

# Family Emotion Socialization and Affective Distress in Asian American and White American College Students

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This study examined the retrospective reports of family emotion socialization experiences and current affective distress among 23 Asian American and 31 White American university students with subclinical levels of distress. Results indicated that most of the Asian Americans interviewed recalled being socialized by their family to suppress their emotions, whereas more than half of White Americans recalled being encouraged by their families to openly express emotions. For Asian Americans, growing up in a family that valued emotional suppression was associated with greater emotional distress.

*Keywords:* Asian American, emotion, socialization, families, distress

Past research has uncovered a pattern of discrepancies between subjective reports of distress and observable indices of distress among Asian Americans. For example, Asian Americans and White Americans did not differ on behavioral indices of social anxiety in laboratory-induced social anxiety situations, yet Asian Americans reported more intense anxiety-related emotions (Okazaki, Liu, Longworth, & Minn, 2002). Asian Americans reported more social anxiety and depressive symptoms on average than White Americans, yet friends and acquaintances tended to underestimate the level of affective distress in their Asian American friends to a greater extent than in their White American friends (Okazaki, 2002). A 2-week diary study of social anxiety suggested that Asian Americans tended to score higher on global reports of social anxiety not because they encountered more situations that made them anxious but because they experienced more intense anxiety in social situations than their White American counterparts (Lee, Okazaki, & Yoo, 2006). These studies suggest that Asian

Americans experience subjectively more intense negative affect but may not always display them to the same extent that White Americans do. The present study examined the possibility that these racial differences in emotional expressivity may be associated with culturally driven socialization of emotions in their families.

## Cultural Differences in Emotion Socialization

Family is an important context in which children learn rules about emotional experiences and appropriate expression. Parents' reactions to children's emotions, family discussion of emotion, and parental expression of emotion all constitute parental emotion socialization (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Families typically transmit larger cultural norms and expectations about appropriate emotion behavior to their children. Within their cultural context, parents develop a metaemotion philosophy about how best to manage their own and their children's emotions (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). According to Gottman et al., some parents operate from an *emotion-coaching* philosophy characterized by awareness and attention to emotions with goals of validating emotions, teaching children to verbally label their emotions, and helping children deal with negative emotions. In contrast, parents with a *dismissing* philosophy view negative emotions of sadness and anger as dangerous and have the goal of ignoring or minimizing these emotions.

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Past research has documented cultural differences in parental behavior and attitudes surrounding emotion behavior. Generally speaking, Western norms encourage the experience and open expressions of emotions whereas East Asian norms promote emotional balance and control (Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, Freire-Bebeau, & Przymus, 2002). In a qualitative study examining emotion-related conversations between American and Chinese mother-child dyads, Wang (2001) found that American mothers employed an emotion-coaching style of providing rich explanations for emotions and Chinese mother-child conversations employed an "emotion-criticizing style" of emphasizing proper behavior and providing minimal explanations. Miller, Fung, and Mintz (1996) found that Taiwanese mothers were much more likely to emphasize how their children's misbehavior violated rules for appropriate conduct, whereas American mothers were more likely to refer to the use of emotion words and to encourage emotional expression with their children. Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, Cole, Mizuta, and Hiruma (1996) found that American mothers were more likely to encourage emotional expressivity in their children than were Japanese mothers. Moreover, behavioral inhibition was associated with parental acceptance and encouragement of achievement in China but with parental rejection, disappointment, and punishment in Canada (Chen et al., 1998), suggesting that these cultural differences may be shaped by what is considered appropriate emotion behavior within each cultural context. In proposing affect valuation theory, Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006) suggested that cultural group differences in "ideal affect" is largely attributable to cultural factors. Moreover, Tsai, Louie, Chen, and Uchida (2007) found that socialization about ideal affect (e.g., valuing high-arousal vs. low-arousal states) starts relatively early in life.

