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What is This?
Culture and gender inequality: Psychological consequences of perceiving gender inequality

Zoe Kinias¹ and Heejung S. Kim²

Abstract
Previous research linking perceptions of gender inequality and psychological well-being were considered in light of the proposition that people from different cultures differ in their beliefs about how justifiable gender inequality is, and this research investigated these differences and their psychological consequences using cross-cultural comparisons. The results show that Hong Kong Chinese women saw gender inequality as less unjust (Study 1) and less unfair (Study 2) and valued gender equality less (Study 2) than European American women did. Gender inequality caused anger (Study 1) and predicted reduced life satisfaction (Study 2) more among European American women than among Hong Kong Chinese women. Implications for cross-cultural tolerance are discussed.

Keywords
culture, gender inequality, well-being

There are very few jobs that actually require a penis or vagina. All other jobs should be open to everybody. (Florynce Kennedy)

The wave of the future is not the conquest of the world by a single dogmatic creed but the liberation of the diverse energies of free nations and free men. (John F. Kennedy)

These two quotes represent American liberal strivings to be respectful of all people. At the heart of these ideals are the endorsement of equality for members of all social categories, including racial, cultural, and gender groups and the freedom that should be given to individuals and social groups to pursue their values and beliefs. This may superficially appear to be a simple and straightforward goal. However, the case of gender inequality in many cultures can pose a dilemma in the pursuit of these ideals. That is, in

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many cultures, men and women are not only treated unequally (which is still the case in most parts of the world), but such inequality is also vast and sanctioned by custom and law. But this inequality is often part of traditions rooted in cultural values deserving of respect. Thus, individuals who share the ideal of social equality and freedom must then decide between protecting the downtrodden of all cultures and respecting the cultural systems in which a particular social group receives systematically different treatments. In fact, there has long been a debate as to whether one should respect cultural traditions regarding the unequal treatment of women or protect women’s right to be treated equally against cultural traditions (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2007). Because cultural rights and women’s rights frequently impinge upon each other, many well-intentioned Western individuals are caught between conflicting goals to respect cultural rights and practices or to protect women’s equality in all societies.

Attempting to answer this question requires understanding how gender inequality is viewed and how it impacts women as a function of different cultural values. By the term “gender inequality”, we refer to differences between women and men in roles, opportunities, and outcomes in a given society. Thus, in the present research, we focus on an examination of how different cultural values impact the meanings and psychological consequences of gender inequality. We do so by comparing the cases of European American and Hong Kong Chinese women, people who are expected to differ in their valuing of gender equality. More specifically, we examined if the notion of gender inequality necessarily equates with negative treatment in the minds of women and how perceptions of gender inequality affect psychological well-being among women from a culture where equality is a foundational value and women from a culture where it is not.

Cultural influences on beliefs about equality

Social equality exists when members of all groups (gender, racial, ethnic, religious, class) have the same rights to work, to vote, to own property, and to receive healthcare and education. Social equality, along with liberty and fraternity, was one of the core ingredients of the Western Enlightenment and the humanist revolution, which infused even “common men” with rights. In fact, the writings of Western European enlightenment scholars such as John Locke, Thomas Paine, Henry David Thoreau, and Voltaire can be viewed as both the driving force of the American Revolution and precursors of more modern human rights movements in the United States (Bailyn, 1967). Western valuing of equality can be traced to Ancient Greek democracy, particularly as presented in Aristotle’s writings that emphasized free men’s right to participate in government (Bailyn, 1967; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Many conceptualizations of Judeo-Christian beliefs, which are dominant in America and culturally interwoven with American values, also involve equality (Henkin, 1998; Lindberg, 2003; Martin, 2005). Equality was among the ideas that were central to the movement of the Western European Enlightenment, which became the foundational framework for the French and American Revolutions, and ultimately for modern democracy (Bailyn, 1967).

Consequently, even though they are imperfectly practiced, freedom and equality are two of the most foundational American values. In the US cultural context, many of the debates regarding the relationships among different social groups center around equal rights and equal treatment, and any explicit violation of the value (i.e., explicit inequality, defined as members of some groups receiving fewer or inferior rights to work, to vote, to own property, or to receive healthcare and education than other groups) is viewed as problematic. For example, it appears that opposing sides in the debates regarding affirmative action build their arguments on the grounds of unfairness and unequal treatment (e.g., Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006).

In this cultural context, gender inequality is synonymous with negative and unjust treatment of women relative to men. Underscoring this point, a body of Western research has sought to
define and understand the conditions under which unequal treatment is interpreted as discrimination (e.g., Inman & Baron, 1996; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; O’Brien, Kinias, & Major, 2008; Rodin, Price, Bryson, & Sanchez, 1990; Stangor et al., 2003).

