

Choosing Your Mother or Your Spouse: Close Relationship Dilemmas in Taiwan and the United States

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Abstract

People in Western cultures tend to assume that the marriage relationship is the most important relationship in life. Does this assumption apply in other cultural contexts? Three studies compared Taiwanese and European American beliefs about the priority of family relationships, using hypothetical life-or-death and everyday situations. In all three studies and in both situations, Taiwanese participants were more likely than European Americans to choose to help their mothers instead of their spouses. Furthermore, Taiwanese were more likely than European Americans to choose to help their mothers instead of their sibling or their own child. Mediation analyses indicated that obligation and closeness accounted for the association between culture and certainty of saving the mother or the spouse in the life-or-death situation. In the everyday situation, obligation alone accounted for this association. These findings have implications for Western theories of close relationships, such as attachment theory.

Keywords

culture, filial piety, family relationships, marriage, helping

Dear Abby: When a man is married, who is supposed to come first in his life—his wife or his mother?

—Tired of Being Second String

“Second String” poses a central question about marriage and family relationships to a famous American advice columnist. In her response, the columnist references a Biblical passage (Genesis 2:24) that frames many American beliefs and assumptions about marriage:

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Dear Tired: At the risk of sounding preachy, the Scripture says a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast [*cleave*] to his wife. As much as a man may love his mother, in order to have a strong and healthy marriage, his wife should come first if he must make a choice.

This “leave and cleave” perspective on marriage has a long history in Western, Judeo-Christian societies, and it has become embedded in American assumptions about marriage (Coontz, 2005). But what if “Second String” is not from a Western European cultural background? Would Abby’s response be as useful (or as accurate) for someone from a very different cultural background, in which the Biblical injunction to “leave and cleave” is not part of one’s cultural heritage? Would a different response be given by a Chinese “Dear Abby”?

The Social Context of Relationship Science

Most social-psychological theories of relationships in the family have been developed in what have been labeled “WEIRD” cultural contexts: **W**estern, **E**ducated, **I**ndustrialized, **R**ich, and **D**emocratic societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; see also Johnson, 2012). Henrich and his colleagues argue that this has resulted in a focus on dimensions of behavior that are peculiar to WEIRD societies, such as independence of the individual from others, a focus on choice, and romantic love as the primary basis of marriage. As they argue, if research had originated in non-WEIRD cultural contexts, the theories and research in many fields of social-psychological research would look quite different.

Indeed, scholars have begun to speak out about the consequences of this WEIRD relationship science. Johnson (2012) argued that many interventions intended to enhance marital well-being and reduce divorce (such as the *Healthy Marriage Initiatives* in the United States during the early 2000s) have been based on research with primarily European American middle-class couples. When these interventions are used with poor couples or couples of color, the results are disappointing. As Johnson (2012) articulated, the research foundation for the development of marital interventions with couples of color is sparse. In a step toward addressing this gap in the literature, we examine one feature of East Asian beliefs that may importantly influence decisions and practices within close relationships.

Priority of Parents Versus Partners in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Of a myriad virtues, filial piety is the first. (Confucius)

In Taiwan and much of East Asia, the concept of filial piety, or respect and obligation toward one’s parents, is central to understanding relationships. Filial piety is the foremost quality of a good person in traditional Chinese culture (Tseng, 1973, cited in Greenfield, Suzuki, & Rothstein-Fisch, 2006); it has been described as “the essential core of Confucian ethics for ordinary people” (Hwang & Han, 2010, p. 486). Filial piety traditionally entailed several dimensions, including gratitude toward parents for their sacrifices and care, an obligation to respect and obey one’s parents, the duty to provide for one’s aging parents’ needs and desires, continuation of the family line, and behavior that brings honor to the family (Ho, 1996; Yeh & Bedford, 2003). After a child’s marriage, the parent–child relationship continues to be based on mutuality and interdependence throughout life. For example, Chinese couples are less likely than European American couples to endorse the notion that there is a boundary between the couple and their parents (Epstein, Chen, & Beyder-Kamjou, 2005) and are more likely than European Americans to point to their families of origin as their chief sources of emotional support (Goodwin, 1999; M. S. Lee, 1999). Thus, in traditional East Asian views, individuals’ relationships with their parents are expected to remain central throughout their lives, even after marriage; children have a life-long obligation to respect and care for their parents (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004; Qi, 2015).

In North American and Western European societies, a critical developmental task of early (or “emerging”) adulthood is to develop independence from one’s family of origin (Erikson, 1968; see also Arnett, 1998). Marriage is generally viewed as the most important relationship in a person’s life (Altman, Brown, Staples, & Werner, 1992; Cherlin, 2009; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). Once married, European American couples are expected to develop firm boundaries between their marriage and other relationships, including with their parents (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Epstein et al., 2005; Timmer & Veroff, 2000). For example, two influential Western theories, Bowen’s (1978) family system theory and Minuchin’s (1974) structural family therapy theory, emphasize the importance of helping family members establish appropriate boundaries between subsystems, such as between the marital system and the extended family system. Those who fail to do so are viewed as maladjusted (Coontz, 2005; Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiiie, & Uchida, 2002). Sociologists have observed that the modern American nuclear family must “stand on its own” (Parsons & Bales, 1960, p. 10) and that modern couples are expected to be self-sufficient—both practically and emotionally (Berg-Cross, 2001; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). Compared with other cultural groups, European Americans have a belief in the “sacred couple” (Shweder, Jensen, & Goldstein, 1995); the protection of the closeness and privacy of the couple is privileged over many other family concerns (such as the need to supervise adolescent girls or the needs of the eldest son, as indicated by Orissa Indians). In short, European Americans tend to assume that the marital relationship takes priority over other adult relationships, including relationships with one’s parents; the individual’s responsibilities and obligations to his or her parents are subordinated to obligations to one’s partner and the relationship.

This European American understanding of the priority of the marital relationship tends to be taken for granted and therefore seldom examined explicitly by researchers in the field. In fact, we found only one (relatively recent) empirical study that focused specifically on participants’ prioritization of parental versus marital relationships (Salter & Adams, 2012, which compared European American and African views). Yet the Chinese tradition of filial piety suggests that the European American approach is not the only way to organize marital and family relationships, and it brings to light this seldom questioned assumption about the primacy of marriage. The studies reported here are among the first to focus specifically on the relative importance of filial versus marital relationships in cultural beliefs about family relationships.

Indicators of the Priority of Parents or Spouses: Decisions About Helping

Cultural beliefs and values are very often implicit and not easily verbalized (Brislin, 1999); they are often expressed through decisions and choices. We selected choices about whom to help as a starting point for an investigation of the differential importance of parental versus other family relationships in Taiwan and North America.

We adopted a paradigm frequently used in decision-making research, in which participants indicate what they would do in a situation that poses a moral dilemma. In this paradigm, participants choose between two people’s need for help in either a life-or-death situation (rescuing one or the other from a burning building) or an everyday situation (fetching an item from a local store; Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994; Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001, 2006). In the emergency situation, the participant is told that one person can be saved from the burning house and the other person will surely die; therefore, it represents an indirect assessment of the ultimate prioritization of one life over the other.

Few people will ever have to make that decision. More often, people are caught in everyday dilemmas: Should I help my mother or do that chore for my spouse? We include an everyday decision condition in these studies for two primary reasons. First, it provides a useful comparison condition for the critical life-and-death decision condition. The costs to the helper in life-and-death versus everyday helping situations are quite different—death of a loved one in the first

case versus possible conflict in the second. If the helping decisions are quite similar in the two conditions, we may infer the cultural value (of filial piety or the sacred couple) is held relatively consistently across at least these two situations. But if they differ within a cultural group, it suggests that there may be competing motives or pressures that influence decision making, such as concerns for reproductive fitness (Burnstein et al., 1994). Relatedly, we seek to build on the existing research that has frequently used these two situations to investigate the role of kinship in helping (Burnstein et al., 1994; Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001, 2006). That work typically finds that degree of kinship and the target's reproductive potential is more influential in life-and-death decisions than in everyday decisions. Our goal is not to comment on inclusive fitness theory but rather to investigate and document the influence of quite different cultural values regarding the centrality of one's natal family or one's spouse in two divergent situations. Certainly, people may find themselves in many other situations in which they have to make choices of whom to help, but the studies reported here begin the process of examining the consequences of the importance of filial piety or the belief in the sacred couple for marital relationships.

