Interpreting a Helping Hand: Cultural Variation in the Effectiveness of Solicited and Unsolicited Social Support

Taraneh Mojaverian and Heejung S. Kim

Pers Soc Psychol Bull published online 6 November 2012
DOI: 10.1177/0146167212465319

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://psp.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/11/05/0146167212465319

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Additional services and information for Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://psp.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> OnlineFirst Version of Record - Nov 6, 2012
What is This?
Imagine a student experiencing a great deal of stress due to multiple exams and paper deadlines. She could ask her friends for study tips or borrow their notes to prepare for the tasks. Or her friends might notice that she is stressed and offer help without her having to mention her trouble. In both cases, the content of the help and support could be similar, but the method of receipt differs. Would one method be more or less effective than the other? Would the student feel differently about herself and about the situation depending on how the help came about? And what are the factors that impact how she would feel about these different ways of receiving support?

Social support is defined as the perception or experience that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Wills, 1991). Social support has been found to ameliorate psychological and biological stress reactivity (Eisenberger, Taylor, Gable, Hilmert, & Lieberman, 2007), and the effects of lacking support on health and mortality are on par with well-established risk factors such as lipid levels and smoking (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Many studies show the benefit of perceived support availability, or comfort that is provided through being aware of the existence of a support network who could provide support if necessary (e.g., Thoits, 1995; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). However, the effectiveness of received social support is less clear. For example, research on social support visibility shows that perceived receipt of social support is more distressing than support that has not been perceived by the recipient (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). Wethington and Kessler (1986) also found that perceived support availability was a stronger predictor for adjustments to stressful life events than received support. Support recipients may interpret provision efforts as controlling or interfering (Lewis & Rook, 1999). When support is overly intrusive, it may increase stress instead of mitigating it (Shumaker & Hill, 1991).

In addition to the type of social support, another factor that seems to have an impact on the use and effect of social support is culture. Although there are a number of studies to show that culture is a significant moderator of social support seeking (see Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008, for a review), how culture influences the effects of social support receipt is less...
clear (e.g., Campos et al., 2008; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2003; Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007; Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008). Research has found both positive and negative effects from social support use for people from different cultures.

We suggest that one distinction that might explain these seemingly inconsistent outcomes of social support receipt is the type of receipt. In the present research, the main goal was to examine the psychological effect of solicited versus unsolicited received support among people from a more individualistic culture (European Americans) and people from a more collectivistic culture (Asian Americans).

**Culture and Social Support**

Studies have found variation in how people seek social support in different cultures (Kim et al., 2008; Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006; Taylor et al., 2004, 2007). These studies show that Asians/Asian Americans tend to avoid seeking social support out of a concern for disrupting group harmony and relational impacts, whereas these factors are not as strongly considered among European Americans (Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004).

The effect of social support is less clear in cultural contexts as well. On one hand, seeking support may have worse psychological and biological effects for Asians than for European Americans. One study found that explicit support seeking in a lab setting increased production of the stress hormone, cortisol, among Asians, whereas it did not among European Americans (Taylor et al., 2007). On the other hand, other research shows that perceiving that one has received social support or social assurance has more positive benefits for collectivistic people than individualistic people (Campos et al., 2008; Morling et al., 2003). For instance, one study showed that perceived receipt of emotional support predicted positive emotions more strongly among Asians than among European Americans (Uchida et al., 2008).

We propose that a key distinction to explain these findings is when people seek social support or are received support. Receiving social support without asking may have a fundamentally different effect from receiving social support as a result of active seeking. Making a contrast between unsolicited support, support that is given without prompting from the recipient, and solicited support, support that is given after the recipient asks for assistance, may be valuable in disentangling the type of support receipt that is most beneficial by culture.

**Culture-Specific Models of Relationships and Social Support**

Differences in relational norms across cultures influence how support is sought and received (Kim et al., 2006). Individualistic cultures, such as North Americans, prize independence and personal agency, viewing the self as autonomous, distinct, and separate from others, with a great emphasis on personal goals and actions based on personal beliefs (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Collectivistic cultures, such as East Asians, encourage interdependence and foster social harmony, viewing the self as intertwined with others, with group goals superseding personal interests (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989).

Given the cultural emphasis on interdependence in Asian cultural contexts, soliciting support could lead to greater concerns for potentially negative relational outcomes for Asian/Asian Americans (Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004), and therefore may lead to negative psychological outcomes. In contrast, unsolicited support receipt may affirm the self as interdependent, as this support is freely given by the provider and may be interpreted as genuine care and concern for the recipient (Chentsova-Dutton, 2009; Uchida et al., 2008). Feeling connected to and cared for by others and feeling strengthened social ties may lead to greater self-worth for Asian Americans, as previous research on relationship esteem, feeling that one’s relationships are harmonious and positive, as a basis of self-worth in Asian cultural contexts suggests (Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Thus, unsolicited support could lead to positive psychological outcomes, such as higher self-esteem and greater positive affect. While research has found that self-enhancement is relatively less central among collectivistic cultures (e.g., Heine et al., 1999), studies have found that self-esteem does play a role in well-being among Asians, especially in contexts where social relationships are also involved (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997; Uchida et al., 2008), suggesting that self-esteem may be an important component of the solicited and unsolicited support distinction for Asians.

In contrast, for European Americans from cultures that place greater emphasis on personal agency than interpersonal obligations, relational implications would be a less central issue. Thus, the potential relational implications of different forms of support receipt may not lead to particularly differentiated psychological outcomes. Previous research shows that priming of different relationships impacts Asian Americans’ willingness to seek social support and their anticipation for support outcomes more strongly than European Americans, suggesting that these types of relational concerns may be less salient factors for them when considering social support use and outcomes (Kim et al., 2006). Therefore, these different types of support receipt may not matter significantly for European Americans.