However, the value of equality is not shared in all cultures to the same extent. For example, East Asian cultural traditions place greater emphasis on proper conduct within the social hierarchy. One of the central teachings of Confucianism that provided much of the foundation for social organization in East Asia regards the different duties of people who occupy a different status in core social relationships (Uno, 1991). For example, the notion of filial piety concerns the relationship between parents (and elders) and their offspring (and juniors) and teaches that the parents should show benevolence toward their offspring and the offspring should show reverence to their parents (Ho, 1994; 1996). Similar emphases are placed on the duties that arise due to different positions one occupies in hierarchical social relationships, such as the relationship between the ruler and subjects, or between husband and wife (Uno, 1991). These examples show that East Asian cultural tradition emphasizes the harmonious maintenance of social hierarchy, rather than equality. And many studies show that this value, such as filial piety, has a psychological impact even to this date (e.g., Ishii-Kuntz, 1997; Ho, 1996; Yeh & Bedford, 2003).

Previous theory and research speak to the idea that there is cultural variability in the valuing of equality (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994; Hofstede, 1984; Lawler & Bae, 1998; Trommsdorff & Iwawaki, 1989). For example, power distance is the extent to which less powerful individuals accept their place in society, and power distance varies as a function of culture (Hofstede, 1984). Power distance is a dimension that is independent from individualism/collectivism, both conceptually and empirically (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994; Hofstede, 1984). An assessment of power distance beliefs within a multinational organization demonstrated that individuals in Asia, Latin America, and the Mediterranean endorse power distance items more than do individuals in the United States and Northern Europe (Hofstede, 1984). We interpret this cultural difference in power distance within an organizational context as evidence for different cultural beliefs about the appropriateness of some social groups occupying different roles and higher status than others.

Evidence from other literatures also supports our hypothesis that there is cultural variation in valuing of equality (Pratto et al., 2000). Social dominance orientation is founded in general beliefs that some groups are more deserving than others, and is related to sexism and other forms of oppression (Pratto et al., 2000; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Relative to North American individuals, Chinese individuals supported beliefs that some groups deserve higher status and better outcomes than other groups (Pratto et al., 2000). Pratto and colleagues’ analyses focused on the relationship between social dominance orientation and culturally relevant forms of social inequality, but their report of mean levels and standard deviations enabled us to make cross-cultural comparison of levels of social dominance orientation. Thus, there is further empirical support for the idea that there may be cultural variation in beliefs about equality.

**Cultural influences on interpretations of gender equality**

Research has also found cultural differences in people’s attitudes toward gender equality. Hostile justifications for gender inequality in the form of beliefs that women seek to gain power over men in underhanded ways (and are therefore less capable or deserving of equal status) are less prevalent within Western cultural contexts than outside them (Glick et al., 2000; Napier, Thorisdottir, & Jost, 2010). For example, two large-scale studies have shown hostile justification for women’s unequal treatment to be higher among women in Japan and South Korea than among women in Northern Europe, the USA, and Australia (Glick et al., 2000; Napier et al., 2010). This suggests that women in Western cultural contexts may see gender inequality as more unjustified than do women in East Asian cultural contexts.
Then, given the cultural difference in the perceived value of gender equality, would the psychological meaning of gender inequality be the same across cultures? We predicted that for women from cultures in which equality is not a central value, gender inequality does not necessarily carry either as negative or as malevolent a meaning as it does for women from Western cultures. Thus, gender inequality, the difference between men’s and women’s roles and opportunities, may not equate to injustice and poor treatment of women. And consequently, the perception of gender inequality could have different psychological implications among women from these different cultures.

**Gender equality and life satisfaction**

To the extent that equality is one of the central values and rights in their cultural context, Western women have expectations and desires for equal treatment (Denmark, Nielson, & Scholl, 1993). Given this expectation, when women in Western cultures experience gender inequality or perceive that gender inequality is prevalent, violating their fundamental right, the perception often leads to reduced emotional well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Klonoff, Landrine, & Campbell, 2000; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995; Major et al., 2002). For example, Klonoff, Landrine, and colleagues (Klonoff et al., 2000; Landrine et al., 1995) have demonstrated relationships between American women’s self-reported experiences with sexism and psychiatric symptoms. Within the cultural context of the United States, there is evidence that attributing rejections to discrimination rather than other potential causes of rejection buffer feelings of well-being, but it is essential to note that this theory and the relevant findings are specific to contexts where the comparison condition is some form of failure or rejection other than discrimination, rather than receiving positive outcomes (Crocker & Major, 1989; see Major, et al., 2002 for a review). Generally speaking, the more women perceive gender inequality and sexism, the lower their psychological well-being.