Accounting for Cultural Differences in Decisions

Our first study simply sought to determine whether Taiwanese and European American young people do, in fact, differ in their beliefs about the priority of parental versus marital relationships. If Taiwanese and European Americans are found to differ in their choices of whom to help in these situations, what factors might account for these differences? In Studies 2 and 3, we assessed two potential mediators of cultural differences in decisions. First, we hypothesized that perceived obligation would be most strongly related to one's choices of whom to help in these scenarios. The tradition of filial piety in Chinese contexts dictates that a child's primary obligation is to his or her parents, whereas the cultural value of the "sacred couple" in European American contexts has created a norm of prioritizing one's obligation to one's spouse over obligations to one's parents. We hypothesized that Taiwanese participants would feel more obligated to help their mother than their spouse, whereas we expect the reverse to be true for European Americans. We also expected perceived obligation to mediate cultural differences in the decisions to help one's mother or one's spouse.

Korchmaros and Kenny (2001) suggested that emotional closeness, defined as a sense of caring and concern between two people, also causes people to want to help each other. They argued that closely related people also typically have frequent interactions and perceive each other to be similar, which lead to emotional closeness. They found that emotional closeness was an important mediator of the relation between genetic relatedness and willingness to help another person. Taiwanese are encouraged to keep a close and interdependent relationship with their parents throughout life (F. L. Hsu, 1971); in contrast, European American social norms and customs promote separation from one's natal family and close, intimate relationships with spouses (Arnett, 1998; Erikson, 1968). Consequently, we hypothesized that Taiwanese would report greater closeness to their mothers than would European Americans, whereas European Americans were expected to report greater closeness to their spouse than Taiwanese. We expected these differences in closeness to mediate cultural differences in the decisions to help one's mother or one's spouse.

Obligation and closeness are often strongly associated, but they need not be. A person may feel obligated to help someone (such as an older or needier person) but not necessarily feel close to them. Likewise, a person may be emotionally close to a romantic partner but perceive a stronger obligation to help his or her parent. Others have described obligation as reflecting social norms about what one should do in these situations (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2006), whereas closeness reflects an emotional tie to the target (Knapp, 2006).

Study 1 first sought to determine whether there is a cultural difference to be explained: Would European Americans and Taiwanese college students make different choices when presented

with the decision to help their mother or their (future) spouse? Taiwanese young people are very exposed to Western media, and their attitudes may be less traditional than expected. In addition, people's personal attitudes may diverge from their beliefs about what others should do in such situations. Thus, Study 1 also examined whether participants' personal decisions differed from perceived social norms. In Studies 2 and 3, we sought to replicate the findings of Study 1 and to unpack cultural differences in decisions by examining potential mediators: perceived obligation and emotional closeness to the target. We also investigated potential alternative explanations for our findings and examined the limits of filial piety. Finally, in Study 3, we sought to replicate the findings of Studies 1 and 2 with married people.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants considered helping situations that required the actor to select between a parent or spouse in either a life-threatening situation or an everyday situation. Participants reported their beliefs about the decisions they would make when married (personal choice condition) or about what others should do (social norm condition). This allowed us to investigate whether personal preferences and perceived norms diverge, especially in Taiwan where newer, Western conceptions of marriage may be in tension with traditional Chinese norms. In recent years, traditional values in many societies have given way to Western values of individualism and efficiency (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). It is quite possible that although East Asians profess the importance of filial piety, its influence may be on the wane in younger generations (Chen, 2009; Ho, 1996). Thus, we examine both perceived social norms and personal endorsement of the importance of filial piety in the context of family relationships. We hypothesized that Taiwanese would be more likely than European Americans to select the mother in both the personal and social norms conditions and in both the life-or-death and everyday situations.

In every culture, young people are socialized into their society's norms and expectations for marriage and family relationships. As in other research (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999), we assumed that unmarried young people have developed goals or ideals for their future marriage and family relationships and would be able to express those in the dilemmas posed to them. To make these beliefs more accessible, the participants were asked to imagine themselves in the future as married and living independently of their parents.

We focused on the mother rather than including both the mother and the father in these moral dilemmas for two reasons. First, young adults in both societies are typically closer to their mother than their father because mothers do more of the caregiving in both societies (Geiger, 1996; E. J. Lee, 2011). Second, in the United States, single-parent homes headed by mothers are more common than are single-parent homes headed by fathers. For many young Americans, fathers are much less central in their upbringing than are mothers. Thus, in the personal choice condition, participants were asked to choose between their mother and their (future) spouse.

Method

Participants. College students in Taiwan ($n = 443$, 158 men) and the United States ($n = 598$, 196 men) were recruited by email from several universities to complete an online survey for the chance to win one of several US\$10 gift cards. All participants who identified as Taiwanese or European American, heterosexual, and whose mothers were alive were included. (Twelve Taiwanese and seven Americans whose mothers had died were dropped from the original sample.) The mean ages of Taiwanese and European American participants were 19.93 ($SD = 2.45$) and 19.36 ($SD = 1.74$), respectively. All materials were developed in English and translated and back-translated by two bilinguals to ensure comparable meanings in English and Chinese (Brislin, 1970).

Procedure. Study 1 had a 2 (Culture: Taiwanese and European American) \times 2 (Perspective: personal choice or social norm) \times 2 (Situation: life-or-death or everyday) between-subjects design. After random assignment to one of the four conditions, participants first read a consent form and were instructed to imagine themselves as 30 years old, married, financially independent, and living separately from their parents, who are still living. After writing a short paragraph about their future life, participants rated their mental image (1 = *cannot create a mental image at all*, 8 = *can create a mental image that is extremely detailed and elaborate*). Seven Taiwanese and five Americans who could not create a mental image at all were dropped from analyses. Taiwanese and Americans did not differ significantly in their ability to imagine married life in either situation, $t_s \leq 1.84$, $p_s \geq .07$.

Next, the participants were posed with one of two scenarios (adapted from Burnstein et al., 1994). The life-or-death scenario read, "Now imagine that today when you go home, you find that your house is quickly burning down. Your spouse and your mother are asleep in two separate rooms. They cannot escape the fire by themselves and cannot survive without your help." The everyday scenario read, "Today you are driving to an appointment. Your mother and spouse each call and ask you to do a small favor for them. They each ask you to pick up an item at two different stores. But you only have the time to help one person. Both of them have the ability to pick up the item by themselves."

In both scenarios, participants were told that, because of limited time, if they decided to help one person, they would not be able to help the other. They were asked to decide as quickly as possible which person they would help.

Participants in the social norm condition were simply asked to indicate which person (the mother or the spouse) other people in their society would say a protagonist (Chen-Hung or Jack) should help in each situation. Participants were told that the protagonist is 30 years old, married, financially independent, and living separately from his parents, who are still living. They read about either the life-or-death situation or the everyday situation, which were reframed to fit the third person perspective. After making their choice, participants in all conditions completed demographic items and measures of potential covariates.

Results and Discussion

Personal choice perspective. In the life-or-death situation, 72.7% of Taiwanese stated that they would save their mothers instead of their spouses, but only 25% of Americans chose to save their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 49.71$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .46$ (close to a large effect size of .50, Cohen, 1988; see Figure 1). In the everyday situation, 82.5% of Taiwanese decided to help their mothers instead of their spouses, but only 37% of Americans chose to help their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 49.37$, $p < .001$; $\phi = .46$.