However, previous research findings suggest that receiving unsolicited support may have more negative psychological effects than receiving solicited support for European Americans. For instance, Bolger and Amarel (2007) found that Americans exhibit negative responses when visible support is given in an unsolicited manner. Another line of research by Kappes and Shrout (2011) on support provider goals found that when support providers held personal goals for
the support recipient’s achievement, providers gave more unsolicited support. This increased amount of unsolicited support, in turn, led to more negative support outcomes, especially among the recipients with lower expectations of success. Yet, the act of explicitly seeking social support could reinforce self-esteem by confirming one’s worth in the eyes of others, particularly among European Americans (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

Previous studies on culture and social support seeking (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004) have essentially researched how soliciting support has differing impacts in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, but cultural differences in the effects of receiving solicited or unsolicited support have not yet been explored. Kim et al. (2006) found that participants from collectivistic cultures were more likely to report receiving unsolicited support compared with those from individualistic cultures, suggesting that the relative prevalence of unsolicited support is higher in more collectivistic cultures than in more individualistic cultures. Additionally, studies that show greater benefit of social support among people from more collectivistic cultures tend to focus on the perceived receipt of social support, which may combine receipt of both solicited and unsolicited social support. As a whole, previous findings on culture and social support raise the possibility that when unsolicited social support is received, its effect may be more positive than when solicited social support is received among those from more collectivistic cultures.

Present Research

Two experimental studies examined psychological responses to solicited and unsolicited social support receipt among European Americans and Asian Americans, both through the use of actual support receipt in a laboratory setting and the use of vignettes. In Study 1, participants were exposed to a stressor in a laboratory setting and either given the opportunity to enlist help from a fellow participant or spontaneously received help on the task and then reported how stressed they felt by the task. In Study 2, participants read a series of vignettes describing a hypothetical stressor and a coping scenario involving either solicited or unsolicited social support. Participants were asked to rate their emotional responses to the vignettes to address whether unsolicited and solicited support have differing psychological effects. Building on previous research on culture and social support, we hypothesized that Asian Americans would experience better outcomes from unsolicited support than solicited support, such as experiencing less stress (Study 1) and more positive emotions (Study 2). In contrast, we hypothesized that European Americans would be either not strongly impacted by these different types of support receipt or even experience better outcomes from solicited support compared with unsolicited support. We also measured participants’ self-esteem (Studies 1 and 2) and feelings of closeness to the support provider (Study 1) in response to support receipt, as we considered these two factors as potential mediators for cultural differences in support outcomes.

Study I

In Study 1, participants randomly received solicited or unsolicited support on a stressful task and reported their state self-esteem, their feelings toward support provider, and their assessment of the task. First, we predicted that Asian Americans would seek less solicited support than European Americans, replicating previous findings (Taylor et al., 2004). However, it is important to clarify that the focus of the study is what psychological effects occur as a result of being in a situation in which either one has to ask for help to receive it (whether the person actually asks for it or not), or in a situation where help is given to a person without asking for it.

More importantly, for Asian Americans, we predicted that being in a situation where one has to solicit support to receive help would lead to greater stress and lower self-esteem than being in a situation where support is given in an unsolicited manner. In contrast, we predicted that European Americans would show no differences or the opposite pattern of differences in the effects of being in a solicited support situation compared with an unsolicited support situation. In this study, we focused particularly on self-esteem related to intellectual performance as this would be more situation relevant than other aspects of self-esteem, such as personal appearance, given the emphasis on performance in the task. Performance self-esteem and liking for the study partner were considered as potential mediators for cultural differences in stress responses to solicited versus unsolicited support.

Method

Participants. A total of 70 participants, ranging in age from 18 to 27 years (M = 19.9, SD = 1.60), took part in this study. In all, 38 participants (58% female) were Asian Americans and 32 participants (75% female) were European Americans. All participants were students at the University of California, Santa Barbara and enrolled in the study for class credit or US$10 in payment.

Materials and procedure. Participants were told that they would be involved in an experiment on interpersonal cooperation between people with different levels of expertise, in a pair with another participant. Participants worked on a set of math problems on a computer, and they were told that their partner was a math major who would be working on an unrelated task but could give advice to the participant if requested. The partner was a confederate who was trained to be knowledgeable on the presented math problems. There were two female European American and Asian American confederates, and ethnicity of the confederate was counterbalanced.
There were a series of 20 math questions of varying difficulty, with 15 being selected as easier problems from general Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and 5 harder questions taken from the advanced math subject GRE. As an incentive for performance, participants were told that they would be entered into a raffle to win US$50 if they answered more than 14 questions correctly on the task. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: solicited support or unsolicited support. In the solicited support condition, the confederate gave assistance on math problems only if it was requested directly by the participant. In the unsolicited support condition, the confederate provided help without the participant asking for it on all of the 5 difficult questions (i.e., offering help as soon as a hard question showed up on the monitor). Participants’ performance, in terms of accuracy and speed, was recorded by the computer. The confederate was ostensibly filling out a questionnaire in the same room. The confederate sat at a table behind the participant, facing the participant’s computer screen, so that it could be seen by both the participant and the confederate. In the unsolicited condition, the confederate waited until the participant had time to read the question (30 seconds) before approaching to help with the hard questions. This timing was chosen so that the participant (and presumably the confederate) would have time to view the problem but not to have time to consider a response. Whether the participant sought help on a question was recorded by the confederate on a checklist hidden inside the bogus questionnaire packet.