However, women in other cultures might be more likely to expect and more willing to accept gender differences to the extent that the value of gender equality is not as important to them. Napier et al.’s (2010) paper also speaks to the issue of gender equality and well-being. They showed that in countries having objectively higher gender equality (including Western European Enlightenment countries in Northern Europe and the USA), individuals holding a combination of benevolent sexist and hostile sexist beliefs are more satisfied with their lives than are individuals who hold hostile sexist beliefs without the benevolent justification complementing those beliefs. There was no such relationship in objectively lower gender equality countries, such as a historically Confucian-based country, Korea. Napier and colleagues framed this finding in the context of complementary justifications for inequalities, such that ironically, there is less need for justification for inequality when equality is objectively low than when equality is objectively high. This prior research focused on objective levels of gender equality rather than on women’s perceptions of equality or desired states of equality, so it did not directly test our hypotheses, but it does suggest that, in line with our thinking, gender inequality may be less psychologically problematic for women in cultures that value equality relatively less. Stated differently, information that they have different social roles and life outcomes because of their gender might not be as upsetting for East Asian women as it is for Western women. Consequently, perceptions of gender inequality would not lead to life satisfaction and well-being as strongly among East Asian women as it is typically found among women from Western cultures.

**Overview of the present research**

In the present research, we compared women who differed in their valuing of egalitarianism vs. hierarchy, due to their cultural background. Prior research has qualitatively investigated the manner in which gender roles and beliefs about gender equality differ between the USA and Hong Kong. That research has shown that cultural norms prescribe more similarity of gender roles in Western
than in Eastern cultural contexts (e.g., Cheung, 1997; Denmark et al., 1993; Kim, 1993; Sukemune, Shiraishi, Sharakawa, & Matsumi, 1993; Yu, 1993).

The two studies presented here examined cognitive and emotional responses to gender inequality among Hong Kong Chinese and European American women. Both studies investigated how unjust gender inequality is perceived to be, and both studies investigated how perceptions of gender inequality relate to psychological wellbeing in the two cultures. We did not expect Hong Kong Chinese women to consider inequality a positive state, but hypothesized that the value of equality is less central in their culture, that inequality does not equivalently violate their sense of justice, and that equality is valued relatively less. Thus, perceiving gender inequality should be less upsetting to Hong Kong Chinese women than to European American women. We hypothesized that the perception of gender inequality would be viewed more negatively and have more negative psychological effects among European American women than among Hong Kong Chinese women.

Study 1

In Study 1, European American and Hong Kong Chinese women read articles indicating that gender inequality was either high or low, and then we measured their perceptions of the injustice of inequality in gender treatment, the extent to which they thought sexism would impact their own lives, and their emotional reactions. In this initial demonstration, we experimentally manipulated the seeming degree of gender inequality in society in order to measure women's psychological reaction caused by the perception of gender inequality. In this study, we predicted that European American women would think that inequality in gender treatment was more unjustified than Hong Kong Chinese women would. We also predicted that European American women would feel more threatened and angry following evidence of gender inequality than following evidence of gender equality, and that these effects would be attenuated or eliminated among Hong Kong Chinese women.

Method

Participants 88 female college students participated in this study for partial fulfillment of a psychology course requirement or for pay. Thus, 48 European American (EAm) women received course credit or US$5 for participation in the United States and 40 Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) received HK$50 (equivalent to approximately US$5) for participation in Hong Kong China. The European American women were slightly younger ($M = 18.79, SD = 1.66$) than the Hong Kong Chinese women ($M = 20.35, SD = 1.61$), $t(86) = 4.44, p < .001$. Age was not a significant predictor of any dependent variables (all $ps > .40$), so it is not discussed further.

Design and procedure This study was a 2 (cultural group: Hong Kong Chinese vs. European American) x 2 (gender inequality manipulation: high vs. low) quasi-experiment. All experimental sessions were conducted in classrooms on large university campuses. Because English is the official language of Hong Kong University, the experimental materials were identical at both locations. Participants were run by female experimenters in groups of 3 to 10, and there was always one or more male participant in each experimental session to conceal the true goal of the research (responses from male participants were discarded). Participants were told that we were investigating “processing of media information” and that they would first read a “press release” and then answer some questions about what they had read. This “press release” actually served as the gender inequality manipulation, as participants were randomly assigned to either read that gender inequality is high or low. The source of information was left unspecified. These manipulations were adapted from McCoy and Major (2003). The high inequality manipulation press release reported that sexism is pervasive, that women earn less money than men, that a “glass ceiling” prevents women’s upward mobility, and
that men hold stereotyped views of women. The low inequality manipulation press release reported that sexism is now minimal, that women’s salaries are rising, that women are “getting ahead” professionally, and that men no longer endorse negative stereotypes about women. After reading the equality manipulation, participants reported their justification beliefs and answered dependent measures and manipulation checks. Then participants were debriefed, compensated, thanked for participating, and dismissed.

