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Kim, Heejung S
Sherman, David K
Taylor, Shelley E

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Culture and Social Support

Heejung S. Kim   *University of California, Santa Barbara*
David K. Sherman   *University of California, Santa Barbara*
Shelley E. Taylor   *University of California, Los Angeles*

Social support is one of the most effective means by which people can cope with stressful events. Yet little research has examined whether there are cultural differences in how people utilize their social support networks. A review of studies on culture and social support presents evidence that Asians and Asian Americans are more reluctant to explicitly ask for support from close others than are European Americans because they are more concerned about the potentially negative relational consequences of such behaviors. Asians and Asian Americans are more likely to use and benefit from forms of support that do not involve explicit disclosure of personal stressful events and feelings of distress. Discussion centers on the potential implications of these findings for intercultural interactions and for the use of mental health services by Asians and Asian Americans.

Keywords: culture, social support, stress, coping, Asian Americans

Social support is a ubiquitous phenomenon in everyday life. People talk about their needs for support with close others and provide it when others experience distress. Support groups provide people with a forum to share a wide range of issues and to receive support from others dealing with similar issues, and in the United States such groups have proven very popular (Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000). Social support is sought to such a large extent because, by and large, it works; it is one of the most effective means by which people can cope with and adjust to difficult and stressful events, thereby buffering themselves from the adverse mental and physical health effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Seeman, 1996; Thoits, 1995). Numerous studies have examined factors that affect individuals' seeking of social support as well as its effectiveness (see Taylor, 2007, for a review). Yet most examinations have adopted a primarily Western perspective, and relatively few studies have considered cultural differences in the use and effect of social support. Consequently, there has not been a clear understanding of how social support may operate among individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

As social support inherently involves relationships among individuals, how it is practiced should be viewed within the context of culturally specific patterns of social relationships. People from different cultural backgrounds may utilize and be affected by support from close others differently even if they possess equally supportive social networks. In this article, using the case of Asians and Asian Americans as an example, we aim to show the cultural specificity of the current understanding of social support use as a way of coping. In so doing, we also highlight the implications of the research findings for intercultural interactions and the use of social services among Asian Americans.

Social Support and Mental and Physical Health

Social support has been defined as information from others that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligations (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Seeman, 1996). It may come from a spouse or companion, relatives, friends, coworkers, and community ties. Social support effectively reduces psychological distress, such as depression or anxiety, during times of stress (e.g., Fleming, Baum, Gisriel, & Gatchel, 1982) and is associated with a variety of physical health benefits, including positive adjustment to coronary heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, cardiac disease, arthritis, and cancer (e.g., Holahan, Moos, Holahan, & Brennan, 1997; Stone, Mezzacappa, Donatone, & Gonder, 1999). It can reduce the likelihood of illness, speed recovery from illness when it does occur, and reduce the risk of mortality from serious disease (e.g., House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Conversely, lack of social support during stressful times can be very distressing, especially for people with high needs for social support who are unable to obtain it, including the elderly and victims of sudden uncontrollable life events (e.g., Sorkin, Rook, & Lu, 2002).

Social support has been studied in various ways. Studies have examined individuals' beliefs or perceptions of support availability (Turner, Frankel, & Levin, 1983; Wethington & Kessler, 1986), as well as social support's

Heejung S. Kim

actual use in coping with stressful events. In the examination of actual *use* of social support, researchers typically focus on specific support transactions involving the seeking and receiving of help through appraisals, tangible assistance, informational support, or emotional support (e.g., Cobb, 1976; Cohen, 1988). Although a large amount of research testifies to the benefits of social support as a coping strategy, it is important to note that the vast majority of these studies were conducted in the United States. Whether and how support is sought and used to cope with difficult or stressful events is determined, in part, by the particular nature of the relationship between the support seeker and the support provider as well as by their shared assumptions about relationships. Whether a person asks a friend for assistance depends, in part, on the mutual understanding about the propriety and efficacy of seeking such support. Culture is one important factor that affects these assumptions about relationships.