Social norms perspective. In the life-or-death situation, 77.2% of Taiwanese reported that other people in Taiwanese society would say that Chen-Hung/Jack should save his mother, compared with only 23.9% of the Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 55.58$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .52$ (Figure 1). In the everyday situation, 86.7% of Taiwanese indicated that others would say that Chen-Hung/Jack should help his mother, compared with only 37.8% of the Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 37.03$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .37$.¹

Within-culture comparisons revealed that decisions in the personal choice or social norms conditions did not differ significantly in either Taiwan or the United States. Comparisons revealed $\chi^2_s < .67$ ($p_s > .40$) in the life-or-death condition and $\chi^2_s < 1.20$ ($p_s > .30$) in the everyday situation.

These results provide initial evidence that the cultural expectations for family relationships diverge as predicted: Taiwanese tend to prioritize the relationship with parents over relationships with spouses, whereas European Americans tend to prioritize the marital relationship over

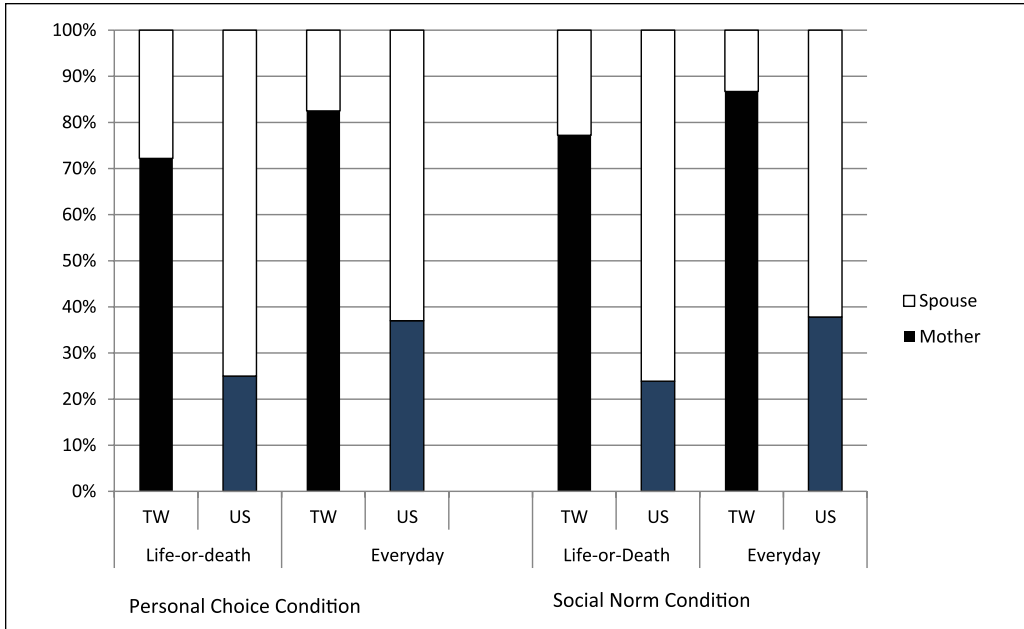


Figure 1. Percentage of participants who would choose to help their mother or their spouse, Study 1. Note. Percentage choosing to help their mother is always at the bottom of the bar. TW = Taiwanese; US = American.

relationships with parents. Study 2 examines potential mediators of these cultural differences and alternative explanations for the findings.

Study 2

Study 2 had four goals. First, we sought to replicate the findings of Study 1 in a new sample. Because the results of the social norm perspective and the personal choice perspective did not differ, we focused on participants' personal choices in this study.

Second, to capture the relative ease or difficulty of making these decisions, we assessed the time it took participants to make a decision. We hypothesized that Taiwanese who chose to help their mother would respond more quickly than those who chose to help their spouse, because helping one's mother is consistent with cultural beliefs. We anticipated the opposite for European American participants, again because helping the spouse is consistent with their cultural beliefs.

Third, we examined two potential mediators (obligation and closeness) of the cultural differences in decisions to help, using a two-time-point research design. In both the life-or-death and everyday situations, we expected that Taiwanese participants would describe themselves in the future as higher in obligation to help the mother and closeness to the mother than would European Americans. In contrast, European Americans were expected to describe themselves in the future as higher in obligation to help the spouse and closeness to the spouse in both situations, compared with the Taiwanese participants.

Fourth, we examined potential alternative explanations for the Taiwanese preference for parent over spouse. One potential alternative explanation concerns unique Chinese perspectives on ingroup members (Pimentel, 2000). In traditional Confucian thinking, spouses are in many ways outside the innermost circle composed of biological kin. In contrast, in the United States, the spouse is an ingroup along with one's own children, and parents often are viewed as standing outside this circle. So if we find that Taiwanese endorse helping the parent over the

spouse, perhaps this simply reflects a greater preference for helping biological kin over relatives by marriage. To test this, we included another condition that pitted saving the mother against saving one's sibling, both of whom are biological kin.

The ultimate test of filial piety may occur when one faces the dilemma of both one's mother and one's own child in the burning house. For Taiwanese, there are conflicting traditional pressures. Taiwanese children are raised to respect and honor their parents above all else, but the most important way to show filial piety is to have children (F. L. Hsu, 1963). Thus, we included a second alternative scenario in which participants were asked to choose between saving their mother or their child.

A final alternative explanation is that Taiwanese people automatically default toward the older person. Respect for older people is a central value in Confucian thinking (F. L. Hsu, 1963). In contrast, research using primarily Western participants shows that people prefer to help younger over older persons (Burnstein et al., 1994). Consequently, we included a final scenario in which participants were posed with a dilemma that pitted saving a 10-year-old stranger or a 60-year-old stranger. We also examined these three additional comparisons for the everyday situation.

Method

Participants and research design. Participants who identified themselves as Taiwanese or European American, heterosexual, and whose mothers were alive were included in Study 2. Five Taiwanese and four European Americans whose mothers had died were dropped from the data. The final sample included 88 Taiwanese undergraduate students (38 men) from two universities in Taiwan (they received US\$4 as compensation) and 137 European American undergraduate students (64 men) from a Midwestern university (they received course credits as compensation). The mean ages of the Taiwanese and American participants were 20.07 years ($SD = 1.41$) and 21.65 years ($SD = 2.68$), respectively. Study 2 had a 2 (Culture: Taiwanese and European American) \times 2 (Situation: life-or-death and everyday situations) between-subjects design.

Procedure. At Time 1, participants completed several demographic measures (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity), and a measure of closeness to their mother in a large mass-testing session. Approximately 1 month later, we invited participants who identified themselves as Taiwanese or European American and heterosexual to our lab. In this lab session, participants were randomly assigned to either the life-or-death or the everyday situation and completed the additional measures via computer using the Medialab program.

In the laboratory session, after providing informed consent, participants first responded to either the life-and-death or the everyday situation, described in Study 1 (personal choice condition only). After making their choice, they rated their certainty of helping that person. Participants then reported their current closeness to their mother and expected closeness to their future spouse and perceived obligation to help their mother and spouse (measures are described below). Next, participants responded to the three alternative helping scenarios described above (mother vs. sibling, mother vs. child, and older stranger vs. younger stranger). Finally, each participant completed the demographic measures described in Study 1 and then was fully debriefed and thanked.

Measures

Certainty of the helping decision. At Time 2, after participants decided whom to help (mother or spouse), they indicated the extent to which they were certain that they were most likely to help that person instead of the other person using an 8-point Likert scale, (1 = *I am not at all certain that I will help this person*; 8 = *I am extremely certain that I will help this person*; Korchmaros & Kenny, 2006). To create certainty scores, we followed the calculation of Korchmaros and Kenny (2006): Participants who chose the mother were given a 0 for their certainty of helping the

spouse, and participants who chose the spouse were given a 0 for certainty of helping the mother. This allowed us to use all the participants in the mediation analyses.²

Closeness to one's mother and one's spouse. We used three items to assess participants' closeness to their mother and (future) spouse. One item assessing closeness to the mother ("How close do you feel to your mother") was included in the Time 1 mass-testing session; participants responded using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all close*) to 6 (*extremely close*). Participants completed a similar measure of expected closeness to their (future) spouse during the Time 2 lab session, using the same 6-point scale.