After the math test was completed, the confederate reported to the experimenter that she was finished with her questionnaire and the confederate was escorted out of the room. Then, participants filled out questionnaires regarding their state self-esteem (20 items, i.e., I feel good about myself; I feel that others respect and admire me; a = .89; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), the stressfulness of the task (5 items; a = .84), and evaluation of their partner (4 items; a = .80). State self-esteem was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all and 5 = extremely). A subset of the State Self-Esteem scale related to intellectual performance was combined into a composite (5 items, i.e., I feel confident about my abilities; I feel as smart as others; a = .86). Task stressfulness was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all and 5 = very much). Task stressfulness items included how stressful the task was, and how overwhelmed the participant felt by the task. For the partner evaluation, participants were asked questions about how close they felt to their partner, how much they liked their partner, how much they enjoyed interacting with their partner, and how helpful they thought their partner was on an 8-point scale (1 = not at all and 8 = very much).

**Results**

For Study 1, our main dependent variables were participant responses to each situation: reported self-esteem, particularly performance self-esteem, how stressful the task was, and evaluation of the confederate. We also tested performance self-esteem and partner evaluation as potential mediators of task stressfulness. In addition, we looked at cultural differences in task performance to see if the two cultures differed in their ability regarding the task. We were also interested in support seeking behaviors as a way of replicating previous studies on culture and support seeking (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004). Preliminary analyses showed no effects for gender or confederate ethnicity; therefore, gender and confederate ethnicity were subsequently dropped from analyses.

**Support Seeking.** First, a 2 (culture: Asian American vs. European American) × 2 (condition: unsolicited vs. solicited) ANOVA was conducted for support seeking behaviors. Consistent with previous research, there was a main effect of number of questions asked by culture, F(1, 65) = 4.55, p = .037, \( \eta^2_p = .06 \). Conceptually replicating previous findings (e. g., Taylor et al., 2004), Asian American participants (M = 2.62, SD = 2.82) asked for help on fewer items than European American participants (M = 3.97, SD = 2.36). This effect was largely driven by support seeking on hard questions, F(1, 65) = 6.65, p = .012, \( \eta^2_p = .09 \). There were no effects by culture for easy questions, F(1, 65) = 1.15, p = .238, \( \eta^2_p = .02 \). The main effect of condition and the interaction were not significant, F(1, 65) = 1.36, p = .527, \( \eta^2_p = .01 \); F(1, 65) = .76, p = .387, \( \eta^2_p = .01 \). In addition, there were no significant differences in the number of questions asked by confederate ethnicity, F(1, 65) = .14, p = .712, \( \eta^2_p < .01 \).

**Effects of Solicited Versus Unsolicited Support.** Average speed and accuracy were initially entered as covariates as the performance itself should impact how participants felt during the task, and the only variable that was a significant covariate was average speed. Thus, to test our other target dependent variables, a series of 2 (culture: Asian American vs. European American) × 2 (condition: unsolicited vs. solicited) ANCOVAs were conducted controlling for the average speed for question response completion.1 Participants may have used time to gauge their performance as they received no feedback on accuracy during the task.

**Task stressfulness.** For reported task stressfulness, there was no significant main effect of culture, F(1, 65) = 1.97, p = .165, \( \eta^2_p = .03 \), or condition, F(1, 65) = .24, p = .625, \( \eta^2_p < .001 \). There was a significant culture by condition interaction, F(1, 65) = 5.31, p = .024, \( \eta^2_p = .08 \). Pairwise comparisons of the simple effects test using the overall error term (Fisher’s least significant difference) showed that, consistent with predictions, within cultures, Asian Americans rated the task as more stressful in the solicited condition (M = 3.89, SD = 1.29) than in the unsolicited condition (M = 3.17, SD = .89), F(1, 65) = 4.23, p = .044. European Americans did not significantly differ by condition (M = 3.11, SD = 1.17 for solicited; M = 3.55, SD = 1.41 for unsolicited), F(1, 65) = 1.54, p = .220. Between-culture pairwise comparisons showed
that Asian Americans found the task to be more stressful than European Americans did in the solicited condition, \( F(1, 65) = 6.45, p = .013 \), whereas there were no between-culture differences in the unsolicited condition, \( F(1, 65) = .36, p = .362 \) (see Figure 1).

**Self-esteem.** Analysis on the composite of state self-esteem showed a main effect of culture, \( F(1, 65) = 4.14, p = .046, \eta^2_p = .06 \). European Americans (\( M = 3.90, SD = .56 \)) reported higher state self-esteem than Asian Americans (\( M = 3.61, SD = .62 \)). The condition, \( F(1, 65) = 1.34, p = .251, \eta^2_p = .02 \), and interaction effects were not significant, \( F(1, 65) = .97, p = .329, \eta^2_p = .02 \).

As the self-esteem regarding one’s performance might be particularly relevant in this experimental situation, the performance state self-esteem subset was separately examined. Asian Americans reported higher performance self-esteem than Asian Americans (\( M = 3.61, SD = .56 \)) reported higher performance self-esteem in the solicited condition (\( M = 3.97, SD = .56 \)) than in the solicited condition (\( M = 3.90, SD = .56 \)) in the solicited condition (\( M = 3.97, SD = .56 \)) and in the unsolicited condition (\( M = 3.52, SD = .77 \), \( F(1, 65) = 4.59, p = .036 \). European Americans did not significantly differ by condition (\( M = 4.12, SD = .60 \) for solicited; \( M = 3.92, SD = .77 \) for unsolicited), \( F(1, 65) = .66, p = .420 \). Between-culture pairwise comparisons showed that Asian Americans reported lower performance self-esteem than European Americans in the solicited condition, \( F(1, 65) = 7.06, p = .010 \), whereas there were no between-culture differences in the unsolicited condition, \( F(1, 65) = .01, p = .914 \).

**Performance self-esteem as a mediator for task stress.** To test whether the culture and condition interaction of task stressfulness was mediated by reported current performance self-esteem, bootstrapping analyses with bias-corrected confidence estimates were conducted using the methods described by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

Perceived task stressfulness was entered as the dependent variable, the culture by condition interaction term was entered as the predictor variable, and the performance self-esteem was entered as the proposed mediator in the SPSS macro created by Preacher and Hayes for bootstrap analyses of proposed mediators. Average speed was entered as a covariate, as well as the main effects of culture and condition.