Culture, Relationships, and Social Support

One of the major contributions of cultural psychology is an understanding that there are considerable cultural differences in how people view the self and relationships with others. In individualistic cultures, such as in the United States, the dominant model of the self views the self as independent and regards a person as possessing a set of self-defining attributes, which are used to take action in the expression of personal beliefs and the achievement of personal goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). People are expected to make their own decisions of their own volition. Relationships also take an independent form—they are thought to be freely chosen and to entail relatively few obligations (Adams & Plaut, 2003). By contrast, in collec-

tivistic cultures, such as in many parts of Asia, the dominant model of the self views the self as interdependent, regards a person as a flexible, connected entity who is bound to others, and considers group goals as primary and personal beliefs, needs, and goals as secondary (Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In these cultures, relationships also take an interdependent form— they are less voluntary and more "given" (Adams, 2005). These cultural differences in the expectations and norms regarding how relationships are coordinated should have implications for whether people use social support, the mode of social support they use, and the effectiveness of social support seeking. People in the more individualistic cultures may ask for social support with relatively little caution because they share the cultural assumption that individuals should proactively pursue their well-being and that others have the freedom to choose to help according to their own volition. In contrast, people in the more collectivistic cultures may be relatively more cautious about bringing personal problems to the attention of others for the purpose of enlisting their help because they share the cultural assumption that individuals should not burden their social networks and that others share the same sense of social obligation. Building on these previous findings, we specifically examined the use of social support among people from Asian, Asian American, and European American cultural contexts, the cultures where differences in the models of self and relationships have been most thoroughly documented (e.g., Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Mesquita, 2001; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2003).

Cultural Differences in Social Support Seeking

Research has examined cultural differences in social support use in a series of studies comparing Asians, Asian Americans, and European Americans (Hashimoto, Imada & Kitayama, 2007; H. S. Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006; Sasaki & Kim, 2008; Taylor et al., 2004). These studies have demonstrated reliable cultural differences in people's willingness to use social support for dealing with stressors. In an initial set of studies (Taylor et al., 2004), using both open-ended and closed-ended methods, we found that Asians and Asian Americans reported using social support to help them cope with stress *less* than did European Americans.

Subsequent studies examined this cultural difference in a wide range of stressful situations, including social, academic and health stressors across the different studies, and samples, including community samples of European American and Asian American participants (Sasaki & Kim, 2008) and a comparison of different generations of Asian Americans (Chu, Kim, & Sherman, 2008; Taylor et al., 2004). Similar findings have been obtained in cross-national comparisons between European Americans and Koreans (Chu et al., 2008; H. S. Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2004) and between European Americans and Japanese (Hashimoto et al., 2007). Across stressors and samples, consistent patterns have emerged. Asians and Asian Amer-

**David K.
Sherman**

icans were significantly *less* likely to report drawing on social support for coping with stress than were European Americans. Although both Asians and Asian Americans differed from European Americans in their social support use, the difference between Asian nationals or Asian immigrants and European Americans was significantly more pronounced than the difference between later-generation Asian Americans and European Americans (Taylor et al., 2004). Although studies occasionally have shown (e.g., H. S. Kim et al., 2006, Study 2) that female participants report seeking social support more than do male participants (cf. Taylor et al., 2000), within each sex there were consistent cultural differences.

Moreover, the general pattern of cultural differences in social support seeking appears to be shared among the different subgroups of Asian culture. The samples of Asians and Asian Americans in these studies consisted mostly of participants from Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultural backgrounds, with smaller numbers of participants from Indian and Filipino cultural backgrounds. We find that all these groups show significantly less use of social coping strategies compared with European Americans. Thus, it appears that the tendency to *not* seek social support is a quite general phenomenon shared across different subgroups of Asians and Asian Americans.

Not only do Asians and Asian Americans seek less social support than European Americans, they also seem to evaluate support seeking differently. In one study, observers watched a video of a young woman who had just undergone a stressful experience (Chu et al., 2008). When the target person explicitly sought support from others, she was viewed more positively by European American college students, but less positively by Asian American students, than when she merely contacted another person without seeking support. In particular, first-generation Asian Americans (i.e., those who were born in Asia) saw the support seeker in a more negative fashion. Moreover, individuals' evaluations of the support seeker predicted the extent to which they reported using social support to cope with their own stressors, such that the more negatively the support seeker was evaluated, the less inclined the evaluator was toward personally seeking social support.

Although Asians and Asian Americans are distinctive cultural groups with divergent experiences, they share some cultural heritage, and we argue that these shared cultural experiences underlie the tendency to not seek social support. The findings from several cross-national studies support this cultural explanation. As the same pattern of results has been found not only with Asian Americans but also with Koreans (H. S. Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2004) and Japanese (Hashimoto et al., 2007) in their heritage cultures, it does not appear that the observed differences in support seeking are a function of Asian Americans' ethnic minority status in the United States.