### **Link Between Emotion Socialization and Psychological Outcomes**

The link between parental emotion socialization and children's emotional adjustment has been documented (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1998; Gottman et al., 1996). Gottman et al. (1996) found that children whose parents engaged in emotion coaching later developed better social competence skills. Berenbaum and James

(1994) found that people who reported having grown up in families in which open and direct expressions of their emotions were discouraged had higher levels of alexithymia (difficulty identifying and communicating emotions) than did those who reported having grown up in more open and safe environments. In an analysis of retrospective reports of Australian college students, Kench and Irwin (2000) found that family expressiveness (or the degree to which family members were allowed and encouraged to express their opinions and feelings to each other) was negatively correlated with alexithymia. At least in Western contexts, encouragement of emotion labeling and expressions and direct discussions about emotions appear to be associated with positive outcomes.

Existing literature suggests that there are cultural variations in parental emotion socialization strategies to promote emotion behaviors that are culturally appropriate. Within North American contexts, emotion expressivity is encouraged by parents and has been linked to positive social functioning in children. However, it is less clear what happens in immigrant families where there may be multiple conflicting socialization goals surrounding emotion behavior. In Asian American families, it is yet unclear whether Asian American children pay psychological costs if parents operate under one cultural strategy (i.e., to encourage modulated emotion expression) that is inconsistent with the larger European American cultural strategy (i.e., to encourage emotion expression).

Ethnographic accounts of Asian American parenting suggest that Asian American immigrant parents do tend to use emotion socialization practices that are consistent with Asian cultural norms. In a retrospective self-report study of European American and Asian American college students (Kao, Nagata, & Peterson, 1997), Asian Americans reported more subdued expressions of emotions in their families. In an analysis of interviews with young adult Asian Americans, Pyke (2000) found that these young adult children of immigrant parents reported that they had longed for parental warmth—which they observed in families of their White American friends and in popular media—during their childhood and that they viewed their parents as cold, distant, and deviant from the American family norm.

Research on the association between family emotion socialization experiences in immigrant Asian American families and psychological distress has been mixed. There is some evidence to suggest that Asian American youth empathize with their immigrant parents' parenting strategies in ways that are related to positive outcomes (Ying, Coombs, & Lee, 1999). On the other hand, Wu and Chao (2005) found that Chinese American high school students reported greater discrepancy than White Americans between their ideals for parental warmth versus their perceived parental warmth, and such discrepancies were related to greater adjustment problems among Chinese American adolescents.

Studies on emotional suppression have largely demonstrated negative consequences for those who engage in this type of emotional expression strategy (see John & Gross, 2004, for a review). However, a recent study by Butler, Lee, and Gross (2007) suggested that adherence to Asian cultural values, such as interdependence and self-restraint, moderated the relationship between emotional suppression (i.e., inhibition of emotional expression) and negative social consequences. Specifically, those with greater adherence to Asian values experienced more muted negative effects of emotional suppression than did those with weaker adherence to Asian values.

### The Present Study

The present study examined the subjective experiences of family emotion socialization and current affective distress among Asian American and White American university students who reported subclinical levels of affective distress. Analyses of young adults' narratives about their family's emotion socialization may capture meanings associated with emotion display that may not be included in existing measures. In the present study, we examined retrospective narratives of parental emotion socialization among Asian Americans and contrasted their narratives with those of their White American counterparts. Two main questions were asked. First, do Asian Americans and White Americans differ in their recalled family socialization experiences? Following the existing literature (e.g., Tsai et al., 2002), we hypothesized that White Americans will be more likely to report being socialized to

express positive and negative emotions openly and Asian Americans will be more likely to report being socialized to inhibit positive and negative emotional expressions or to express emotions indirectly. Second, we hypothesized that a recalled parental socialization strategy of inhibiting, repressing, and/or suppressing positive and negative emotions will be linked to poorer psychological outcomes in both Asian Americans and White Americans.

## Method

### Participants

Twenty-three Asian American and 31 White American undergraduate students at a large public Midwestern university participated in this study. At the time of the data collection, the campus population was ~4% Asian American and >90% White American. The participants were selected from a larger study involving 200 Asian American participants (100 female) who were recruited from the university registrar's list of all undergraduate students who self-identified as Asian American and 200 self-identified White Americans (100 female) who were recruited from the registrar's list and who were matched on sex and age to the Asian American participants. Randomly selected individuals from the list were contacted by telephone or e-mail and were asked to participate in the study as voluntary paid participants. The study was described as a survey "about your personality, your attitudes, opinions, and experiences with various moods and emotions, and your background." Among the individuals who were contacted either by telephone or e-mail, the overall participation rate was 47%; the Asian American response rate was 50%, and the White American response rate was 44%. The response rates for the two ethnic groups were significantly different ( $z = 2.10, p < .05$ ), suggesting that once contacted, Asian Americans were more likely than White Americans to participate in the study.