The bootstrap results indicated that the total effect of the interaction term on task stressfulness, \( c = .297, t(70) = 2.305, p = .024 \), became nonsignificant when performance self-esteem (our proposed mediator) was included in the model, \( c’ = .152, t(70) = 1.355, p = .180 \). The effect of interaction term on performance self-esteem was significant, \( a = −.155, t(70) = −2.048, p = .045 \), and performance self-esteem predicted task stressfulness, \( b = −.942, t(70) = 5.287, p < .001 \).

Furthermore, the analyses revealed, with 95% confidence, that the indirect effect was significant, with a point estimate of .141 and a 95% bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) bootstrap confidence interval (CI) = [.012, .370]. This indicates that performance self-esteem mediated the effect of the cultural variation by support condition in task stressfulness. See Figure 2 for the full mediational model.

**Partner evaluation.** There was a main effect of condition regarding participant ratings of the confederate, \( F(1, 65) = 7.41, p = .008, \eta^2_p = .10 \). Participants in the unsolicited condition (\( M = 6.64, SD = 1.49 \)) rated the confederate more positively than those in the solicited condition (\( M = 5.85, SD = .95 \)). There were no significant effects for culture or the interaction variable, \( F(1, 65) = .155, p = .695, \eta^2_p < .001 \); \( F(1, 65) = 2.01, p = .161, \eta^2_p = .03 \). Partner evaluation, as a measure of closeness to the support provider, was considered as a possible mediator for cultural differences in solicited and unsolicited support outcomes. However, as there were no culture or culture by condition effects, it was not a successful mediator.

![Figure 1. Task stressfulness ratings by culture and condition (Study 1)](image)

![Figure 2. Performance self-esteem as a mediator for task stressfulness (Study 1)](image)
Task Performance. To look at actual task performance, a series of 2 (culture: Asian American vs. European American) × 2 (condition: unsolicited vs. solicited) ANOVAs were conducted for number of correct answers (accuracy) and the average time elapsed for question completion in milliseconds (speed).

Accuracy. Looking specifically at accuracy on the difficult questions, there was a marginal main effect of culture, with Asian Americans having lower accuracy (M = 3.55, SD = 1.67) than European Americans (M = 4.09, SD = 1.12), F(1, 65) = 3.82, p = .055, η² = .06. There was also a main effect of condition, with participants having greater accuracy in the unsolicited (M = 4.64, SD = .72) than the solicited condition (M = 3.00, SD = 1.55), F(1, 65) = 34.87, p < .001, η² = .35. The interaction term was not significant, F(1, 65) = 2.67, p = .106, η² = .04. There were no significant effects of culture or condition for accuracy on easy questions, F(1, 65) = 1.56, p = .216, η² = .02; F(1, 65) = .40, p = .53, η² = .01; F(1, 65) = .12, p = .73, η² < .001. Taken together with the results on the frequency of help seeking, it appears that Asian American participants could have benefited from the confederate’s help, as European Americans, who sought more help, performed better. These results also show that Asian Americans’ lower help seeking is not due to superior knowledge in math.

Speed. Looking specifically at average speed (in seconds) for difficult questions, there was a significant main effect of culture, F(1, 65) = 4.02, p = .049, η² = .06. Asian Americans (M = 126.46 s, SD = 37.88 s) had a shorter average question response time than European Americans (M = 143.13 s, SD = 31.03 s). There was no main effect of condition, F(1, 65) = .003, p = .955, η² < .001. There was a marginal culture by condition interaction, F(1, 65) = 3.23, p = .077, η² = .05. Pairwise comparisons of the simple effects test using the overall error term showed that Asian Americans (M = 119.23 s, SD = 48.79 s) had a shorter average question response time than European Americans (M = 150.84 s, SD = 36.61 s) in the solicited condition, F(1, 65) = 7.06, p = .010. There were no cultural differences in the unsolicited condition (M = 133.69 s, SD = 23.68 s for Asians; M = 135.42 s, SD = 22.87 s for European Americans), F(1, 65) = .02, p = .882. There were also no within-culture differences by condition for European Americans, F(1, 65) = 1.58, p = .212, or Asian Americans, F(1, 65) = 1.66, p = .203.

There was a significant main effect for culture on average speed for easy questions, F(1, 65) = 4.73, p = .033, η² = .01. Asian Americans (M = 49.90 s, SD = 16.42 s) had a shorter average question response time than European Americans (M = 60.07 s, SD = 22.72 s). There were no significant effects of condition or an interaction for average speed on easy questions, F(1, 65) = .698, p = .407, η² = .01; F(1, 65) = .045, p = .833, η² = .001.

Discussion

In line with our hypothesis and mirroring previous research on culture and social support seeking, Asians were less likely to ask for help than European Americans. More importantly, results from Study 1 demonstrate that the effect of receiving unsolicited support is more positive for Asian Americans compared with receiving solicited support. Within-culture comparisons showed that Asian Americans reported higher performance self-esteem and found the task less stressful when receiving unsolicited support than when they received solicited support. European Americans did not show clear differences between solicited support and unsolicited support. Looking at cross-cultural differences, Asian Americans reported more negative effects from solicited support compared with European Americans, although there were no clear differences by culture in the unsolicited support condition.

The mediational analysis showed that effects of task stressfulness could be explained by ratings of current performance self-esteem. Given the academic nature of the stressor, the link between performance self-esteem and task stressfulness is not surprising. This also highlights how unsolicited and solicited support may have differing impacts on self-esteem across cultures, particularly self-esteem in a stressor-relevant domain. For Asian Americans, receiving unsolicited support led to more positive outcomes, such as feeling less stress about the task. Although they also felt closer to the support provider, it was self-esteem that mediated this relationship. Perhaps, as unsolicited support may be relationship affirming, Asian Americans felt more supported and therefore able to deal with the task when receiving unsolicited support, and this led to experiencing less stress.