Furthermore, two studies (Chu et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2004) provide clear evidence that the degree of exposure to Asian versus American cultures moderates the cultural difference in the use and evaluation of social support. These findings point to the role of cultural factors in shaping the observed cultural differences, and thus, our research has focused on identifying cultural explanations for the differences.

In summary, there are reliable cultural differences in the degree to which Asians, Asian Americans, and European Americans seek social support in coping with their stressors, and this difference appears to be accompanied by a cultural difference in how people judge and evaluate the support-seeking act. To what should we attribute these cultural differences? We have examined several potential reasons for these cultural differences.

Reasons for Cultural Differences in Social Support Seeking

There are at least three possible reasons for these cultural differences in social support use. First, it may be that Asians and Asian Americans do not have to ask for social support because they have more unsolicited social support available to them than do European Americans. In Asian cultures, there may be a belief that one should not have to ask for support because people should anticipate close others' needs for support and provide it before support is explicitly sought. Second, it may be that Asians and Asian Americans have a stronger belief than European Americans that a personal problem should be solved independently because each person should be responsible for his or her own problems. Third, it may be that Asians and Asian Americans are more concerned about the potentially negative relational consequences of support seeking, such as disrupting group harmony or receiving criticism from others. Therefore, to minimize these negative relational consequences, they may not disclose their distress. We empirically examined whether the availability of unsolicited

Shelley E. Taylor

group harmony, and receive criticism from others, and these relationship concerns seemed to have discouraged them from drawing social support from close others. The other two factors (i.e., availability of unsolicited support and independence concerns) were not related to their use of social support to cope.

Experimental Evidence for Relationship Concerns

Stronger support for the explanation that relationship concerns account for the observed cultural differences in social support seeking is provided by a series of experimental studies in which we primed different relational goals and examined the effects of this priming on social support seeking. In these studies (H. S. Kim et al., 2006), European American and Asian American college students were assigned to conditions that primed different relational goals. Some were asked to write about their most important personal goals, and they wrote about such goals as graduating from college or starting a family. Others were asked to write about the most important goal of their in-group, which was defined as a group of people with whom they felt very close and shared common goals, such as their family's wish to send all the children to college. A third set of participants was asked to write about the most important goal of an out-group, which was defined as a group of people with whom they did not feel particularly close or share common goals, such as someone else's sports team winning a league championship. These instructions focused participants on different relationships and allowed an examination of whether this priming of relationships affected social support seeking.

After the priming task, all participants reported their most pressing social stressor and indicated how they would cope with it. Overall, European Americans reported that they would seek social support to a greater extent than Asian Americans. More important, their willingness to seek social support did not differ regardless of which relational goals they were thinking about. Asian Americans, by contrast, were much more responsive to the relational goal that was salient in deciding whether or not to seek social support. When Asian Americans were led to think about goals of an important group, and hence were primed to think about relationships important to them, they reported less willingness to seek social support than they did when they were led to think about their personal goals or the goals of an unimportant group.

Moreover, when Asian Americans thought of goals of an important group, they thought that their friends and family would be *less* helpful in helping them resolve their stressors than when they thought of personal goals (H. S. Kim et al., 2006, Study 3). European Americans were not affected by the prime; they thought their friends and family would be equally helpful regardless of the prime. These findings indicate that people from more collectivistic cultures appear to be more attuned to the potential constraints of their relationships. When they reflected upon their relationships, Asian Americans not only reduced their willing-

social support, independence concerns, or relationship concerns would best explain the cultural differences in support-seeking behavior. We expected, on the basis of our analysis of the model of relationships in each culture, that relationship concerns would account for the effect of culture on social support seeking.

Correlational Evidence for Relationship Concerns

One way to test these different reasons is to conduct a series of mediational-type analyses to determine which explanation best accounts for the cultural differences. This approach was adopted in two studies (H. S. Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004). Specifically, after indicating their inclinations (or not) to use social support to manage particular stressors in their lives (e.g., academic, social, or health), participants responded to a number of items assessing each of the three explanations. For example, the availability of unsolicited social support was measured by items such as "I wouldn't seek help because I think that others who are close to me will take care of my needs without me having to ask," and independence concerns were measured by items such as "I do not like to ask for help because I do not want to be dependent on others." Relationship concerns were measured with items such as "I wouldn't want to make the people I am close to feel stressed about my problems" or "I would be embarrassed to share my problems with the people I am close to."