Dependent measures

Injustice beliefs Participants completed a 3-item scale reporting how unjustified they believed women’s status was: “Differences in status between men and women are the result of injustice”, “Differences in status between men and women are fair” (r), and “It is unfair that women make less than men in the workplace.” Response choices were anchored at 0 = “strongly disagree” and 6 = “strongly agree”. We averaged these three items to form a composite of injustice beliefs (Hong Kong Chinese \( \alpha = .68 \), European American \( \alpha = .66 \)).

Threat We assessed the extent to which women felt personally threatened by sexism with three items: “Sexism will affect many areas of my life”, “Sexism will have a severe impact on my life”, and “Sexism will prevent me from reaching some of my goals.” These items were adapted from the three most face-valid items used by McCoy and Major (2003) to assess the threat of racism. These response choices were also anchored at 0 = “not at all” and 6 = “very much”. The three threat items were reliable (Hong Kong Chinese \( \alpha = .86 \), European American \( \alpha = .85 \)), so we averaged them to form a scale.

Manipulation check

Participants responded to one item measuring the effect of our gender inequality manipulation: “Women attain less prestigious positions in society.” Response choices were anchored at 0 = “not at all” and 6 = “very much”.

Results

Manipulation check

The manipulation was successful. Women in the high inequality condition (\( M = 4.20, SD = 1.03 \)) indicated that women attain less prestigious positions in society than did women in the low inequality condition (\( M = 2.07, SD = 1.37 \)), \( F(1, 84) = 66.74, p < .001 \). There was no main effect of culture or interaction, \( Fs < 2.50, ps > .120 \).

Dependent measures

Injustice beliefs European American women (\( M = 4.45, SD = 1.08 \)) thought that gender differences in status were more unjust than did Hong Kong Chinese women (\( M = 3.96, SD = 1.04 \)), \( F(1, 84) = 4.623, p = .034 \). There was no main effect of experimental condition or interaction, \( Fs < 1, ps > .700 \).

Threat There was no main effect of cultural context on the extent to which women found gender inequality threatening, \( F(1, 84) = 0.85, p = .360 \). There was a main effect of experimental condition, \( F(1, 84) = 8.06, p = .006 \), which was qualified by a significant interaction, \( F(1, 84) = 5.14, p = .026 \) (see Figure 1). Simple effects tests of the manipulation in each cultural context revealed that European American women in the high inequality condition felt significantly more threatened by gender inequality (\( M = 3.13, SD = 1.32 \)) than did European American women in...
the low inequality condition ($M = 1.64, SD = 1.00$), $F(1, 84) = 14.34, p < .001$. Hong Kong Chinese women, however, did not feel more threatened by gender inequality in the high inequality condition ($M = 2.73, SD = 1.57$) than in the low inequality condition ($M = 2.57, SD = 1.54$), $F(1, 84) = 0.15, p = .699$. These results support the idea that Hong Kong Chinese women are not psychologically impacted by gender inequality as much as European American women are.

**Anger** Recall that we also sought to explore how cultural context affected women’s emotional responses to unequal treatment. There was a main effect of experimental condition, $F(1, 84) = 27.33, p < .001$, a main effect of cultural context, $F(1, 84) = 10.03, p = .002$, and an interaction $F(1, 84) = 9.36, p = .003$ (see Figure 2). Consistent with our second hypothesis, the European American women were significantly angrier in the high inequality condition ($M = 2.94, SD = 1.46$) than in the low inequality condition ($M = .78, SD = .89$), $F(1, 84) = 37.78, p < .001$. Hong Kong Chinese women were somewhat angrier in the high inequality condition ($M = 1.32, SD = 1.33$) than in the low inequality condition, but this difference was not statistically significant ($M = .75, SD = 1.14$), $F(1, 84) = 2.15, p = .146$.

**Discussion**

Study 1 provided initial support for predictions based on the theoretical framework that gender equality is more important to European American than Hong Kong Chinese women. First, Study 1 demonstrated that the psychological impact of gender inequality differs as a function of cultural context. European American women felt more threatened and angry following the inequality manipulation than did Hong Kong Chinese women. Thus, our European American sample replicated prior research on women’s responses to gender inequality (e.g., Major et al., 2002), such that European American women exposed to evidence of gender inequality felt angrier than did women exposed to evidence of gender equality. In contrast to most prior research conducted in Western cultural contexts, however, evidence regarding gender inequality did not affect Hong Kong Chinese women’s anger levels.