Two additional items were included in the Time 2 lab session; these items were chosen to reduce some of the measurement issues that arise with cross-cultural use of Likert-scaled items (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002). The first item placed spouse at 1 and mother at 9, and participants were asked to choose one number to indicate their anticipated closeness to their mother and spouse when they are married. Participants were told that if they chose a number that is close to "1," it indicates that they imagined that they would have a closer relationship with their spouse than with their mother. In contrast, if they chose a number that was close to "9," it indicated that they imagined that they would have a closer relationship with their mother than with their spouse; "5" indicates that participants would have equal closeness to both of them. For the final item, participants assigned two numbers, summed to 100, for their mother and spouse to indicate their anticipated closeness to each person. For example, if they assigned their mother the value of 80, their future spouse would get a value of 20. If they believed they would feel equally close to both their mother and their spouse, participants would assign the number 50 to their mother and the number 50 to their spouse. Total closeness scores were created by standardizing the scores of the three items and summing the standardized scores separately for mother and spouse.³

Obligation to help the mother and the spouse. After making their own choice, participants were asked to imagine both hypothetical choices (i.e., to save their mother and to save their spouse) and to rate their obligation to help their mother and their spouse. This scale was adapted from Miller, Bersoff, and Harwood (1990) and Korchmaros and Kenny (2006). For each hypothetical decision, participants responded to three items (e.g., "How much responsibility do you have to help your mother/spouse from the burning house [to pick up the items from the store]?"). The obligation items used a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*No responsibility*) to 6 (*Quite a lot of responsibility*). For each hypothetical choice (helping mother or spouse), we summed together the three items and used the total score to indicate the participants' perceived obligation to help that person (mother or spouse). Reliabilities are presented in Table 1.

Alternative pairs: Sibling, child, and strangers. In both the emergency and everyday conditions, participants responded to two alternative scenarios that pitted saving or helping the mother against one's sibling or child, and a scenario that pitted saving or helping an older versus a younger stranger. To generate the alternative scenarios, we modified the previously described scenarios of helping one's mother versus one's spouse by replacing one's spouse with a different target (one's sibling and one's child) and by rewording the paragraphs to make the logic smooth. Because it is not likely that one would have strangers in one's house or would run an errand for strangers, the scenarios concerning helping two strangers were rephrased. In the life-or-death situation, participants read the following:

Please imagine for one moment that you are in a sinking boat with two strangers. One is 60 years old and the other is 10 years old. Now you only have enough time to save one person, either the older person or the younger person.

Table 1. Correlations Among Main Variables of Studies 2 and 3.

	α Life-or- death	α Everyday	Certainty of helping mother	Closeness to mother	Obligation to mother	Certainty of helping spouse	Closeness to spouse	Obligation to spouse
Study 2								
Certainty of helping mother			—	.50**	.43**	-.77**	-.51**	-.31**
Closeness to mother	†	†	.19	—	.33**	-.48**	-.83**	-.27**
Obligation to mother	.70/.75	.81/.78	.67**	.23*	—	-.41**	-.36**	.07
Certainty of helping spouse			-.91**	-.15	-.58**	—	.48**	.39**
Closeness to spouse	†	†	-.29*	-.84**	-.27*	.27*	—	.36**
Obligation to spouse	.67/.66	.70/.75	-.42**	.01	-.26*	.45**	.09	—
Study 3								
Certainty of helping mother			—	.49**	.57**	-.84**	-.45**	-.28**
Closeness to mother	†	†	.38**	—	.41**	-.52**	-.59**	-.17*
Obligation to mother	.82/.71	.82/.71	.71**	.40**	—	-.63**	-.46**	-.32**
Certainty of helping spouse			-.90**	-.36**	-.67**	—	.51**	.39**
Closeness to spouse	†	†	-.42**	-.63**	-.44**	.44**	—	.24**
Obligation to spouse	.75/.78	.75/.79	-.40**	-.20	-.20	.55**	.33**	—

Note. Culture: Taiwanese = 1 and American = 0. For the α (Cronbach's coefficient alpha), the number before the slash is for Taiwanese and the number after the slash is for Americans. In Studies 2 and 3, information above the diagonal is for life-or-death situation; information below the diagonal is for the everyday situation.

†Calculation of Cronbach's alpha for the closeness measure is not appropriate given that the items do not all use Likert scales.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For the scenario about helping two strangers in an everyday situation, participants read the following:

Now, imagine that you are walking on the XXX campus and are on your way to a very important meeting. You are late and are in a hurry to get there. Now imagine that two strangers (one is 60 years old and the other is 10 years old) each ask your help for a small favor. They each ask you to provide directions for two different buildings. But you only have the time to help one person. At this time, both the older stranger and the younger stranger have the ability to ask for help or directions from other people.

Results

Decision to help mother or spouse. Taiwanese and European American participants were similar in their ability to imagine their future married life in the life-or-death and everyday situations, $t_s < 1.2$, $p_s > .25$. In the life-or-death situation, 66.1% of Taiwanese stated that they would save their mothers instead of their spouses, but only 32.6% of Americans chose to save their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 15.73$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .33$. In the everyday situation, 87.5% of Taiwanese decided to help their mothers, compared with only 42.2% of Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 16.12$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .46$ (see Figure 2).⁴

Reaction time. To test the difference in reaction time in the life-or-death situation, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with culture (Taiwanese vs. European Americans) and helping decision (help mother vs. spouse) as between-participant factors. The results indicated a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 143) = 6.98$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Consistent with our hypotheses, Taiwanese participants who chose to save the mother responded more quickly than those

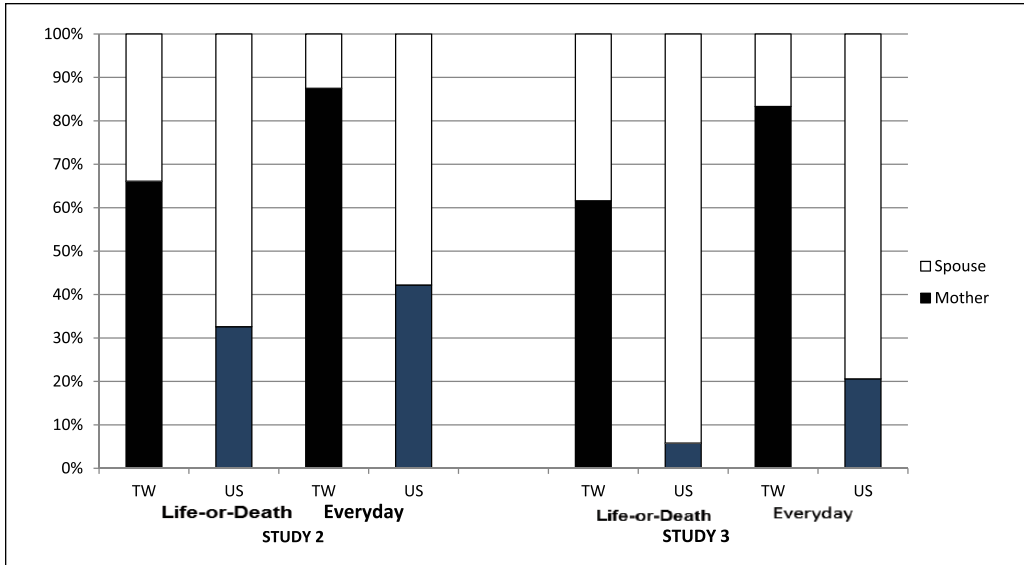


Figure 2. Percentage of participants who would choose to help their mother or their spouse, Studies 2 and 3.