Although all three reasons for not seeking social support were more strongly endorsed by Asian Americans than European Americans, only relational concerns fully accounted for the cultural difference in seeking support. In these studies, Asian Americans were more concerned that seeking support would cause them to lose face, disrupt

ness to seek social support but also reduced their expectation of the helpfulness of close others.

Moreover, if Asians and Asian Americans are more sensitive to the potential negative relationship implications of seeking support, then they may be more affected by the situational constraints of a potential support provider than are European Americans. We conducted a study to examine the role of relational concerns in support seeking, adopting a different methodological framework (Sherman et al., 2008). In this study, participants were undergraduate and graduate student romantic couples, with both members of a couple being either European American or Asian American. One member of the couple was given a stressful task of preparing to deliver a speech. The other member of the couple was given a puzzle to complete on his or her own; however, the difficulty of the puzzle was manipulated. Some were given an easy puzzle, and thus had greater resources to provide support to their highly stressed, speech-preparing partners. Others were given a difficult puzzle and thus had fewer resources with which to provide support.

We predicted that the Asian Americans, to the extent that they were more responsive to the situational constraints on their relationship partners, would be more affected by the manipulation than would the European Americans. This prediction was examined through analysis of the behavior exhibited by the couples, which was recorded by a hidden camera. During the time that the speech givers were preparing for their task, the Asian Americans sought more support by asking for help and/or consolation when their partners had an easy puzzle than when their partners had a more difficult puzzle. The European Americans, by contrast, sought help to the same extent regardless of what their partners were doing. This study provides behavioral evidence that the Asian Americans were more sensitive to relational factors when considering whether or not to seek social support.

In summary, these findings suggest that Asian Americans may be more concerned than European Americans about the relational implications of asking for help and may thus be more reticent about seeking support from close others, particularly when the close others themselves are occupied. We next turn to an examination of potential modes of social support use that may not carry the same negative relational implications as explicit support seeking.

Culture and Different Modes of Social Support Use

Although the studies reviewed suggest that people from collectivistic cultures utilize social support less than people from individualistic cultures, it is important to note that this research has primarily examined how people from different cultural backgrounds engage in a specific social support transaction—the explicit seeking and receiving of support. Yet the explicit seeking and receiving of support is only one aspect of social support. It is not our intention to imply that social networks among Asians and Asian Americans or people from collectivistic cultures more generally are less

supportive, or that Asians and Asian Americans do not benefit from any form of social support. The research evidence for the beneficial effects of social support—having a supportive social network and knowing that one is cared for by close others—in buffering individuals against stressful events is overwhelming, and numerous research findings, including studies with multicultural samples, demonstrate the benefit of both perceived and received support from close others (e.g., Dunkel-Schetter, Sagrestano, Feldman, & Killingsworth, 1996; Morling et al., 2003). Thus, it seems likely that people from all cultures are benefited by social support but that there may be cultural differences in *how* people seek and receive social support from their social networks.

People from Asian cultural backgrounds may utilize social support for coping with stress in culturally appropriate ways that are different from the Western model of social support transaction that focuses on explicit seeking and receipt. We propose that forms of social support that do not risk disturbing relationships are more sought out by and more beneficial for those from Asian cultural backgrounds. Thus, social support that can be used *without* disclosing and discussing problems may be more culturally appropriate for Asians and Asian Americans.

Accordingly, we distinguish between *implicit* and *explicit* social support (Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007). We define explicit social support according to the conventional Western definition of the social support transaction, as people's specific recruitment and use of their social networks in response to specific stressful events that involves the elicitation of advice, instrumental aid, or emotional comfort. We define implicit social support as the emotional comfort one can obtain from social networks without disclosing or discussing one's problems vis à vis specific stressful events. Implicit support can take the form of reminding oneself of close others or being in the company of close others without discussing one's problems. This construal of implicit support is similar to "perceived support" (Turner et al., 1983; Wethington & Kessler, 1986), which refers to solace and comfort provided through awareness of the existence of a support network, rather than through use of a support network. However, implicit support differs from perceived support in that perceived support includes beliefs that one could draw on people and groups for aid or solace if needed.