Both cultures reported higher evaluation of the support provider when receiving unsolicited support. It may be that both cultures feel closer to support providers who anticipate or acknowledge recipients’ needs for assistance. For Asian American participants, this pattern was consistent with other positive outcomes from unsolicited support receipt, whereas for European Americans, partner evaluation showed dissociated pattern from the rest of measures.

Although Study 1 provides the initial demonstration of the main hypothesis with actual behaviors, there were a few limitations. First, the study lacks a control condition to help determine the effect of different types of social support receipt. Moreover, a math task was chosen in this study because it allowed measurement of actual task performance with clear explanations for the math problems that could be given in a standardized way during support interactions. However, the nature of the task may raise the possibility that Asian Americans may not have needed to ask for as much help on the task because they are better at math than European Americans. In terms of objective performance, Asian American participants in the solicited condition did worse than their European American counterparts on the more difficult questions. Asian American participants were also subjectively less confident judging by their performance self-esteem results. It appears as though skill-level difference between the cultural groups, both objectively measured and subjectively perceived, does not account for support seeking...
differences. In addition, if stereotypes about Asian Americans’ math ability were driving the support seeking, we would expect differences in support seeking behavior depending on the ethnicity of the confederate, where Asian American participants might have been more willing to seek help from another Asian American math major partner. However, we found no significant differences in the number of questions participants sought help on by confederate ethnicity. Finally, this potential explanation of skill-level difference does not account for the results regarding the psychological effect of support receipt between experimental conditions.

Relational context and ingroup–outgroup distinctions have been shown to be of relatively greater importance among East Asians compared with European Americans (e.g., Iyengar, Lepper, & Ross, 1999; Kim et al., 2006). Because it was a lab experiment, Study 1 involved support seeking and provision between a participant and a confederate who had no previously existing relationship. However, the support provider was identified as a fellow student and fellow participant, and a shared group membership is a factor to increase the sense of ingroupness in both Asian and American cultural contexts (Yuki, Maddux, Brewer, & Takemura, 2005). This may help to explain why differences were found among Asian American participants in unsolicited and solicited support outcomes despite the relational context. Nonetheless, social support is most often studied within the context of close relationships, and the lack of existing relationship is a limitation of this study. We sought to address this with our second study. In Study 2, participants were exposed to a series of vignettes involving support transactions with a close other (sibling or coworker) to further explore the solicited and unsolicited social support distinction.

Study 2

Study 2 used vignettes of hypothetical stressors and coping efforts involving either solicited or unsolicited support to investigate how each type of support from close others impacts psychological outcomes. In addition to the conceptual replication of Study 1, in this study, we also added two control conditions to understand the effects of different types of social support receipt more clearly. One control condition is the baseline condition in which no mention of social support is made. This control condition gives a comparison for the general impact of the stressor. The other condition is a situation in which close others have knowledge of the stressor but do not give support. This control condition was added to examine whether experiencing officiousness of close others has differing effects from receiving unsolicited support. Unsolicited support involves both the provider’s acknowledgment that the support recipient is in trouble as well as the provision of assistance. Thus, this additional control condition allows a test of the effect of offering unsolicited help beyond officiousness. To increase participants’ ability to imagine themselves in the situations, these vignettes were designed to outline, in detail, clear potential stressors that undergraduate students could encounter in their lives. We predicted that Asian Americans would experience more positive emotions and perceive better outcomes from unsolicited support transactions than solicited support transactions, while European Americans would not experience any more positive psychological outcomes from unsolicited transaction. As in Study 1, we also explored the role of self-esteem as a possible mediator of support outcomes.

Method

Participants. A total of 185 undergraduates participated in this study. In all, 89 were Asian Americans (62.8% female) and 96 were European Americans (72.9% female). All participants were students at the University of California, Santa Barbara, aged 18 to 31 ($M = 19.94, SD = 1.72$), and enrolled in the study for class credit.

Materials and procedure. Participants filled out an online questionnaire including two vignette stressors: one financial stressor and one work-related stressor. In terms of the coping effort described to deal with these stressors, there were four conditions: the two target conditions of solicited or unsolicited support and two control conditions. Participants were asked to imagine that they were in each of the situations. In the solicited support condition, both vignettes involved resolving the stressor by seeking solicited support. In the unsolicited support condition, both vignettes involved resolving the stressor by receiving unsolicited support. One control condition, the officiousness condition, involved a possible support provider who expresses knowledge of the stressor, but no support is provided. Another control condition, the stressor only condition, did not include a support provider in the situation description and only included information about the stressor to gauge the general stressfulness of the stressor apart from the support transaction. The possible support provider in the financial stressor was a sibling, and the possible support provider in the work-related stressor was a coworker (see the appendix for the vignette descriptions).

Participants answered a series of questions on how they would feel in the situation in response to each vignette on a 7-point scale ($1 = not at all$ and $7 = very much$). Related to self-esteem, in this case, more general feelings of self-esteem as these stressors were more general in nature, participants were asked how confident, positive, and how much self-esteem they would feel. Participants were also asked what their emotions would be in each situation. The Emotions scale asked how much the participant would feel each of the emotions in the situation on a 7-point scale ($1 = not at all$ and $7 = very much$). There were four positive emotion items (confident, content, relaxed, proud) and six negative emotion items (frustrated, shame, anger, humiliated, helpless, overwhelmed).