Note. Percentage choosing to help their mother is always at the bottom of the bar. TW = Taiwanese; US = American.

who chose the spouse ($M_{\text{mother}} = 26270.03$ ms, $SD = 8182.62$ vs. $M_{\text{spouse}} = 32100.47$ ms, $SD = 12650.91$), $F(1, 143) = 3.02$, $p = .04$, $d = .55$. Conversely, European American participants who chose the mother responded more slowly than those who chose the spouse ($M_{\text{mother}} = 39663$ ms, $SD = 3320.36$ vs. $M_{\text{spouse}} = 33876$ ms, $SD = 1309.60$), $F(1, 143) = 4.54$, $p = .017$, $d = 1.29$. This supports our hypothesis that the normative decision would be easier to make than the non-normative decision.

For the everyday situation, due to the unequal sample sizes of Taiwanese who decided to help their mother ($n = 28$) and spouse ($n = 4$), a two-way ANOVA was not conducted. Instead, we conducted an independent t test for Americans to test whether the reaction time was the same for those who chose mother versus spouse. For Americans in the everyday situation, the decision to help the mother or the spouse did not differ in reaction time ($M_{\text{mother}} = 32859.74$ ms, $SD = 8163.84$ vs. $M_{\text{spouse}} = 32240.27$ ms, $SD = 9087.14$), $F(1, 43) = .055$, $p = .82$.

Mediation by obligation and closeness. We hypothesized that obligation and closeness would mediate the association between culture and certainty of helping the mother or the spouse. In the first step of the process of demonstrating mediation, we examined cultural differences in the dependent variables—certainty of helping the mother and the spouse—and the proposed mediators. As shown in Table 2, we found the expected cultural differences: Taiwanese were more certain than European Americans of the decision to help their mother in the life-or-death situation and in the everyday situation. Conversely, European Americans were more certain than Taiwanese of the decision to help their spouse in both situations. In both situations, Taiwanese reported a higher level of obligation to save their mother and closeness to their mother than European Americans. In contrast, European Americans reported a higher level of obligation to help their spouse and closeness to their spouse than Taiwanese. The zero-order correlations among the eight main variables are presented in Table 1.

We tested the mediating effects with the bias-corrected bootstrap (BCB) test, using the SPSS macros that Preacher and Hayes (2008) provided, to compute a confidence interval (CI) for each

Table 2. Mean Differences for Helping Certainty, Closeness, Obligation, and Filial Piety Across Culture for Studies 2 and 3.

	Life-or-death												Everyday																			
	Taiwanese mother				U.S. mother				Taiwanese spouse				U.S. spouse				Taiwanese mother				U.S. mother				Taiwanese spouse				U.S. spouse			
	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d	t	d				
Study 2																																
Certainty	3.86 (3.02)	1.24 (2.04)	-5.75***	1.02	1.27 (2.14)	3.78 (3.06)	5.88***	.95	5.03 (2.28)	2.27 (2.83)	-4.74***	1.07	.72 (1.94)	3.36 (3.01)	4.67***	1.04																
Closeness	0.93 (2.25)	-0.73 (2.44)	-4.13***	.71	-1.37 (2.59)	0.88 (1.83)	5.70***	1.00	.69 (2.33)	-0.49 (2.53)	-2.08*	.49	-0.96 (2.34)	0.64 (1.92)	3.29**	.75																
Obligation	15.30 (2.37)	12.27 (3.15)	-6.65***	1.09	10.84 (2.98)	13.85 (2.62)	6.43***	1.07	14.38 (2.18)	11.38 (2.53)	-5.43***	1.27	9.63 (3.02)	11.89 (2.29)	3.74***	.84																
Study 3																																
Certainty	3.64 (3.24)	.22 (1.06)	-8.56***	1.42	2.23 (3.02)	6.17 (2.20)	8.92***	1.49	5.17 (2.66)	0.74 (1.62)	-9.35***	-1.94	0.98 (2.25)	5.26 (2.84)	7.61***	1.71																
Closeness	.65 (1.65)	-0.68 (1.59)	-4.88***	.82	-0.60 (1.58)	.64 (1.53)	4.75***	.80	0.57 (1.62)	-0.74 (1.33)	-3.87***	-0.87	-0.63 (1.97)	0.88 (0.9)	4.66***	0.93																
Obligation	14.93 (2.75)	8.78 (3.85)	-11.01***	1.84	12.07 (2.99)	13.81 (3.01)	3.46***	.58	14.23 (2.72)	8.74 (2.91)	-8.77***	-1.96	10.77 (3.12)	12.88 (3.10)	3.03**	0.68																

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the standard deviations. Certainty = the level of certainty of helping the target. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

mediation effect. A significant mediation effect at $p < .05$ level is indicated when the 95% CIs do not include zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).⁵

Life-or-death situation. BCB tests indicated that both obligation to save one's mother and closeness to one's mother (entered together) significantly mediated the association between culture and certainty of saving one's mother. The 95% CIs for obligation (BCB: .1586, .9622) and for closeness to one's mother (BCB: .3191, 1.0880) did not include zero.

BCB tests indicated that both mediators (entered together) significantly accounted for the associations between culture and certainty of saving one's spouse. The 95% CIs for obligation to save one's spouse (BCB: -1.0422, -.1073) and closeness to one's spouse (BCB: -1.6000, -.4683) did not include zero.

Everyday situation. BCB tests indicated that only obligation to help significantly mediated the associations between culture and certainty of helping either one's mother or helping one's spouse. For certainty of helping one's mother, the 95% CI of obligation to help (1.1444, 2.8039) did not include zero, but the 95% CI for closeness to one's mother did include zero (-.1936, .3586). For certainty of helping one's spouse, the 95% CI of obligation to help did not include zero (BCB: -1.5954, -.2311), but the 95% CI for closeness to one's spouse did include zero (-.9973, .0565).

Thus, our hypotheses were supported in the life-or-death situation: Participants' perceptions of obligation and closeness to their mother or their spouse accounted for the cultural differences in certainty of saving that person from the burning house. In the everyday condition, however, only perceptions of obligation significantly mediated the cultural differences in certainty to help the mother/spouse.

Alternative explanations: Sibling, child, and strangers. Three additional conditions allowed us to examine alternative explanations for the Taiwanese preference to help the mother. In the life-or-death situation (Figure 3), 66% of Taiwanese chose to save their mother instead of their sibling, compared with only 26% of Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 22.97, p < .001, \phi = .39$. Similarly, 48% of Taiwanese chose to save their mother instead of their child, compared with only 3% of Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 43.53, p < .001, \phi = .54$. When forced to choose among two strangers (age 10 years vs. age 60 years), only 1.8% of Taiwanese and 3.3% of Americans chose to save the 60-year-old stranger instead of the 10-year-old child, $\chi^2(1) = .29, p = 1.00, \phi = .04$.

In the everyday situation, 100% of Taiwanese and 84% of Americans chose to help their mothers instead of their siblings, $\chi^2(1) = 5.48, p < .02, \phi = .27$. When forced to choose among their mother and child, 56% of Taiwanese chose to help their mother, but only 27% of Americans did, $\chi^2(1) = 6.88, p < .01, \phi = .30$. When forced to choose among two strangers, 63% of Taiwanese and 44% of Americans chose to help the 60-year-old stranger, $\chi^2(1) = 2.44, p = .12, \phi = .18$.

Discussion

As in Study 1, Taiwanese were more likely than European Americans to help their mother in both the life-or-death and the everyday situations. Furthermore, in the life-or-death situation, Taiwanese made the decision to save their mother more quickly than the decision to save their spouse, whereas the opposite was true for European Americans. These findings support our claim that the choice to help one's mother is expected and normative for the Taiwanese, and so it is made more easily than the decision to help one's spouse.