We hypothesized that European American women would see gender inequality as more unjust than Hong Kong Chinese women would, but in Study 1 we did not find the predicted interaction effect or the main effect of manipulated perceived inequality. Instead, we observed a main effect of culture. Hong Kong Chinese women indicated that relative to European American women, they believe that gender differences in life outcomes are justified. At first, this seemed counter to our hypothesis, because the intended purpose of this measure was to examine participants’ justice assessment of the “current” society given the manipulated information as a function of culture. It appears that participants were not influenced by the manipulation in responding to these injustice belief items, and we suspect that it...
is due to the way in which these items were phrased. The items such as “Differences in status between men and women are the result of injustice” are more likely to tap into people’s ideals and values, rather than assess a given reality of the society (as informed by the manipulation). Thus, we believe that these items might have measured participants’ chronic belief about how justifiable gender inequality is, independent from and unaffected by the manipulated information. This finding suggests that Hong Kong Chinese women in general consider gender inequality from a different cultural perspective than do European American women.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was designed to assess the process through which culture moderates the psychological effects of gender inequality on women’s well-being. This study also tested the hypotheses that culture provides a framework for interpretation of gender inequality and that European American women experience greater psychological effects of gender inequality than Hong Kong Chinese women do. To test these hypotheses more directly, we measured women’s perceptions of how equal gender roles should ideally be, how equal they actually are, how fair the distribution of opportunities is, and how satisfied with their lives women from both cultural contexts are. Our goal in this study was to directly examine how much gender equality is valued, and whether the relationship between the perception of gender inequality and general life satisfaction would differ among women from these two cultures. In this study, we had three predictions. First, we predicted that European American women would value gender equality more than Hong Kong Chinese women would. Second, we predicted that gender inequality would relate to unfairness appraisals more among European American women than among Hong Kong Chinese women. Unlike Study 1 in which we measured how unfair people believe the notion of inequality to be, in Study 2, we measured the unfairness of the perceived current state of gender inequality. We predicted that the negative relationship between perceptions of gender inequality and life satisfaction would be weaker among Hong Kong Chinese women than among European American women.

**Method**

**Participants** One hundred thirty-five women participated in this study for partial fulfillment of a course requirement or for pay. Seventy-one European American women received course credit or US$5 for participation in the United States, and 64 Hong Kong Chinese women received course credit or HK$500 (equivalent to approximately US$5) for participation in Hong Kong China. Again, the Hong Kong Chinese women (M = 21.00, SD = 1.44) were slightly older than that European American women (M = 19.61, SD = 1.47), and again the age difference does not influence any of the findings reported.

**Design and procedure** The design of this study was a 2 (culture: Hong Kong Chinese vs. European American) x continuous (perceived gender equality) correlational design in which unfairness appraisals and life satisfaction were the outcome variables. As in Study 1, this study was conducted by female experimenters in classrooms in large universities in Hong Kong and the USA. Study sessions were run by female experimenters from their own culture in all-female groups of 3 to 10 participants. Participants reported the extent to which they valued gender equality, the extent to which they perceived gender inequality, and their life satisfaction. Then participants were compensated, thanked for participating, and dismissed.

**Measures**

**Valuing gender equality** We measured the extent to which women valued gender equality with a 3-item scale (“How similar or different do you think women’s and men’s roles should be?”, “How much do you think women and men should be treated the same or different in work contexts?”, and “How much do you think women and men should be treated the same or different in family/
relationship contexts?”). This scale was anchored at 1 = completely different and 9 = exactly the same. These three items were reliable (Hong Kong Chinese α = .72, European American α = .73), so we averaged them to form a scale.

**Perceiving gender inequality** We measured the extent to which women perceived actual gender equality with a 4-item scale (“How similar or different do you think women’s and men’s roles are?”, “How much do you think women and men are treated the same or different in work contexts?”, “How much do you think women and men are treated the same or different in family/relationship contexts?”, and “How similar or different are women’s and men’s opportunities in life?”). This scale was also anchored at 1 = completely different and 9 = exactly the same, and we reverse coded the items so that higher numbers indicate greater perceptions of inequality. The four items were sufficiently reliable (Hong Kong Chinese α = .74, European American α = .65), so we averaged them to form a scale.

**Unfairness appraisals** We measured the extent to which women perceived the division of opportunities for women and men to be unfair with two items. These items were “To what extent do you think that the division of opportunities between women and men is fair or unfair?” and “To what extent do you think that the opportunities you have received because you are a woman are fair or unfair?” These items were anchored at 1 = completely unfair and 9 = completely fair. We recoded and combined these two correlated items (Hong Kong Chinese r = .427, p < .001, European American r = .410, p < .001) to form a composite measure of unfairness appraisals.