Because we were interested in the possible relationship between emotion socialization and current emotional distress experience, we recruited participants with mild affective distress. From the original pool of 400 students, we identified those who had elevated scores on two distress measures to identify those who would

be able to narrate their distress experiences. The participants were contacted if they had scored 60 or above on a Social Phobia Anxiety Inventory (SPAI; Turner, Beidel, Dancu, & Stanley, 1989), which meets SPAI's screening guideline for "possible" or "probable" social phobia, or if they had scored 14 or above on Beck Depression Inventory—Second Edition (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996), which meets BDI-II's recommended cut off scores for detecting "mild" depression. Of the original 400 participants, 64 met the inclusionary criteria and agreed to be interviewed for the present study. Ten participants were excluded from the present study because they were biracial or Asian adoptees into White families.

Of the 23 Asian Americans who were interviewed (40% female), 8 identified their ethnic heritage as Chinese, 5 as Indian, 4 as Korean, 3 as Vietnamese, 1 as Chinese-Taiwanese, 1 as Filipino, and 1 as Thai. Of the Asian Americans in the sample, 7 were born overseas and immigrated to the U.S., with 3 of these participants immigrating before the age of 10. The breakdown in class year of the Asian American subsample is as follows: 5 freshmen, 8 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 4 seniors. Of the 31 White Americans who were interviewed (60% female), 9 identified as American, 5 identified as White or non-Hispanic White, 5 as Jewish, 2 as Polish, 1 as Irish Catholic, 1 as French, 1 as Dutch-German-Canadian French, 1 as French Canadian-German-Scottish, 1 as German, 1 as Hungarian-Jewish, 1 as Norwegian, 1 as Russian-Jewish, 1 as Norwegian-Danish-German, and 1 as Norwegian-German. Of the White Americans in the sample, one was born overseas and immigrated at age 12. The breakdown in class year of the White American subsample is as follows: 3 freshmen, 12 sophomores, 5 juniors, 10 seniors, and 1 other. The mean age of the two subsamples ( $M = 20.26$ ,  $SD = 2.34$  for Asian Americans,  $M = 20.32$ ,  $SD = 2.10$  for White Americans) did not differ significantly,  $t(52) = -.10$ ,  $p = .92$ .

## Measures

**BDI-II.** The BDI-II (Beck et al., 1996) is a 21-item self-report measure that assesses the severity of depression. The alpha coefficients of the BDI-II for the outpatient and college student samples were reported to be .92 and .93, respec-

tively (Beck et al., 1996). The alpha coefficient for the present sample was .87 (.79 for Asian Americans and .90 for White Americans).

**SPAI.** The SPAI (Turner et al., 1989) is a 45-item self-report measure that assesses somatic and cognitive components of social anxiety and social phobia. The alpha coefficients for two subscales of the SPAI, Social Phobia and Agoraphobia, in the present sample were .98 (.98 for Asian Americans and .98 for White Americans) and .89 (.91 for Asian Americans and .85 for White Americans), respectively.

**Global Assessment of Functioning Scale.** The Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) is an interviewer-rated assessment of an individual's overall level of psychosocial functioning. This rating is based on a scale ranging from 1 to 90, with ratings of 1–10 indicating *severe impairment* and ratings of 81 to 90 indicating *superior functioning*. The scale is used as Axis V of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (*DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Ratings were determined by one of the three interviewers, a Ph.D. clinical psychologist and two Masters-level doctoral students in clinical psychology or related fields, on the basis of a Structured Clinical Interview for the *DSM-IV* Axis I Non-Patient Version (SCID-I/NP; First, Spitzer, Gibbon, & Williams, 2002) that was administered as a part of the larger study but not reported here. All raters were trained using the 11-hr SCID-101 for *DSM-IV* Training Series Videos.