For European Americans, the decision to help the spouse is the normative choice in the life-or-death condition, and it was made more quickly than the decision to help their mother. There were no differences for European Americans in the everyday situation in their speed to make the decision of whom to help. This suggests that there are few social expectations about whom one

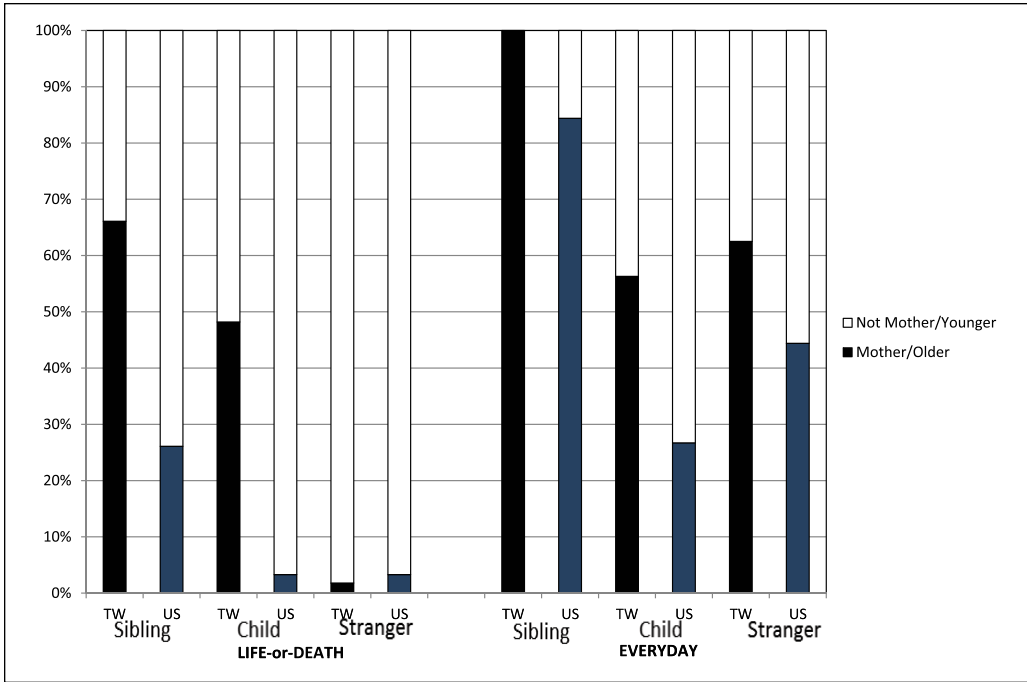


Figure 3. Percentage of saving and helping decisions among three additional pairs for Study 2. Note. Percentage at the bottom is always for the mother or the older person in the paired comparison. Labels at the bottom represent Mother or Sibling, Mother or Child, and Older or Younger Stranger. TW = Taiwanese; US = American.

should help in everyday situations; thus, they deliberate similarly when making one or the other decision.

We hypothesized that two attitudes might explain the cultural differences in decisions: perceived obligation and closeness to the target. As expected, Taiwanese participants were more likely than European Americans to report obligation to help the mother in both situations. Taiwanese also were more likely than European Americans to anticipate being close to their mother. Mediation analyses for the life-or-death situation revealed that these constructs significantly mediated the association between culture and certainty of saving the mother and the spouse. For the everyday situation, only perceived obligation significantly mediated the effects of culture on helping decisions. In run-of-the-mill situations, social norms and expectations of whom one should assist (e.g., perceived obligation) seem to play a more important role in determining people’s helping decisions than does closeness to the target.

Finally, we examined three alternative explanations for our findings by asking participants to choose between their mother and their sibling or child in the life-or-death and everyday situations. In the life-or-death situation, Taiwanese were more likely to choose the mother than the sibling (the ratio was 2:1) and equally likely to choose the mother as the child. European American participants, in contrast, were much more likely to choose the younger relative (the sibling or the child) than their mother. These results point to the extremely strong influence of filial piety among the Taiwanese participants, especially given the importance of producing offspring in Confucian views of the family. European Americans, in contrast, tend to value youth over age (Burnstein et al., 1994). Our final additional comparison ruled out the alternative hypothesis that Taiwanese may prefer to help an older person instead of a younger person. When facing the choice of helping two strangers of different ages, both Taiwanese and European American

participants were much more likely to help the younger person in the life-or-death situation than the older person. Thus, the Taiwanese participants' tendency to choose the mother rather than younger relatives is due to filial piety, not to a more general respect for older people. In short, these findings provide strong support for the centrality of the relationship with one's parents for Chinese participants, compared with the centrality of the relationship with one's spouse and prioritization of younger over older relatives for the European American participants.

These findings are based on reports from single undergraduate research participants, who were asked to anticipate how they would feel when they are older and married. Thus, these findings may be viewed as reflections of young people's beliefs about what is expected of married children. In addition, participants in Studies 1 and 2 have an actual mother but only a hypothetical spouse; thus, they may have been biased in favor of helping the actual person. If this is the case, we might expect married people, both Taiwanese and European Americans, to be more likely to choose to help their spouse rather than their mother. Thus, Study 3 sought to replicate these results among married people in both cultural contexts.

Study 3

Method

Participants. Married Taiwanese participants were recruited in Taiwan from graduate students enrolled in community colleges or adults who were approached in public places and were compensated with a small gift. Married European American participants in the United States were recruited through an online survey or approached in public places and were entered into a drawing for a gift card. Only people who were Taiwanese or European American and heterosexual were included. Twenty Taiwanese and 15 Americans whose mothers had died were dropped from this study. The final sample included 121 married Taiwanese (50 men) and 103 married Americans (57 men), and their mean ages were 40.55 years ($SD = 6.96$) and 34.06 years ($SD = 8.57$), respectively.

Procedure and materials. All participants volunteered to complete a 5- to 10-min survey and were randomly assigned to the life-or-death or everyday situation. Using the personal choice scenarios described in Study 1, participants decided whom to help and rated their certainty of helping that person, using the same 8-point Likert scale used in Study 2. To create certainty scores, participants were given a "0" for the person they chose not to help (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2006).

Participants were asked to indicate their closeness to their mother/spouse by assigning two numbers, summed to 100, for their closeness to their mother and their spouse (as in Study 2). The other closeness item was adapted from the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992); it was composed of six pairs of increasingly overlapping circles that represented different levels of closeness between their mother/spouse and themselves. For both mother and spouse, participants chose one figure to describe the relationship between the target and themselves. Total closeness scores were created by standardizing the scores of the two items and summing the standardized scores separately for mother and spouse.

Participants also completed the perceived obligation items used in Study 2 (1 = *no responsibility*; 6 = *quite a lot of responsibility*). Responses were summed to create obligation measures for each target (see Table 1 for reliabilities).

Next, participants decided who to help among the three additional pairs described in Study 2. Finally, participants responded to demographic items and rated their marital satisfaction (two items, "All in all, how satisfied are you with your marriage?" and "How happy are you, all things considered, with your marital relationship?" adapted from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Spanier, 1976).

Results and Discussion

Helping decisions. Taiwanese were more likely than European Americans to choose to help their mother instead of their spouse in the life-or-death situation (61.6% Taiwanese vs. 5.8% European Americans), $\chi^2(1) = 48.95, p < .001, \phi = .59$, and the everyday situation (83.3% Taiwanese vs. 20.6% European Americans), $\chi^2(1) = 32.03, p < .001, \phi = .63$ (see Figure 2).⁶

Mediation analyses. We hypothesized that obligation and closeness would mediate the cultural differences in certainty to save the mother or the spouse. In both life-or-death and everyday situations, Taiwanese were more certain of their decision to help their mother, felt more obligated to help their mother, and felt closer to their mother than did European Americans (Table 2). European Americans were more certain, obligated, and felt closer to their spouse than did Taiwanese. Zero-order correlations among the six main variables are presented in Table 1.

We applied the BCB method to test the mediation effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). When the two mediators were entered together, the results for the life-or-death situation indicated that obligation and closeness both significantly mediated the associations between culture and certainty of saving one's mother as well as saving one's spouse. When predicting certainty of saving one's mother, the results revealed a 95% CI ranging from .3262 to 1.8949 for obligation to one's mother and from .2339 to 1.1207 for closeness to one's mother. When predicting certainty of saving one's spouse, the 95% CIs ranged from $-.7744$ to $-.0984$ for obligation to one's spouse and from -1.2616 to $-.3752$ for closeness to one's spouse.