Our conceptualization of implicit support particularly emphasizes the absence of explicit disclosure and sharing of stressful events. In using implicit social support, the recipient of social support can enjoy the benefits of social support without potential concerns about the relational implications (e.g., losing face or worrying others) of explicit support use. Implicit support is an active social support coping strategy but one that does not depend on disclosure and sharing of the source of the stress or feelings of distress.

We theorized that implicit social support use that does not involve active disclosure and discussion of the stressor or distress would be more beneficial for Asians and Asian Americans than would explicit social support. In contrast,

European Americans may benefit more from explicit social support use than implicit social support use. This hypothesis is also consistent with research showing that for European Americans, the expression of thoughts and feelings is particularly meaningful and beneficial (and that the lack of such expression is particularly harmful; Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007; H. S. Kim, 2002, 2008; H. S. Kim & Sherman, 2007).

The Effectiveness of Implicit vs. Explicit Social Support

Neuroendocrine Responses to Stressors

To determine if psychological and biological responses to stress are affected by implicit and explicit social support, we conducted a study with Asian American and European American students (Taylor et al., 2007). The study examined the hypothesis that Asian Americans' psychological and biological (i.e., salivary cortisol) responses to a stressor would be buffered when implicit support was primed but that their biological and psychological responses to stress would be aggravated when explicit support was primed; European Americans were expected to be benefited more by the priming of explicit than implicit social support.

The participants engaged in the Trier Social Stress Task (Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1993), a well-established laboratory stressor that involves both mental arithmetic and the preparation and delivery of a speech. Before preparing for these tasks, participants were exposed to a manipulation that primed either implicit or explicit support. Participants in the implicit support condition were asked to think about a group that they were close to and then write about the aspects of that group that were important to them. These instructions activated thoughts of participants' support networks without requiring their disclosure of the stressor. Participants in the explicit support condition were told to think about people that they were close to and then to write a letter directly asking for advice and support for the upcoming tasks from these people. Participants in the no-support control condition completed a neutral writing activity. After the writing task, participants engaged in the stress tasks. Participants provided several saliva samples for the assessment of cortisol responses to these tasks and completed a measure of post-task stress.

Consistent with the predictions, Asian Americans who completed the implicit support prime experienced less stress and had lower cortisol responses than Asian Americans who completed the explicit support prime. European Americans experienced less stress and had lower cortisol levels when they completed the explicit support prime than when they completed the implicit support prime. In fact, the results suggest that the culturally inappropriate form of social support (i.e., explicit for Asian Americans and implicit for European Americans) may actually have exacerbated stress. That is, Asian Americans in the explicit support condition, in which they wrote a letter asking for help, reported considerable psychological distress from imagining the use of explicit social support and exhibited higher

cortisol levels than Asian Americans in the control condition in which no support was primed. By contrast, the European Americans were more stressed in the implicit support condition, where they imagined close others without the opportunity for disclosure or support seeking, than they were in the control condition.

By examining salivary cortisol levels in response to an acute stressor, these findings provide direct biological evidence regarding cultural differences in the effectiveness of social support use. These findings, along with those reviewed earlier, suggest that how people obtain the psychological and biological benefits of social support in a given cultural context may depend on the cultural emphasis on relationship goals. In a culture in which maintenance of harmonious social relationships is emphasized (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), a form of social support that does not bring relational "risks" may be more beneficial and more commonly used. By contrast, in a culture in which self-expression and verbal sharing of thoughts and feelings are emphasized (H. S. Kim & Ko, 2007; H. S. Kim & Sherman, 2007; Mesquita, 2001), a form of social support that includes explicit disclosure may be more utilized and beneficial.

Responses to Daily Stressors

In addition to examining cultural differences in coping with a laboratory stressor, we have also examined how Asians (i.e., Koreans in Korea) and European Americans utilize implicit and explicit support to cope with ongoing daily stressors, such as academics, family relationships, romantic relationships, and job concerns. We conducted a daily diary study with Korean and European American students who, every day for one week, completed an on-line survey in which they described the most stressful event of the day (H. S. Kim et al., 2008). They also reported how many people they communicated with after the stressor, how many people they specifically discussed the stressor with, and their reported daily life satisfaction and daily emotions. The purpose of the study was to examine whether there are cultural differences in how successful these support-seeking strategies are for reducing the negative impact of daily stressors.