As there were two vignettes, participants answered these series of questions for each vignette separately, first regarding the first vignette and then again after reading the second
vignette. In between the first and second vignettes, participants completed a 3-min neutral sentence unscrambling task to separate responses between each vignette. To look at overall trends across vignette types, responses were combined between the two vignettes. Emotions felt during the situation for both vignettes were compiled into a total average for positive emotions (8 items; $\alpha = .85$) and negative emotions (12 items; $\alpha = .88$). Items related to self-esteem felt in the situation were compiled into a total average for self-esteem (6 items; $\alpha = .85$).

Results

Emotions. To see whether exposure to solicited or unsolicited support situations had an effect on emotions, a series of 2 (culture: Asian American vs. European American) x 4 (condition: unsolicited, solicited, officiousness, and stressor only) ANOVAs were conducted.

On reported positive emotions, there were no main effects of condition, $F(3, 177) = 1.51, p = .214, \eta^2_p = .03$, or culture, $F(1, 177) = .736, p = .392, \eta^2_p < .01$. There was a significant culture by condition interaction, $F(3, 177) = 2.72, p = .046, \eta^2_p = .04$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons on within-culture differences via the simple effects test using the overall error term (Fisher’s least significant difference) found that Asian Americans had more positive emotions in the unsolicited condition ($M = 2.81, SD = .94$) than in the solicited condition ($M = 2.23, SD = .66$), $F(1, 177) = 6.07, p = .015$; the officiousness condition ($M = 2.18, SD = .81$), $F(1, 177) = 6.12, p = .014$; and the stressor only condition ($M = 2.01, SD = .64$), $F(1, 177) = 9.78, p = .002$. The solicited condition did not differ from the officiousness, $F(1, 177) = .04, p = .837$, or stressor only condition, $F(1, 177) = .75, p = .387$, and the stressor only and officiousness condition did not significantly differ from each other, $F(1, 177) = .37, p = .540$. European Americans’ reported positive emotions did not differ from the unsolicited (condition: unsolicited, solicited, officiousness, and stressor only) ANOVA was conducted to analyze cultural differences in reported general self-esteem outcomes using the self-esteem composite variable.

There were no main effects of culture, $F(1, 177) = .618, p = .433, \eta^2_p = .003$, or condition, $F(3, 177) = 1.28, p = .281, \eta^2_p = .02$. There was a marginally significant culture by condition interaction, $F(3, 177) = 2.57, p = .056, \eta^2_p = .04$. Pairwise comparisons within cultures via the simple effects test using the overall error term revealed that Asian Americans reported more positive emotions than European Americans in the unsolicited ($M = 2.34, SD = .71$) and solicit condition ($M = 2.43, SD = .77$), $F(1, 177) = .57, p = .464$; or stressor only condition ($M = 2.45, SD = 1.01$), $F(1, 177) = .211, p = .647$. The solicited condition did not differ from the officiousness condition, $F(1, 177) = .01, p = .993$, or the stressor only condition, $F(1, 177) = .01, p = .915$, and the stressor only and officiousness condition did not significantly differ from each other, $F(1, 177) = .01, p = .929$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons on between-culture differences found that Asian Americans reported more positive emotions than European Americans in the unsolicited condition, $F(1, 177) = 4.17, p = .043$. There were no significant between-culture differences in the solicited, $F(1, 177) = .79, p = .376$; officiousness, $F(1, 177) = .87, p = .352$; or stressor only condition, $F(1, 177) = 2.61, p = .11$ (see Figure 3).

On reported negative emotions, there were no effects of condition, $F(3, 177) = .827, p = .430, \eta^2_p = .01$; culture, $F(1, 177) = .179, p = .672, \eta^2_p = .001$; or a significant interaction, $F(3, 177) = .667, p = .574, \eta^2_p = .01$. Gender did not have any significant effect on these analyses or any of the following analyses, and thus, we shall not mention it further.

Self-esteem as a mediator for positive support responses. A 2 (culture: Asian American vs. European American) x 4 (condition: unsolicited, solicited, officiousness, and stressor only) ANOVA was conducted to analyze cultural differences in reported general self-esteem outcomes using the self-esteem composite variable.

There were no main effects of culture, $F(1, 177) = .618, p = .433, \eta^2_p = .003$, or condition, $F(3, 177) = 1.28, p = .281, \eta^2_p = .02$. There was a marginally significant culture by condition interaction, $F(3, 177) = 2.57, p = .056, \eta^2_p = .04$. Pairwise comparisons within cultures via the simple effects test using the overall error term revealed that Asian Americans reported higher self-esteem in the unsolicited ($M = 3.90, SD = .71$) than in the solicited condition ($M = 3.51, SD = .89$), although this was not significant, $F(1, 177) = 2.17, p = .142$, and significantly more self-esteem in the unsolicited than in the officiousness ($M = 3.30, SD = 1.09$), $F(1, 177) = 4.46, p = .036$, or control condition ($M = 3.03, SD = .85$), $F(1, 177) = 9.21, p = .003$. There were no significant differences by condition for Asian Americans between the solicited condition and the officiousness condition, $F(1, 177) = .57, p = .449$. There was a marginally significant difference between the solicited condition and the control condition, $F(1, 177) = 2.85, p = .093$. There were no significant differences between the officiousness and the control condition, $F(1, 177) = .75, p = .388$. There were no differences by condition for European Americans between unsolicited ($M = 3.20, SD = .93$) and solicited ($M = 3.45, SD = .83$), $F(1, 177) = 1.04, p = .309$; or officiousness ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.19$), $F(1, 177) = .025, p = .872$; or stressor only condition ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.07$), $F(1, 177) = .53, p = .464$. There were also no differences between the solicited condition and the officiousness, $F(1, 177) = .55, p = .458$; or stressor only condition, $F(1, 177) = .02, p = .879$; or between the officiousness and stressor only condition, $F(1, 177) = .28, p = .600$. 