**Life satisfaction** We measured life satisfaction using Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin’s (1985) 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). This scale was selected for its demonstrated effectiveness in multiple cultural contexts and was reliable in our sample (Hong Kong Chinese α = .83, European American α = .84).

**Results**

**Valuing gender equality** Consistent with our first hypothesis, European American women (M = 7.05, SD = 1.44) valued gender equality more than did Hong Kong Chinese women (M = 6.32, SD = 1.59), t(133) = 2.81, p = .006. Although in an absolute sense women from both cultures thought gender equality was important, the EAm women thought it was more important than the HKC women did.

**Perceiving gender inequality** We tested for cultural differences in women’s naturally occurring perceptions of actual gender inequality. There was no difference between European American women’s (M = 5.30, SD = 1.28) and Hong Kong Chinese women’s (M = 5.20, SD = 1.48) perceptions of actual inequality, t(133) = −.44, p = .658.

**Perceived gender inequality and unfairness appraisals** Next, we analyzed the relationship between perceptions of gender inequality and appraisals of the unfairness of gender opportunities in each cultural context using hierarchical linear regression (Aiken & West, 1991). In preparation for analyses, we dummy coded culture (European American = 0, Hong Kong Chinese = 1) and centered the perceptions of gender inequality scale (M = 5.25, SD = 1.35). In step 1 of the analysis, we regressed unfairness perceptions on culture and perceived gender inequality. This step was statistically significant, R² = .097, F(2, 131) = 7.00, p = .001. Within this step, there was a main effect of perceived gender inequality (b = .329, t(131) = 3.74, p < .001) and no main effect of cultural context (b = .013, t(131) = .054, p = .957). Note the levels of unfairness appraisals among European American women (M = 3.51, SD = 1.54) and Hong Kong Chinese women (M = 3.49, SD = 1.31). In step 2, we added the interaction term to the regression equation. The interaction was statistically significant, ΔR² = .035, F(1, 130) = 5.25, p = .024 (see Figure 3). Analyses of simple slopes revealed relationships supportive of our hypothesis. Among European American women, there was a
significantly positive relationship between perceiving gender inequality and unfairness appraisals, $b = .517$, $t(130) = 4.33$, $p < .001$. There was no such relationship among Hong Kong Chinese women, $b = .120$, $t(130) = .96$, $p = .341$.

**Perceived gender inequality and life satisfaction** Finally, we analyzed the relationship between perceptions of gender inequality and life satisfaction in each cultural context using hierarchical linear regression with the same dummy coded and centered variables prepared for the analysis of unfairness appraisals. In step 1 of the analysis, we regressed life satisfaction on culture and perceived gender inequality, and this step was statistically significant, $R^2 = .187$, $F(2, 131) = 15.05$, $p < .001$. Within this step, there were main effects of cultural context ($b = 1.352$, $t(131) = 5.19$, $p < .001$), and of perceived gender equality ($b = −.190$, $t(131) = −1.97$, $p = .051$). The main effect of cultural context from that step is represented by these means and standard deviations among European American women and Hong Kong Chinese women ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 1.62$) and ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.41$), respectively. In step 2, we added the interaction term to the regression equation. The interaction was statistically significant, $\Delta R^2 = .024$, $F(1, 130) = 3.96$, $p = .049$ (see Figure 4). Again the simple slopes supported our hypothesis. Among European American women, there was a significant negative relationship between perceiving gender inequality and life satisfaction, $b = −.391$, $t(130) = −2.81$, $p = .006$. There was no such relationship among Hong Kong Chinese women, $b = −.011$, $t(130) = −.09$, $p = .932$.

**Discussion**

Study 2 provided additional support for our hypotheses. First, European American women endorsed the value of gender equality more than Hong Kong Chinese women did, which provides additional empirical support for our hypothesis that there are cultural differences in justification of gender inequality, although both groups of women endorsed equality well above the scale midpoint. Thus, it is important to note that gender inequality is viewed as a problem in both cultures, and the cultural difference that we observed is relative.