Explicit support was operationalized in terms of the number of people with whom participants disclosed this most pressing daily stressor. Implicit support was operationalized in terms of the number of people with whom participants communicated without disclosing the daily stressor. The European Americans reported using explicit social support in coping with their daily stressors to a greater extent than did the Koreans, and the Koreans reported using implicit social support to a greater extent than did the European Americans.

We also examined the relationship between daily use of different types of social support and daily life satisfaction. We found that among Koreans, all social interactions (i.e., both use of explicit and use of implicit social support) were predictive of daily life satisfaction. By contrast, among European Americans, only the number of people with whom they talked about the stressor (i.e., their use of

explicit social support) predicted their daily life satisfaction. Moreover, Koreans' use of explicit support, although predictive of daily satisfaction, was also associated with a greater degree of negative emotion, such as regret and shame. European Americans, by contrast, experienced the benefit of explicit social support without regret or shame.

This examination of social support use in dealing with everyday stressors suggests that the type of social support most effective for Asians and Asian Americans may have less to do with talking about the problem and more to do with being with others without disclosing the stressor. In summary, these findings suggest the possibility that what constitutes a supportive transaction from the perspective of the individual differs as a function of culture. These cultural differences in the normative mode of social support could have implications not only for how people in different cultures seek and use social support but also for how people are affected by social support.

Implications for Relational and Social Well-Being

The foregoing analysis suggests that explicit social support is more commonly utilized and beneficial among those from individualistic cultures, whereas implicit support is more commonly utilized and beneficial among those from collectivistic cultures. Next, we examine the implications of the present analysis for promoting positive intercultural interactions at both the individual and institutional levels.

Implications for Intercultural Interactions

Social interactions occur both within a culture and between people from different cultural backgrounds. Cultural diversity is a fact of life throughout the world and in the United States in particular. One direct outcome of living in a multicultural society is frequent interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, and social networks often include people with different cultural experiences. Consequently, a person can find himself or herself in a group of close others who have different ideas about how one should seek social support and, perhaps, how one should *provide* social support as well.

Social support researchers have proposed and found support for the *matching hypothesis*, the notion that the effectiveness of social support is determined by whether or not the support provided matches the support needed and desired by a distressed individual (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This matching hypothesis can be extended to social support use among people from different cultural backgrounds. A clear hypothesis that follows from the research reviewed in this article is that there are cultural differences in the normative mode of social support provision. Individuals from Asian and Asian American cultural contexts may prefer providing more implicit and indirect support, such as simply being there without discussing the issue at hand, whereas individuals from European American cultural contexts may prefer providing more explicit and direct support, such as focusing on the issue and offering words of encouragement.

One outcome of such intercultural relationships is the greater possibility of a mismatch between the support needed and the support provided. To the extent that close others recognize the distress of a person, their efforts to provide social support are likely to take a form that matches their own cultural expectations. One's desire for implicit support could be met with explicit support provision, or one's wish for explicit support could be met with implicit support provision, and consequently, despite the best intentions of the provider to be supportive, the effectiveness of such efforts may be mitigated. Even worse, one's attempt to seek implicit social support—by, for example, calling up a friend to chat without delving into the stressor that seemed (to the knowing friend) to precipitate the call—could be seen as a disingenuous act rather than a call for implicit support. Or, the attempt to seek explicit social support could be seen, depending on people's understanding of the cultural differences, as an act of imposition or selfishness.

Consequences of this mismatching could be considered at an institutional level as well. In either an educational or an organizational setting in the United States, a cultural minority's seeming lack of support or advice seeking could be (wrongly) interpreted as a sign of satisfaction or contentment by a European American supervisor (e.g., a teacher or a manager). If the expectation is that a person in distress will speak up to cope with the problem, many potentially serious problems that could actually be solved with instrumental or informational help, such as harassment or academic or occupational difficulties, may go undetected. Whereas these problems may be difficult for anyone to disclose, our analyses suggest that there are systematic tendencies for people from collectivistic cultural backgrounds to have greater difficulty with disclosure than people from other cultural backgrounds. Thus, it could be of particular importance for those in supervisory roles to be aware of cultural differences in social support use and to consider more indirect and contextual cues to detect the needs of these individuals.