**Meaning of distress interview.** After conducting a thorough review of the cultural and parental emotion socialization and cultural expressions of distress literature and consultation with a cultural anthropologist, we developed a semistructured interview protocol that broadly assessed the participants' experiences in the areas of family, hometown, current living environment, impact of cultural background, and phenomenology of distress experience. Although all transcripts were coded in their entirety, narratives most relevant to the present study were typically in response to the following questions: "What kind of messages did you get about how you should deal with emotions?" "What do you think your family taught you about dealing with your emotions when you were growing up?" and follow up questions that asked specifically about expressions of sadness,

anger, love, and happiness in their family as they were growing up. In addition, participants were asked to recall a time in which they felt the greatest level of anxiety and depression and asked what factors they thought had played a role in how they experienced intense negative emotions in those specific instances. Each participant was interviewed by a female interviewer. All Asian American participants were interviewed by Asian American interviewers, and all White American participants were interviewed by a White American interviewer. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim and verified for accuracy.

**Interview coding.** Because no systematic coding method was available for coding emotion socialization from interviews, we developed and coded the interviews in two steps. The first step involved the identification of major themes related to emotion socialization and the development of initial coding categories and dimensions, and the second step involved having a separate set of coders rate the interview transcripts using the coding scheme. The identification of emotion socialization patterns was based on the consensual qualitative research (CQR) method (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), which is a systematic method developed in counseling psychology for analyzing qualitative data through iterative coding, consensus-building, and auditing among multiple coders to identify the major themes present in the data. In this step, we randomly selected 6 Asian American and 6 White American interviews from the larger pool of 54. Three research assistants (a female South Asian American doctoral student in psychology, a male South Asian American undergraduate, and a female Chinese American undergraduate) who had not participated in the study design or data collection read the interviews and came to a consensus regarding major socialization themes and its components. The second author (a female Japanese American Ph.D. psychologist) served as the auditor to verify that the nominated categories and dimensions were sufficient to capture the variations in the interview data.

The 61 interview transcripts were then coded by three coders (2 Filipino American male doctoral students in psychology and the first author, a Chinese American female doctoral student in psychology) who had not participated in the data collection or the development of codes. One coder

rated all interviews, and the other two coders each rated one half of the interviews. Each coder rated each interview independently, then each pair met to arrive at a consensus. All ratings were then reviewed with the auditor (S.O.).

For socialization of emotions in general, coders classified each participant into one of three types of parental messages. The first style, which we labeled as "*Open*" is characterized by clear and direct messages to express negative emotions. Some examples of narratives that were consistent with this message included: "My parents would tell me like not to hold anything in, you know, that's just gonna make it worse" (Korean American female) and "It's a very distinct memory of childhood that's just exemplifying how it was, you know? It's all right to cry, and it's all right to, like, express your emotions" (White American male). The second style, labeled as "*Closed*" was characterized by clear and direct messages to either inhibit the display or to internally control negative emotions. Examples of parental messages classified into this category were: "You are not allowed to show it" (Chinese American male), and "When I was a kid it was. . . don't deal with, don't deal with things, and don't let your emotions get the best of you" (White American female). The third style, labeled as "*Mixed*" was characterized by respondent narratives that did not specifically recall clear and direct message to express or inhibit emotional expressions but nevertheless indicated implicit messages to keep negative emotions to the self. Examples of this type of message were: "We never really talked about, you know, how we felt and stuff" (Chinese American male) and "My parents have always said 'Come to us' but whenever I would, they always kind of played it off to be, 'Oh, don't worry about it.' Like it's not a big deal" (White American female).