![Figure 3. Positive emotions ratings by culture and condition (Study 2)]
Follow-up pairwise comparisons on between-culture differences found that Asian Americans reported higher self-esteem than European Americans in the unsolicited condition, \( F(1, 177) = 7.47, p = .007 \). There were no significant between-culture differences in the solicited, \( F(1, 177) = .06, p = .803 \); officiousness, \( F(1, 177) = .03, p = .863 \); or stressor only condition, \( F(1, 177) = 1.45, p = .229 \).

To examine whether the culture and condition interaction of positive emotions was mediated by self-esteem, bootstrapping analyses with bias-corrected confidence estimates were conducted using the methods described by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

Positive emotions was entered as the dependent variable, the culture by condition interaction term was entered as the predictor variable, and the perceived self-esteem was entered as the proposed mediator in the SPSS macro created by Preacher and Hayes for bootstrap analyses of proposed mediators. The main effects of culture and condition were also entered. For this analysis, only the two target conditions (solicited and unsolicited support) were included to mirror the comparisons in Study 1.

The bootstrap results indicated that the total effect of the interaction term on positive emotions, \( c = -.656, t(110) = -2.212, p = .029 \), became nonsignificant when self-esteem (our proposed mediator) was included in the model, \( c' = -.241, t(110) = -1.135, p = .259 \). The effect of interaction term on self-esteem was marginally significant, \( b = -.636, t(110) = -1.960, p = .053 \), and self-esteem predicted positive emotions, \( b = .653, t(110) = 10.444, p < .001 \).

The analyses revealed with 95% confidence that the indirect effect was marginally significant \( p < .10 \), with a point estimate of \( -.421 \) and a 95% BCa bootstrap CI = \([- .862, .005]\) (90% BCa bootstrap CI = \([- .809, -.075]\)). This indicates that self-esteem partially mediated the effect of the cultural variation by support condition in positive emotions, although this was marginal. See Figure 4 for the full mediational model.

**Figure 4.** Self-esteem as a mediator for positive emotions (Study 2)

Note: *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

**Discussion**

Results from Study 2 conceptually replicated the results from Study 1. As predicted, unsolicited support led to more positive outcomes for Asian Americans. For European Americans, there are few differences in support outcomes between conditions. In addition, as predicted, unlike European Americans, there were clear benefits from unsolicited support than solicited support for Asian Americans. Moreover, the comparisons with two control conditions show that unsolicited support significantly increased positive mood.

Study 2 also replicated the mediational analysis from Study 1, showing self-esteem as a marginal mediator of cultural differences in support outcomes between conditions. Study 1 was a task-oriented situation with a real-time stressor, whereas Study 2 required participants to imagine a series of hypothetical stressors. This may explain why self-esteem was a stronger mediator in Study 1 than in Study 2. Nevertheless, in both studies, the same mediational pattern was obtained.

It is noteworthy that we found the expected effect only with positive emotions. It may be the case that the benefit of unsolicited social support in close relationship contexts is related to bolstering psychological resources more than nullifying psychological problems (cf. Cohen & Syme, 1985; Gonzalez et al., 2004). Moreover, it is also notable that unlike in Study 1 in which cultural differences were found in the solicited condition, cultural differences were found in the unsolicited condition in Study 2. This difference may be due to the fact that these two studies had different types of support providers. In Study 1, the support provider was a stranger, although described as a fellow student in the same university, and in Study 2, the support provider was a close other. It is reasonable to think that in dealing with a stranger, the concerns for potential cost of support solicitation are where cultural differences emerged, whereas in thinking about close others, unsolicited support in which others show interpersonal care is where cultural differences emerged. However, it is important to note that within-culture pattern was identical in both studies.

**General Discussion**

We predicted that solicited and unsolicited support would have different effects across cultures. Specifically, we hypothesized that Asian Americans would respond more positively to unsolicited support than solicited support and that European Americans would be less affected by the distinction between support types or show the opposite pattern.

Study 1 largely supported our predictions with a lab interaction, showing responses to actual solicited and unsolicited support receipt. Asian Americans reported more positive outcomes when receiving unsolicited support than solicited support, while European Americans did not significantly differ between conditions. Study 2 also supported our predictions, looking at imagined responses to unsolicited and solicited support receipt from close others. Following our hypotheses, Asian Americans reported more positive emotions for unsolicited support compared with solicited support, while European Americans did not show significant differences between support types.

In both studies, we found that self-esteem mediated cultural differences in responses to solicited and unsolicited support for Asian Americans. Moreover, the comparisons with two control conditions show that unsolicited support significantly increased positive mood.
support. In the first study, we found this effect regarding performance self-esteem with a stressor with a performance focus, and in the second study, we found this effect with a more general measure of self-esteem when examining more general life stressors. This may point to differences in how individualistic and collectivistic cultures interpret unsolicited support. For Asian Americans, unsolicited support may boost one’s self-esteem. The finding that solicited and unsolicited support affect self-esteem among Asian American participants underscores the notion that relationship esteem can be a basis of self-worth in Asian cultural contexts (Endo et al., 2000; Heine et al., 1999; Kwan et al., 1997). Perhaps, unsolicited support may function to strengthen social ties among Asians, a topic for future research. For European Americans, solicited and unsolicited support did not significantly differ in their effects on support receipt outcomes.

It is important to note that in both studies, our sample of Asian Americans was comprised of Asian Americans of East Asian origin, most of whom were born in the United States. The current research does not include an East Asian sample. While we could expect similar results with East Asians in Asia, further research is necessary to generalize this research outside of the United States. It is possible that, given greater importance of self-esteem in Northern American cultures (e.g., Heine et al., 1999), Asian Americans may show American cultural influences, and we may find different results with an East Asian sample.

