary people also influence ECs. The continuity of this behavior appears to maintain the climate. Thus, it persists beyond the objective conditions that were originally involved. For example, the climate of fear in Chile continued for a long time after the massive repression of the two first years of the dictatorship (De Rivera & Páez, 2007).



*Figure 4* Positive and negative EC in terrorism victims in Spain  
(Source: Techio et al. 2011)

*Collective memory.* Another cultural element that drives EC is a group's social representation of its past. Thus, EC will be positive or negative depending on how the past is perceived, as a function of collective memory, which may evoke extreme success and pride, or failure, guilt, and shame for the ingroup. For example, induced experimental salience of collective violence in the past (such as the Spanish Civil War or ETA's violence in Spain) involves poorer perceptions of EC (Techio et al., 2011). In Espinosa's (2011) study, positive EC was similarly associated with positive appraisal of historical characters and events. Nevertheless, it was in fact the assessment of Peru's social situation that predicted positive EC more than collective identity, values, and collective memory. Such findings suggest that social situation is a more powerful factor in explaining EC than distal processes such as collective memory.

*Social sharing.* Social sharing related to collective events is very common, and fosters the transmission of feelings and the construction of EC. A longitudinal study conducted one week after the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 showed that higher levels of sharing predicted higher event-related negative emotions and rumination, contributing to the maintenance of negative EC. However, talking about a collective trauma also plays a role in the creation of positive EC through the improvement of cognitive resources and social integration (Rimé et al., 2009). Exposure to information about collective violence in the mass media helps to shape EC (De Rivera & Páez, 2007).

*Collective coping through rituals.* Collective forms of coping such as rituals also influence EC. Rituals are cultural devices that allow people to focus on common topics and share emotions; they increase bonding and reinforce social representations, and facilitate change and the improvement of affects and cognitions. A ritual can turn negative emotions and beliefs into positive ones (Rimé et al., 2009). Secular rituals or demonstrations are collective gatherings in public spaces aimed at transmitting a symbolic message involving both expressive and instrumental goals. For instance, in the aftermath of the Madrid terrorist attacks, demonstrations expressed political conflicts between left- and right-wing political ideologies, and played a role in the expression of anti-war attitudes among Spaniards. Participation in demonstrations predicted positive EC two months after the attacks. In addition, an indirect effect was found: participation reinforced the perceived social integration after three weeks and post-traumatic growth in response to trauma. Both, in turn, led to positive EC two months later.

Participation in transitional justice rituals, such as the Gacaca (or popular trials) in Rwanda, also affected perceived EC. Gacaca elicited an emotional communion among participants and fostered intense emotional manifestations and re-evocations of the genocide. Among participating victims, positive EC was rated as higher than among their controls before Gacaca, probably because of the hopes and positive expectations that characterized participating victims in the period preceding the trial. Their positive perception of the climate decreased after the trial, but remained higher than among victims in the control group, suggesting

that their hopes did not entirely vanish with the trial. Perpetrators, for their part, perceived the EC as less positive than their controls before Gacaca, probably because they expected to be punished. After Gacaca, the perception of positive emotions in the social climate was markedly increased among perpetrators who participated. These findings are consistent with those of other studies, which found that active perpetrators showed a more positive attitude toward transitional rituals, especially when they did not receive hard punishment—as occurred in the Gacaca trials. Furthermore, both victims and perpetrators increased positive out-group stereotypes and individualized perceptions of out-group members, factors that fuel reconciliation and positive EC (Martin-Beristain, Páez, Rimé, & Kanyangara, 2010).

*Institutional reparatory acts.* Finally, institutional reparatory actions also influence EC. When exposed to past collective misdeeds by one's group, people tend to believe that victims deserved their fate, devaluing them and justifying ingroup actions. In contrast, an official apology reframes past misdeeds positively, showing that at least some symbolic action can be performed. This helps people to reject beliefs that the world is just (and that victims deserved their fate), and can be a source of collective pride that helps people accept the past misdeeds of their group. An experimental study showed that the salience of past collective violence in Spain at the same time as the Law of Historical Memory (an institutional reparatory behavior) reinforces positive EC and agreement with reparatory behaviors in comparison with a control condition in which people were only reminded of collective violence. In a similar study on the effects of an apology issued by the Basque Parliament addressing the victims of collective violence in the Basque Country, participants exposed to the apology, as contrasted with the control condition, reported higher levels of shame and agreed more with reparations. As concerns positive EC, it was higher in the experimental than the control condition for participants with low identification with Basques, confirming that apologies have positive effects on social cohesion, especially among vicarious victims (Bobowik, Bilbao, & Momoitio, 2010). Finally, in line with the findings of previous studies, the Belgian prime minister's official apology for past colonial misdeeds in the former Belgian Congo, together with the salience of outgroup suffering, increased the perception of a positive EC, which was significantly higher than in the condition where past misdeeds were merely remembered (Lastrego & Licata, 2010). In addition, Belgians who were exposed to the apology, in contrast to a control group, reported a less positive view of the past. This less positive view of the past mediated the effect of the apology on agreement with reparation and positive intergroup attitudes. This result suggests that apologies help to increase collective moral emotions and to construct a more integrative social representation of the past. In a reframed narrative, victims' experience matters, and they are entitled to dignity. Such a narrative, which both parties can live with, helps to improve EC, reflecting how current EC is related to social representations of the past.

## Conclusions

As in the case of differences in individual affect, direct regulation of negative EC is more difficult and is determined mainly by collective stress, while regulation of positive EC is more successful and is mainly associated with social support and positive reappraisal. Indeed, our review of recent research suggests that experiences of social problems, conflict, and collective violence boost negative EC. In turn, improvements in social problems, participation in altruistic behaviors and demonstrations, institutional reparatory rituals, community empowerment and the construction of inclusive collective memories may augment positive EC. These tools therefore constitute the vehicles for directly reinforcing positive climate and indirectly attenuating the perception of negative climate.

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