For positive emotions, each interview was coded as belonging to one of three styles of expression. The first style, labeled as "*Expressive*" was characterized by sharing and physical and verbal affection. Examples of positive emotional expression labeled this style were: "On the phone my dad's like, 'I love you?', 'yeah, love you too, Dad' (Korean American male)" and "We're affectionate in the sense of hugging, and kissing on the cheek" (White American female). The second style, which we labeled as "*Instrumental*" was characterized by intuiting

love and affection from parental behavior such as financial support and encouragement. Examples of this type of emotional expression were: “My stepfather. . .if he had a good day [would] start giving the money” (Asian American male), “My mom was basically a taxi for us all through high school. . .and she worked too” (White American male), and “my parents. . .sacrifice a lot for us. . .like money. . .they help me pay for my college. . .like if you have like a cake or something and there’s a last piece, they save it for us” (Asian American female). The third style was labeled as “Noted Absence of Affectionate Display.” An example of this style was: “They [my parents] never say I love you. I see my. . .friends and their parents, they’re like, ‘I love you’ and kiss good-bye. We don’t, we don’t hug, we don’t do any of that stuff at all” (Asian American female).

In addition to classifying emotion socialization patterns, the coders rated each interview on the level of expressivity on a 4-point rating scale from 0 (“not at all characteristic”) to 3 (“describes the family well”). There were four dimensions on which the narrative data were rated: (1) the amount of family discussions about feelings, (2) open expression of anger, (3) open expression of sadness, and (4) open expression of positive emotions.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Before testing the main hypotheses, we first examined the study sample with respect to their

levels of reported distress. Results of  $t$  tests indicated no statistically significant difference in depression severity as assessed by the BDI-II between Asian Americans ( $M = 19.76$ ,  $SD = 6.85$ ) and White Americans ( $M = 16.87$ ,  $SD = 9.18$ ),  $t(52) = 1.27$ ,  $p = .21$ . Asian Americans ( $M = 74.90$ ,  $SD = 24.02$ ) and White Americans ( $M = 68.76$ ,  $SD = 27.56$ ) did not differ in severity of self-reported social phobia as assessed by the SPAI,  $t(52) = .86$ ,  $p = .40$ . There was a significant difference in current functioning as assessed using the GAF by trained interviewers such that Asian Americans ( $M = 69.87$ ,  $SD = 9.93$ ) were rated as higher functioning by the clinical interviewers than were White Americans ( $M = 62.63$ ,  $SD = 8.30$ ),  $t(51) = 2.89$ ,  $p < .01$ . GAF Scale scores in the 61–70 range characterize individuals with mild symptoms or some difficulty in social, occupational, or school functioning but who are nevertheless functioning well in general. Overall, the students who were interviewed are best described as falling in subclinical ranges of affective distress.

### Patterns of Emotion Socialization

To test our first hypothesis that Asian Americans and White Americans would differ in their recalled parental emotion socialization style, we conducted a chi-square test examining the relationship between racial group membership and emotion socialization theme separately for negative and positive emotions. As shown in Figure 1, there was a significant relationship such that a greater proportion of Asian American partici-

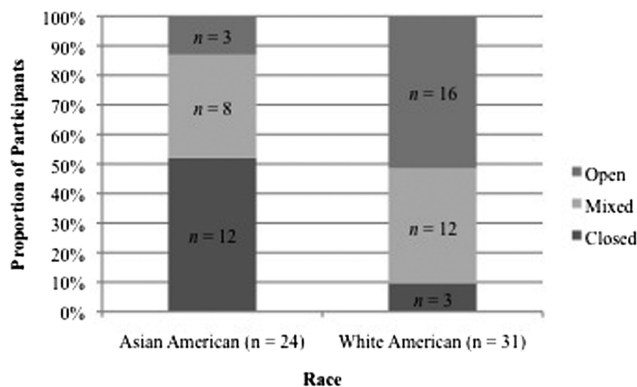


Figure 1. Emotion socialization pattern by race.

pants recalled parental messages to inhibit, repress, or suppress emotions (i.e., closed socialization theme) than did White Americans, who recalled messages to openly express emotions (i.e., open socialization theme),  $\chi^2(2, N = 54) = 14.22, p < .01$ . Past research on emotion socialization has suggested that parents' socialization of emotions differs depending on the sex of the child such that girls are socialized to be more emotionally expressive than boys (e.g., Garner, Robertson, & Smith, 1997; Garside & Klimes-Dugan, 2004). However, in our data, there was no relationship between gender of participant and type of family socialization narrative  $\chi^2(2, N = 54) = .45, p = .80$ . That is, men and women did not differ on the types of messages about emotions that they recalled receiving from their parents.