Further research is clearly needed to directly address questions such as these regarding the intercultural dynamic of support provision and the matching hypothesis. We believe, however, that understanding culturally normative social support transactions and the underlying cultural reasons people seek support in the manner that they do could circumvent such unfortunate interaction outcomes and foster more positive intercultural interactions.

Implications for Mental Health Services

Our findings on culture and social support use may apply to another form of support transaction, namely, to the individual who enlists, or fails to enlist, assistance from mental health services. We suggest that the utilization of social services is governed by culturally specific patterns of relationships and that research on culture and social support is relevant to understanding the use and benefit of mental health services among Asians and Asian Americans.

The underutilization of mental health services among Asian Americans, especially among more recent immi-

grants, is well-documented (e.g., B. S. K. Kim, 2007; S. Sue, Fujino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991). In mental health service contexts, researchers have recognized the importance of the need for practitioners to have an awareness and understanding of cultural minority clients' cultural norms and worldviews (e.g., Hwang, 2006; D. W. Sue, 2001; S. Sue, 2003). Yet surprisingly little research has examined the actual effect of psychological treatments on Asians and Asian Americans (see Hwang, 2006, for a review). To the extent that there is empirical evidence, the findings suggest that in general, ethnic minorities, including Asians and Asian Americans, have worse treatment outcomes (Institute of Medicine, 1999) and higher dropout rates than people from other cultural groups (Zane, Enomoto, & Chun, 1994).

Multiple reasons have been proposed for why Asian Americans are more reluctant to seek professional support, and not all of these reasons are due to cultural differences. For instance, Asian Americans may be reluctant to utilize mental health services because of a mistrust of mainstream American society (D. W. Sue & Sue, 2008). Asian Americans may not have knowledge of existing mental health resources, as they may be less familiar with these more "mainstream" American options (B. S. K. Kim, 2007).

In addition, our research findings point to the need to recognize the role of cultural patterns of social relationships. A recent cross-national study comparing Japanese and American participants found that people's willingness to seek professional help for their psychological problems was significantly associated with their general tendency to seek social support from their social networks (Hashimoto et al., 2007). Given this link between the use of explicit social support in daily life and the willingness to seek help from mental health professionals, it is important to consider the reasons for not seeking explicit social support in the context of professional mental health service provision.

Although social support transactions and professional services are qualitatively different from each other, they both involve personal relationships and interactions governed by similar expectations. For instance, mental health services are typically reliant on participants' disclosure, an act that resembles explicit social support seeking. One of our main findings is that Asians and Asian Americans are more likely to experience disclosure as an additional stressor when they are made to engage in it (Taylor et al., 2007) and that they may perceive the act of disclosure with the goal of support seeking more negatively than do European Americans (Chu et al., 2008). Our findings raise the possibility that overemphasis on disclosure may limit the actual benefits Asians and Asian Americans could conceivably obtain from seeking professional support. And it is our hope that future research will examine these possibilities in more specifically therapeutic relationship contexts.

Recognition of Divergent Cultural Ways of Doing

Our primary goal in the present review has been to illustrate the cultural specificity of how people utilize social support as a way of coping by comparing Asians and Asian Americans with European Americans. In so doing, we have highlighted the mainstream American cultural assumptions underlying the traditional ways in which social support use has been understood, investigated, and evaluated. Although the present focus has been on particular cultural groups, the present findings warrant a similar cultural analysis for other cultural groups, such as those from Latin American cultures or from Middle Eastern cultures. We fully expect that within each cultural context, there are subtly different ways in which people seek, obtain, and benefit from social support from their close others. We hope that the issues raised in this article will lead to future research exploring cultural and psychological diversity in both how people use social support and, more generally, how individuals relate and interact in their social relationships.

Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings. When people perceive that those from another culture engage in actions that are not concordant with the norms and expectations of their own culture, they often unjustly regard the difference as maladaptive. As we have found, there are cultural differences in the use of explicit social support, a mode of coping that has been shown to be effective among European Americans. Our analysis suggests that conceptualizing social support primarily as an explicit transaction may lead to misinterpretations of Asians' and Asian Americans' reluctance to solicit social support. When implicit support is included in the cultural examination of coping with stress, Asians and Asian Americans experience similar benefits. Social support is probably most effective when it takes a form that is congruent with the relationship expectations prevalent in a given culture. This recognition of culture and psychological functioning as complex systems with specific adaptations and equilibria is an important step toward both a cultural understanding of psychological differences as well as a psychological understanding of cultural differences.

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