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Research Shows Asian Americans Less Likely to Seek Social Support

Individuals facing challenges in their lives often seek comfort and support from family members and close friends. Research conducted by two social psychologists at UC Santa Barbara, however, has demonstrated that during times of stress Asian Americans are far less likely than other people, particularly Americans of European extraction, to seek emotional support, advice, and help from their respective social networks. The researchers' findings have been published in the December issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, the journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. The full text of the article can be found at

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"People commonly expect people from collectivistic cultures, such as Asian Americans, to seek help from one another more than those from individualistic cultures, but we found just the opposite was true," said David K. Sherman, assistant professor of psychology at UCSB. He oversaw the research project in collaboration with Heejung S. Kim, also assistant professor of psychology at UCSB, and Shelley E. Taylor, professor of psychology at UCLA. Deborah Ko, a social psychology graduate student at UCSB also participated in the research. The project is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation's Human and Social Dynamics program.

A collectivistic culture is one in which members of close groups are bound to one another emotionally and consider the group's goals and well being as primary. By contrast, an individualistic culture prizes the individual's freedom to think, act, and

make decisions independently of the needs of the group.

The research suggests that while European Americans view a request for social support as a proactive method of solving problems, Asian Americans are more concerned with the negative implications of asking for help, including the risk of burdening others, disrupting the harmony of the group, making the problem worse, and bringing shame to oneself or one's family.

"In Asian American cultures, emphasis is placed on maintaining harmony within the social group, and any effort to bring personal problems to the attention of others or enlist their help may risk undermining that harmony or making inappropriate demands on the group," said Kim. "The cultural norms appear to discourage the active engagement of one's social support network for help in solving problems or for coping with stress."

Rather than share problems openly with the group, Asian Americans might utilize their social support networks differently, choosing to spend time in the company of family or friends without disclosing their problems. In this case, they receive what the researchers term implicit support.

Conversely, relationships in individualistic cultures may be seen as a means of achieving personal goals. This characteristic makes it possible for individuals to recruit explicit help from those in their social networks with less concern for the potential costs that doing so might cause the relationship.

In addition, relationships in individualistic cultures are considered freely chosen with relatively few obligations. When one person asks another for support, it is with the mutual understanding that the person of whom the request is made has the choice to provide assistance or not. In collectivistic cultures, however, relationships are viewed as less voluntary and come with a greater sense of obligation. When one person asks another for help, in general that other person must comply. Therefore, members are cautious about bringing personal problems to the attention of others for the purpose of enlisting their help.

"This research provides important information about Asian Americans' inclination not to ask for help during times of stress," said Sherman. "In turn, it may explain why they tend not to utilize social services available in their communities. Also, it shows that instead of trying to figure out ways to encourage Asian Americans to take advantage of what exists, it would be more helpful to figure out what kinds of social

service structures can be created that are in line with their cultural norms."

The current research builds on earlier work by Sherman, Kim, and Taylor that identified the cultural differences that affect how people seek support from their social networks. Those findings were published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2004. A third paper, which reports that Asians benefit physiologically from more implicit social support, will appear in *Psychological Science* in 2007.

Sherman, who received his Ph.D. in psychology from Stanford University, was a post-doctoral fellow at UCLA before joining the faculty at UCSB. His research examines the role of the self in responding to threats and stressful events.

Kim received a bachelor's degree in French literature from Ewha Women's University in Seoul, Korea. She earned a second bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Southern California and received her Ph.D. in social psychology from Stanford University. Before joining the faculty at UCSB, she was an assistant professor at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont. She is a specialist in the cultural influences on psychological processes.

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