We found the moderated relationship between perceived gender inequality and psychological well-being, operationalized as life satisfaction. Consistent with much previous research on perceptions of sexism and women’s well-being (e.g., Klonoff et al., 2000; Landrine et al., 1995; Major et al., 2002) and with Study 1, the more European American women perceived gender inequality, the lower their life satisfaction was. In contrast to most prior research, but consistent with Study 1, Hong Kong Chinese women’s perceptions of gender inequality did not predict their life satisfaction, showing the consistent pattern with the findings in Study 1.
It is noteworthy that there was not a significant cultural difference in perceptions of actual gender inequality given that these two societies differ from each other in objective measures of their gender equality, such as income gap, given that there is a smaller gender gap in the USA than in Hong Kong (Economic status of women, 2008). We believe that this discrepancy (i.e., difference in the objective criteria but no difference in the subjective assessment) also supports our theorizing in that subjective experiences of gender inequality do not necessarily match objective conditions. That is, the American women, who are relatively more concerned about gender equality than the Hong Kong women, do not perceive greater gender equality even though the actual gender gap in the USA is relatively small compared to Hong Kong. Nevertheless, given our interest in the relationships between subjective perceptions of inequality and well-being within each culture, the women’s subjective ratings were a more appropriate measure and we focused our analyses accordingly.

Study 2 also demonstrated that European American women, but not Hong Kong Chinese women, connected gender inequality with unfairness. Just as in Study 1, where European American women indicated that inequality is more unjust than did Hong Kong Chinese women, the interpretation of inequality as unjust (i.e., the relationship between perceived inequality and seeing the distribution of opportunities as unfair) was stronger for European American women than for Hong Kong Chinese women. The Hong Kong Chinese women’s psychological disconnect between inequality and unfairness may seem surprising from a Western cultural perspective, but this finding supports the supposition that fulfilling the roles one is meant to play within a social system is considered virtuous in an East Asian cultural context (Uno, 1991).

General discussion
Summary and implications

These studies demonstrated support for hypotheses that inequality carries different cultural meanings among European Americans and Hong Kong Chinese. Study 1 demonstrated a cultural difference in how women react to gender inequality. Women in Hong Kong thought that gender inequality was more justified than European American women did. Study 1 also showed that information about gender equality affected the extent to which European American women, but not Hong Kong Chinese women, felt personally threatened by sexism.

Study 2 demonstrated cultural differences in valuing of gender equality and a psychological consequence of perceived gender inequality. European American women thought that gender equality was more important than did Hong Kong Chinese women. There was also a stronger relationship between perceptions of gender inequality and appraisals of the unfairness of women’s and men’s opportunities among European American than Hong Kong Chinese women. This finding provides evidence that the Western psychological relation between equality and fairness is attenuated in East Asian cultural contexts, which is consistent with the idea that social hierarchy is viewed as natural in East Asian cultural tradition (Uno, 1991).

In both studies we also found support for our hypothesis that gender inequality affects European American women’s psychological well-being more than it affects Hong Kong Chinese women’s well-being. Consistent with prior research (see Major et al., 2002), European American women’s psychological well-being was caused (Study 1) and predicted (Study 2) by their perceptions of gender-related inequality. However, we found that among Hong Kong Chinese women, there was no effect of the inequality manipulation on anger in Study 1, and no relationship between perceptions of gender inequality and life satisfaction in Study 2. We interpret these studies as providing support for the hypothesis that violations of gender equality affect Western women’s psychological well-being more than East Asian women’s psychological well-being.

Limitations and future questions

It should be noted that many of the effects we found are differences in degree. The absolute
scores for women of both cultures indicate that equality is generally seen as important and inequality is generally seen as unjustifiable. This means that although European American women believe that gender equality is more important than Hong Kong Chinese women do, both groups of women do believe that women and men should be treated more similarly than differently. This makes sense given that the values of interest are not exclusively held in only Eastern or Western cultural contexts. For example, although respecting the role one plays in society is relatively more important in East Asian cultural contexts than in the West, even in the United States, norms for behavior related to roles are known to influence individuals’ behavior (Katz & Kahn, 1966). This finding may also be due, in part, to characteristics of our Hong Kong participant samples. First, there are mixed cultural influences in Hong Kong, which include modernization and the British influence due to colonization (Cheung, 1997). Second, all samples were comprised of university students. Beyond that, our Hong Kong Chinese samples were from a large, English-language university in Hong Kong, which suggests that those women may have been especially “westernized” by Hong Kong standards. We feel, though, the fact that our Hong Kong Chinese samples were particularly westernized means that our studies provided especially strong tests of our hypotheses. This could have only minimized our opportunities to find cultural differences between Hong Kong Chinese and European American women’s psychological responses to gender inequality.

We noted above that our use of college student participants benefited the research by providing relatively similar Hong Kong Chinese and European American women to rule out alternative explanations for the findings, but this participant selection also limits the conclusions that should be drawn from the findings. It would not be appropriate based on these studies to generalize to women of different generations or to women who do not have the privilege of attending university.