For the everyday situation, the BCB tests indicated that only obligation significantly mediated the associations between culture and certainty of helping one's mother and spouse. When predicting certainty to help one's mother, the results revealed a 95% CI ranging from 1.0091 to 2.9754 for obligation to one's mother and from $-.1974$ to $.5967$ for closeness to one's mother. When predicting certainty to help one's spouse, the results revealed a 95% CI ranging from -1.4972 to $-.2701$ for obligation to one's spouse and from $-.7716$ to $.0024$ for closeness to one's spouse.

These findings replicate the mediation results of Study 2 and indicate that both obligation and closeness account for cultural differences in decisions in the life-or-death situations, but only obligation accounts for cultural differences in the everyday situation.

Alternative comparisons. For the decision to save one's mother or a sibling, we eliminated participants who did not have a sibling (four Taiwanese; two Americans) from the analyses. In the life-or-death situation, 90.1% of Taiwanese decided to save their mothers instead of their siblings, compared with only 27.9% of Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 57.59, p < .001, \phi = .65$ (Figure 4). For the mother versus child comparison, 21.9% of Taiwanese participants chose their mother instead of their child, compared with only 1.5% of Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 13.66, p < .001, \phi = .31$. Finally, when the decision was between two strangers (ages 10 years vs. 60 years), 90.4% of Taiwanese and 94.2% of Americans reported that they would save the younger stranger, $\chi^2(1) = .71, p = .40, \phi = .07$.

In the everyday situation, 100% of Taiwanese and 97.1% of Americans chose to help their mothers instead of their siblings, $\chi^2(1) = 1.43, p = .23, \phi = .13$ (Figure 4). When asked to choose among their mother and child, 59.1% of Taiwanese chose to help their mother, compared with only 18.2% of Americans, $\chi^2(1) = 12.99, p < .001, \phi = .40$. When choosing among two strangers, there was no significant difference in American and Taiwanese helping decisions; 53.3% of Taiwanese and 35.3% of Americans chose to help the 60-year-old stranger, $\chi^2(1) = 2.54, p = .11, \phi = .18$.

When making choices between two family members in the life-and-death situation, Taiwanese were more likely to choose their mother than were European Americans. Thus, for a substantial minority of Taiwanese, filial piety is stronger than obligations to offspring. The final alternative comparison (between younger and older strangers) indicates that Taiwanese people's obligations

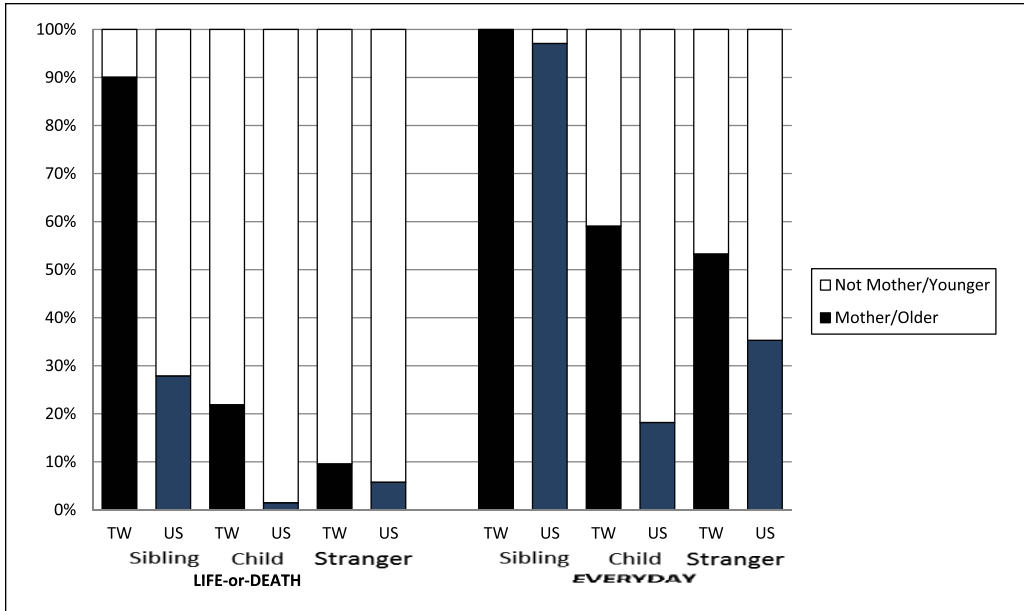


Figure 4. Percentage of saving and helping decisions among three additional pairs for Study 2. Note. Percentage at the bottom is always for the mother or the older person in the paired comparison. Labels at the bottom represent Mother or Sibling, Mother or Child, and Older or Younger Stranger. TW = Taiwanese; US = American.

to their mothers are not driven entirely by a default toward helping older rather than younger individuals.

General Discussion

These studies are among the first to demonstrate that the Western belief that the marital relationship is more important than filial relationships is culturally specific. Consistent with the value of filial piety, both single (Studies 1 and 2) and married (Study 3) Taiwanese were more likely than European Americans to choose to help their mothers rather than their spouses in hypothetical life-or-death and everyday helping situations. Notably, these studies reveal that Taiwanese families are not simply “extended” (in that they include multiple generations) but that relationships with parents are given higher priority than spousal relationships.

The percentage of Taiwanese who selected their mother in the three studies was remarkably similar, despite differences in marital status. Although one might expect married people to be more likely than singles to choose to save their spouse, there were no significant differences in the percentages of Taiwanese who selected the mother in the life-or-death situation in Study 3 (61.6%) and Study 1 (72.2%) or Study 2 (66.1%), both $\chi^2s(1) < .110$, $ps > .31$, $\phi s < .09$. Thus, even when Taiwanese must choose between their mother and their actual spouse (rather than a hypothetical spouse, as in Study 1), their perceived obligation to their mother supersedes their obligation to their spouse.

In contrast, married European Americans tended to be *less* likely to choose their mother than were single European Americans. For the life-or-death situation, the percentage of European Americans who selected the mother in Study 3 (5.8%) was smaller than in Study 1 (25%) or Study 2 (26.1), both $\chi^2s(1) > 14.0$, $ps < .001$, $.25 < \phi < .28$. This suggests that European Americans more strongly internalize the cultural norm after marriage than beforehand.

Our results also ruled out alternative explanations for our findings. The Taiwanese chose the mother more frequently than a sibling in the emergency situation, ruling out the possibility that saving biological kin is more valued than kin by marriage. Taiwanese were also more likely to save a young stranger than an older stranger in the emergency situation, ruling out the possibility that they always value the older person over the younger person. Finally, Taiwanese were more likely than European Americans to choose to save their mother than their own child in the emergency condition. In short, loyalty and sacrifice for one's parents is a supreme cultural value in Taiwan; we describe some implications of this for theories of marriage below.

Consistent with our hypotheses, cultural differences were explained by obligation and closeness to the target in the life-and-death situations, but inconsistent with our hypotheses, only obligation was a significant mediator in the everyday situations. We were puzzled by the failure of closeness to account for these cultural differences in the everyday situation. Our hunch is that because closeness connotes an emotional tie to the target (Knapp, 2006), the life-and-death situation activates this emotional tie much more strongly than the everyday situation. When deciding whether to run an errand for one's mother or one's spouse, feelings of love and affection may matter less than calculations of duty, responsibility, and the immediate costs and benefits of each choice.

Strengths and Limitations

Studies 1 and 2 used unmarried participants, which may cause some to question the validity of these results. Yet many in this group are actively pursuing potential mates, and one may assume that they have been socialized into their society's norms and expectations for marriage and family relationships. Furthermore, results of Studies 1 and 2 were largely replicated in Study 3 using married participants.