Figure 2 displays the distribution of participants within each racial group coded by types of positive emotion messages. A chi-square test indicated that more White Americans reported that their parents expressed positive emotions openly, whereas more Asian Americans reported instrumental expressions of positive emotions  $\chi^2(2, N = 54) = 11.38, p < .005$ .

Results of *t* tests indicate a pattern of significant racial differences on various dimensions of family emotional expression. As shown in Table 1, Asian Americans' narratives were characterized by less family talk about feelings than those of White Americans,  $t(52) = -3.99, p < .001$ , Cohen's *d* = -1.10, 95% confidence interval = -1.65, -.51, indicating a medium to large effect. Asian American narratives also were also characterized by less open expression

Table 1  
Ratings of Dimensions of Family Emotional Expression Narratives by Race

Dimension	Race	
	Asian American	White American
Family talk about feelings*	.74 (1.25)	2.00 (1.06)
Open expression of anger*	1.30 (.97)	2.39 (.72)
Open expression of sadness*	1.17 (.98)	2.00 (.89)
Open expression of positive emotions*	1.26 (1.10)	2.13 (1.06)

Note. Narratives rated on a 4-point scale (0 = 'not at all characteristic' to 3 = 'describes the family well').

\* Mean difference significant at  $p < .01$ .

of negative emotions, specifically anger,  $t(52) = -4.71, p < .001$ , Cohen's *d* = -1.29, 95% confidence interval = -1.85, -.69, indicating a medium to large effect, and sadness,  $t(52) = -3.22, p < .005$ , Cohen's *d* = -.89, 95% confidence interval = -1.44, -.32, indicating a small to large effect, and less open expression of positive emotions,  $t(52) = -2.94, p < .01$ , Cohen's *d* = -.81, 95% confidence interval = -1.35, -.24, indicating a small to large effect. There was no significant racial difference found on indirect expression of positive emotions,  $t(52) = -.07, ns$ .

**Emotion Socialization and Psychological Outcome**

Before examining our second question regarding the relationship between family socialization

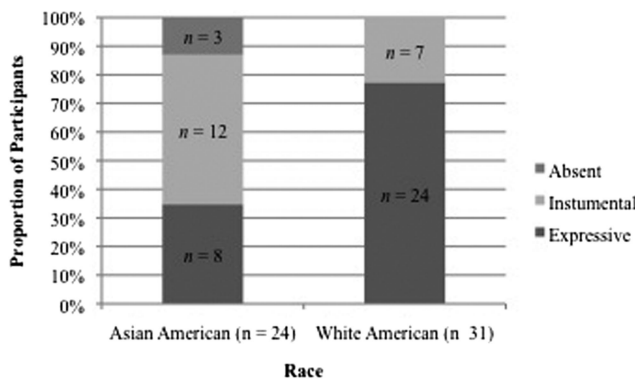


Figure 2. Type of positive emotional expression by race.

and psychological outcome, we conducted one-way ANOVAs across all participants with three types of family socialization as the independent variable and current distress as measured by the BDI-II, SPAI, and GAF. The ANOVAs showed no significant main effects of family socialization types on self-reported current depressive symptoms  $F(2, 51) = .87, ns$ , self-reported current social anxiety symptoms  $F(2, 51) = 2.22, ns$ , or interviewer-rated overall functioning,  $F(2, 50) = .78, ns$ . Because so few Asian Americans reported open discussion about emotion ( $n = 3$ ) and so few White Americans reported being socialized to suppress emotion ( $n = 3$ ), it was not possible to test for interactive effects of race and three socialization types on current distress.