There are two additional factors related to the conclusions to be drawn from this research. First, although confirmatory factor analysis can be used to test measurement invariance across cultures (e.g., Reise, Widaman, & Pugh, 1993), our samples were not large enough to facilitate use of this statistical technique. Thus it is possible that either gender equality or well-being are conceptualized differently in the two cultures, and these data do not allow for an analysis of this possibility. Second, although the theory we tested here was based specifically on features of the cultures we examined that would lead to different cognitive and emotional responses to gender inequality, there are other differences between the two cultures we examined that could be related to the findings. For example, objective markers of gender equality indicate that although the women in our studies reported similar levels, the United States is actually more gender egalitarian than Hong Kong China is (Economic status of women, 2008). It is possible that inequality is more upsetting for women in cultures that are actually relatively more egalitarian.

An important question for future research is how important gender equality is in cultural contexts other than Hong Kong and the USA, such as other Western and East Asian cultures, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa, to examine global norms for beliefs about gender equality and the psychological consequences of gender inequality. Previous gender research suggests that East Asians, Latin Americans, Middle Easterners, and Africans believe that women need to be cared for and protected (justifications for unequal treatment) more than do European Americans, Northern Europeans, and Australians (Glick et al., 2000; Napier et al., 2010). This suggests that the negative relationship between gender inequality and well-being might also be absent in these cultural contexts. It is also true that in nations with objectively higher levels of gender equality than the United States, such Sweden and Norway (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2009), gender inequality is potentially even more upsetting for women than it is in the United States.
Another important question the present research raises is how members of privileged groups within East Asian and Western cultural contexts differ in their interpretations of equality and the impact of inequality on their psychological processes. Research conducted in Western cultural contexts has illuminated the psychological consequences of privilege. In particular, research on White guilt has shown that it is a consequence of White privilege, inversely related to prejudice, and a predictor of some restitution efforts (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Richardson, 2005; Swim & Miller, 1999). Might members of high status gender, racial, or cultural groups outside Western cultural contexts feel less compunction about their privilege? Our research suggests that they may. For example, the experience of Japanese regarding Okinawans may not equate to White’s guilt regarding African Americans in the United States.

Cultural psychology has focused largely on psychological and behavioral consequences that emerge from cultural differences in independent and interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) or individualism/collectivism (Triandis, 1989). The distinction has been very fruitful in inspiring an impressive array of psychological research. However, the focus of the majority of the research utilizing this framework has focused on how cultures differ in their view and emphasis on the notion of individual freedom and agency in relatively non-hierarchical contexts. As much as the notion of liberty is a central value that varies among different cultures and implicates psychological tendencies, the notion of equality is also a central value that varies between different cultures (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) and can implicate psychological tendencies. Thus, we propose that it will be beneficial to examine the divergence in the meanings of equality and their psychological and behavioral consequences. Another core aspect of psychological differences resulting from cultural contexts may lie in beliefs about equality, and systematic examinations of its implications will be fruitful, as examining the implications of valuing freedom has been.

Conclusion

Having highlighted the lack of negative psychological consequences of gender inequality among Hong Kong Chinese women, in contrast to European American women, we would be irresponsible to ignore the big picture involving women’s rights. First, we are not claiming that it is acceptable to beat, rape, or otherwise dehumanize women or girls anywhere (e.g., Horowitz & Jackson, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 2007; Okin, 1998). Moreover, we recognize the facts that some women must work harder for each dollar earned and disallowed inheritance can also have negative financial and physical consequences for those women (e.g., Landrine et al., 1995; Russo, 1993).

It is not our intention to defend unequal treatment of women. We strongly feel that there are many instances of malevolent treatment of women that cannot be and should not be sanctioned in any cultural contexts. We suspect that in most cultures, people do make distinctions between teaching both sexes to fulfill their particular social roles while treating each other with benevolence and abusing and disrespecting women (e.g., in the case of Mencius’ teaching on benevolent treatment of subordinates; Uno, 1991).

Rather, it is our intention to show that the notion of equality in the sense of sameness of social roles might not be as central in the discussion of proper and fair treatments of women in many non-Western cultural contexts as in Western cultural contexts. We hope that increased knowledge about women’s beliefs about gender equality and inequality and their psychological responses to it can minimize cultural misunderstandings. Our research provides empirical support for the idea that respecting women according to Western definitions of respect (e.g., allowing women to occupy the same social roles and status as men) may not resonate with women everywhere. In fact, being able to play their culturally designated roles with respect may be even more important for individuals’ psychological well-being in many cases.
non-Western cultural contexts. We hope that this research can increase sensitivity and respect for cultural variation in beliefs about equality. In so doing, we hope to begin to disentangle the dilemma of how to treat women and those with different cultural views regarding the conduct of gender relationships.

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References