One strength of this method is that it minimizes some potential problems of cross-cultural equivalence; forced choice decisions are less prone to response biases (such as moderacy or extremity bias) that can affect survey responses (Heine et al., 2002). One limitation of these studies, however, is that they used only hypothetical scenarios to assess what people think they would do, not actual helping behavior. Of course, it is unethical to manipulate or observe life-or-death situations in real life. Like research on moral thinking that uses hypothetical scenarios (e.g., Miller et al., 1990), these studies starkly illustrate cultural differences in attitudes and beliefs about the priority of parents versus other relationships.

One limitation is the possibility that the participants' decisions in the alternative dilemmas (mother vs. sibling, child) may have been influenced by either their previous choice (mother vs. spouse) or salient social desirability norms. Our focus was on the initial mother versus spouse decision, and we kept this decision first in all the studies so that it would not be influenced by other decisions. But subsequent studies would benefit from either a fully between-subjects design or from counterbalancing the order of the decisions across participants. In addition, we used obligation and nationality as proxies for filial piety; future studies would profit from the use of existing measures of filial piety, such as that by Yeh and Bedford (2003). This measure distinguishes between two forms of filial piety: reciprocal and authoritarian; its use would facilitate examination of more specific questions about the attitudes and beliefs that account for prioritization of one's relationship with one's parent or spouse.

These studies focused on cultural norms and beliefs, but unfortunately, given space limitations, we acknowledge that we gave short shrift to issues of gender. The questions about gender cut two ways: How do the decisions of men and women differ in these situations? And how might people's decisions differ if the target was their father rather than their mother? In these studies, gender differences in choices were inconsistent across studies and across conditions. We focused on mothers for the sake of simplicity and due to cultural differences in the role of fathers in

children's lives, but actual family dynamics are often much more complex, and investigation of differences in attitudes and behaviors toward mothers versus fathers may bring to light interesting and understudied relationship processes.

Finally, other, unmeasured factors may also account for the cultural differences in choices. For example, Taiwanese couples are more likely to live with their parents than are European American couples (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2005). Despite the scenario instructions to imagine themselves living with their spouse but not with their parents, the Taiwanese participants' decisions may have reflected different patterns of residence. In addition, studies using behavioral measures of helping would extend these findings. For example, a mark of maturity for Taiwanese young people is to give money to their parents (Nelson et al., 2004), but this practice is less common among European Americans.

Implications

These findings show that the cultural assumption of the primacy of the marriage relationship over the parent-child relationship may not apply to Taiwanese; thus, one may ask whether current theories and research that assume the priority of the spousal relationship can appropriately explain marriages in Taiwan and other Chinese contexts. For example, family systems theory and attachment theory tend to view the marital relationship as the key to family well-being (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). In contrast, the primary relationship in many East Asian societies is the parent-child relationship (F. L. Hsu, 1963; J. Hsu, Tseng, Ashton, McDermott, & Char, 1987). Even when Taiwanese young people marry, their parents' place in a hierarchy of attachment figures is high relative to the place of the spouse, and boundaries between the married couple and their parents may be blurred (Rothbaum et al., 2002). Inclusion of East Asian and other non-Western conceptions of marriage and filial relationships into theories such as family systems theory or attachment theory will reduce the likelihood that non-Western families are viewed as unhealthy and will enhance the global generalizability of the theories.

Therapists in societies that share a Confucian heritage (and those working with populations that originated in such societies, such as Asian-Americans) need theories, research, and counseling approaches that take account of the centrality of one's relationship with one's parents after marriage. For example, Chen (2009) proposed a self-relation coordination counseling model, which focuses on helping Chinese find a balance among achieving personal goals, meeting the needs and expectations of others (e.g., one's parents), and fulfilling role obligations and social expectations. Chen, Lee, and Lin (2008) found that when married Chinese applied the self-relation coordination process to their marriage, their marital satisfaction increased. Western researchers may find that increased inclusion of relationships with extended family into theories and research on close relationships will shed light on unexplored attitudes and patterns of behavior. Much like other research on cultural differences (such as Markus and Kitayama's, 1991, work on self-construals), theories that originate in non-Western settings provide insight into previously unexamined processes and practices that also may importantly shape close relationships and marriages in Western societies.

Finally, these findings speak to the question of how culture shapes particular behaviors. Do people consciously integrate cultural values (such as filial piety) and make conscious decisions based on these values (a top-down perspective), or do people develop habitual responses due to years of experience with everyday practices, habits, and customs (a more bottom-up approach)? We believe that both top-down and bottom-up processes are inextricably linked in this work. We suspect that participants reflected top-down values in their choices, but their speed to respond (Study 2) reflected habitual patterns and practices. In our view, even documenting the cultural differences in perceived norms or values for this topic is a contribution to the literature, given that the question seldom has been asked by Western researchers.

Conclusion

What would a Taiwanese Dear Abby say to the writer who is tired of being “second string”? Our findings suggest she would remind the writer of the importance of filial piety and of one’s responsibility to one’s parents. But to Western readers, Dear Abby’s actual response seems obvious (and her brief response suggests that she also thinks little elaboration is necessary). These studies suggest that what seems obvious, natural, or taken-for-granted in one cultural context may seem odd, unusual, or inappropriate in another cultural context. The vast majority of theorizing and research on close relationships has focused on Western cultural contexts, resulting in a “WEIRD” science of relationships that assumes Western norms and beliefs (Henrich et al., 2010). We will create a more global, inclusive science as researchers consider the ways cultural beliefs, such as filial piety, define family relationships.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Gender was a significant predictor in a logistic regression predicting the decision to save the mother versus spouse in the life-or-death situation among participants in the personal choice condition and the social norm condition. For participants who made decisions about an everyday helping situation, there was a significant effect of gender in the personal choice condition but not in the social norms condition. In each of the cases where there was a significant effect of gender, women were more likely than men to save or help their mother. For each of these analyses, the main effects of culture were significant even when gender was included in the analyses.
2. The certainty scores represent both the choice (spouse vs. mother) and the strength of that choice (low vs. high certainty). This continuous variable allowed us to conduct more robust mediation analyses than a dichotomous measure (choice, no choice) would allow. One consequence of this approach is that the variances for the two groups differ more than one usually finds with other Likert-scaled items. The group that chooses a target less frequently (such as the Americans who rarely choose the mother over the spouse) will have a lower standard deviation of the mean of the certainty of helping the mother measure because there are considerably more “0”s in the distribution. This could result in the overstatement of the effect size of the difference in means. The *d*s for the certainty measures in Studies 2 and 3 are all fairly large ($>.95$). This would be a concern if they were much larger than other effect sizes in the study. But examination of the effect sizes for the other, more conventional Likert-scaled items, especially obligation, shows that they are also often fairly large (the effect sizes for obligation are >1.0 in all but one case).
3. Because the items were not all Likert scaled, it was inappropriate to calculate Cronbach’s alphas for these measures. We used these diverse types of measures for two reasons: to try to avoid some of the measurement problems that arise with cross-cultural use of Likert-scaled measures and to demonstrate that the findings are not due entirely to the type of measure used. As recommended by Heine et al. (2002), these alternative sorts of measures (e.g., forced choice measures) are not as prone to reference group effects as are Likert-scaled measures, although they do present some challenges in other ways. We have conducted the analyses with these measures separately, and we found quite similar patterns of relations for the separate items as for the index. Thus, we have kept the items together in a single index. The exception was that the 1- to 7-point Likert-scaled item assessing closeness was not always a significant mediator in the analyses predicting certainty of saving one’s spouse. This could be due to reference group effects on Likert-scaled items that can obscure group differences in means (Heine et al., 2002).

4. There were no significant effects of gender in these analyses.
5. The results were very similar using logistic analyses, and after much deliberation, we decided to present the bootstrapping approach to investigation of mediation because it provides clearer confidence intervals and is simpler to explain. In addition, logistic regression is not advised when there are extremely low rates of one of the categories (such as the low rates of American's choosing the mother in the emergency condition; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).
6. Gender was a significant predictor in a logistic regression predicting the decision to save the mother versus spouse in the life-or-death condition and in the everyday situation; in both cases, women were more likely than men to save their mother. In both cases, the main effects of culture were significant even when gender was included in the analyses.

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