Previous research on the effect of received support among Americans has provided somewhat mixed results. Research on invisible social support by Bolger and his colleagues has shown that unsolicited assistance may be interpreted as appraisal of inefficacy and can have a negative effect on European Americans (e.g., Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000). However, another body of research shows that unsolicited support that encourages security without threatening personal autonomy has positive outcomes for the support recipient (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Feeney, 2004). Our research has found no clear impact of unsolicited support for European Americans, whether it is compared with solicited support or no support. One factor that may moderate support outcomes is the context of support receipt. For example, the ambiguity of needing assistance may play a role in how unsolicited support is interpreted by the recipient. In the experimental study by Bolger and Amarel (2007), support was given in a situation where it was not necessarily clear that the recipient was in need of aid. In both the current studies, participants clearly required support, whether in a stressful situation in the lab or in a hypothetical vignette.

In addition, research on the impact of ego threat on help receipt outcomes may also inform research on unsolicited support (e.g., Nadler, 1987; Nadler, Fisher, & Ben Itzhak, 1983). This research suggests that, among other contextual and recipient characteristics, the extent to which a given situation is ego-relevant and the support provider is a similar close other affect the benefits of received aid through increasing recipient self-threat. It is possible that the effects of receiving unsolicited support may vary along these dimensions, and is a question for future research on this topic.

The present research focused on the transaction of mostly instrumental support, as previous studies involving provision of unsolicited support (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000; Kappes & Shroot, 2011) have also focused mostly on instrumental support receipt. However, differentiating between emotional versus instrumental social support may be important when gauging the benefits of solicited and unsolicited support in future research. Given that work by Uchida et al. (2008) found positive outcomes from the perceived receipt of emotional support, particularly among Asians, it may be that unsolicited emotional support works in a similar way as unsolicited instrumental support.

Implications for Cultural Understanding of Social Support

This research aims to give a richer understanding of how culture affects social support transactions. Previous research has been unclear regarding the cross-cultural benefits of social support. While research on perceived support has shown positive outcomes, other research has implicated social support receipt as being less beneficial for some cultures (e.g., Taylor et al., 2007; Uchida et al., 2008). The current research shows that social support does have clear benefits cross-culturally but that the process of effective social support may look different in different cultures. It adds to previous culture and support literature by proposing a method of explicit support use that may be more effective for collectivistic cultures than solicited support (e.g., Kim et al., 2006, 2008; Taylor et al., 2004, 2007).

Drawing on how relationships are viewed among individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the nature of obligation for the interdependent and independent self is notable. Among individualistic cultures, relationships function with the assumption of individual choice and volitional engagement, compared to collectivistic cultures, where relationships function with the assumption of mutual obligation and responsibility (Adams & Plaut, 2003). Given that helping is seen more as a reciprocal transaction and thus, as an obligation in collectivistic cultures, soliciting support may increase the seeker’s stress by making him or her aware of the reciprocal nature of support provision (Miller & Bersoff, 1994). However, unsolicited support may not activate this stress in the same way.

For social support literature as a whole, drawing a distinction between solicited and unsolicited support may be valuable for understanding how perceived support and received support may have differing outcomes (e.g., Wethington & Kessler, 1986). It also complements work on support visibility, showing conditions when support may be more or less useful for the recipient (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000). Contrasting these modes of support provision in future research would be valuable, particularly concerning what provider factors are more likely to encourage unsolicited support provision and the impact of providing unsolicited support for the support provider.
Conclusion

By examining the factor of solicitation of support seeking using a cultural psychological framework, the present research provides additional insight into how culture shapes our social interactions. The success of received support depends on the conditions under which the support was given, and the impact of those conditions depends on culture. Whether requesting aid from a friend or receiving assistance without asking for help, benefit derived from the support interaction may hinge on the relational norms of one’s culture.

Appendix

Sample Vignette (Study 2)

Financial stressor vignette

Vignette base/stressor only condition:
You are dealing with trouble paying your rent and managing your monthly income. Your landlord has recently raised the rent in your apartment, and one of your roommates has moved out to live elsewhere, so you are splitting the rent between fewer people than in previous months. You also need to buy textbooks for your classes for the quarter, a car payment to pay, as well as other monthly bills. You have several bills that are now past due and need to be paid this month, and classes are starting next week. You have a part-time job that gives you some income, and your parents also give you a fixed amount to go toward your rent. This income has been sufficient to cover your living expenses in the past, but with raised rent and additional expenses, you are not sure how to budget this amount to pay rent this month along with your other expenses. You have a sister who is good at managing money. She has dealt with her own expenses well and knows how to manage a tight budget effectively from her own experiences.

Solicited condition continues:
You decide to call up your sister and talk about your trouble with budgeting for your expenses. Then, you ask her for help with organizing your financial plan so that you can pay for everything that you need with the income that you have.

Unsolicited condition continues:
Your sister calls you and said that she heard that you are having trouble with budgeting for your expenses. Then, your sister offers to help with organizing your financial plan so that you can pay for everything that you need with the income that you have without you asking for help.

Officiousness condition continues:
Your sister calls you and said that she heard that you are having trouble with budgeting for your expenses.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the UCSB Cultural Psychology Lab for their comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. We are also grateful to our undergraduate research assistants for their contributions with this research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (BCS-1124552).

Notes

1. We did not control for confederate advice time in our average speed variable, as we did not specifically measure the time it took the confederate to give advice in this study. However, when including questions asked as an additional covariate (as a proxy for the advice time taken to answer questions), all of our major analyses remain significant.

2. The correlation between performance self-esteem and task stressfulness was high ($r = .64$). Thus, we performed an alternative test of the relationship between culture, performance self-esteem, and task stressfulness, with task stressfulness as a mediator of culture by condition differences in performance self-esteem, and this model was not significant (point estimate = −.089, 95% bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap CI = [−.216, .016]).

References


Chentsova-Dutton, Y. (2009). Advice-Giving in European American and Russian Cultures. In Relationship Maintenance and (Inter)Dependence. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the International Association of Relationship Research Conference, Lawrence, KS.