In examining the relationship between emotion socialization and distress in Asian American participants in the sample, we were particularly interested in differences between overt emotional socialization messages to suppress emotions and nonovert emotion socialization messages to suppress emotions. Therefore, we combined participants with open and mixed socialization themes ( $n = 11$ ) to form a new category, "nonovert suppression," and compared this group with participants with closed socialization theme (i.e., "overt suppression";  $n = 12$ ). One-way ANOVAs were performed on the Asian American participants examining the effect of emotion socialization messages (suppress vs. nonsuppress) on BDI-II, SPAI, and GAF scores. As shown in Table 2, there

was a significant effect of socialization message on SPAI,  $t(23) = 2.28, p < .05$ , Cohen's  $d = .95$ , 95% confidence interval (CI) = .06, 1.78, and GAF scores,  $t(23) = -2.38, p < .05$ , Cohen's  $d = -.99$ , 95% CI =  $-1.82, -.09$ , but not on BDI-II scores,  $t(23) = .62, ns$ . Asian Americans who had been overtly socialized to suppress negative emotions had higher social anxiety scores and were judged to have lower overall functioning than those Asian Americans who were not overtly socialized to suppress emotional expressions.

## Discussion

The current study examined racial differences between Asian American and White American college students in their subjective experiences of past family socialization and current affective distress. As hypothesized, there were racial differences between Asian American and White American participants in the pattern of emotion socialization they experienced growing up. Specifically, most Asian Americans in the sample endorsed a socialization pattern of closed expression of emotions, while a little more than half of White Americans in the sample endorsed a socialization pattern of open expression of emotions. This finding is consistent with extant literature on emotional expression and parental socialization of emotions among Asian Americans and White Americans (Le et al., 2002).

We were unable to test our a priori hypothesis that a closed emotion socialization pattern (i.e., to overtly suppress emotions) would be related to current distress among White Americans because of the small number of White American participants who endorsed a closed emotion socialization pattern in our sample. However, among Asian Americans, we examined the possible relationship between the overt (vs. nonovert) family socialization to suppress emotions and current distress as measured by self-report scales of depressive and social anxiety symptoms as well as a rating of psychosocial functioning based on a clinical interview. We found that among Asian Americans, recalled overt family socialization of suppression was significantly related to social anxiety and psychosocial functioning scores such that those who endorsed an overt suppression socialization pattern had higher social anxiety and lower psy-

Table 2  
*Distress Scores for Asian Americans by Overt Suppression vs. Nonovert Suppression Socialization Pattern*

Outcome	Socialization pattern	
	Overt suppression ( $n = 12$ )	Nonovert suppression ( $n = 11$ )
Depression	20.63 (7.51)	18.82 (6.27)
Social Phobia*	84.91 (18.87)	63.97 (25.04)
Global Assessment of Functioning*	65.58 (7.53)	74.55 (10.42)

*Note.* Depression measured by Beck Depression Inventory—Second Edition, social phobia measured by Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory, and Global Assessment of Functioning measured by DSM-IV Axis V.

\* Mean difference significant at  $p < .05$ .



chological functioning scores than those who did not endorse an overt suppression socialization pattern. These results provide some indication that being explicitly socialized to suppress emotions may be associated with affective distress among Asian Americans, even if such parental practices may be culturally motivated.

It was unexpected that the impact of overt family socialization of suppression was significant for social anxiety and psychosocial functioning but not for depression among Asian Americans. It has also been suggested that anxious individuals who engage in suppression still experience the physiological symptoms of anxiety (see Amstadter, 2008, for a review). It is possible that suppression of sad mood may be easier than suppression of anxious mood because the psychophysiological experiences that accompany social anxiety are less amenable to regulation by suppression.

One possible reason for the relationship between overt messages of suppression and current distress is that it reflects intergenerational differences in acculturation. That is, perhaps when differences in acculturation exist between Asian American parents and their children, Asian American children may experience affective distress when they receive messages to suppress or inhibit emotions from their parents while hearing a different socialization message from larger American society that one should be open with their emotions. With post hoc analyses, we attempted to quantitatively test for acculturation's moderation effect, similar to the effect shown by Butler, Lee, and Gross (2007). To test the possible moderating effect of acculturation on family socialization pattern and current distress, we first dichotomized acculturation, as measured by the SL-ASIA (Suinn, Ahuna, & Khoo, 1992; alpha coefficient for the Asian American subsample was .73), into low acculturation (SL-ASIA score  $<3$ ) and high acculturation (SL-ASIA score  $\geq 3$ ) as suggested by Suinn, Khoo, and Ahuna (1995). There was no significant relationship between acculturation and suppression  $\chi^2(1, N = 21) = .44, ns$ . We then conducted an analysis of variance examining the potential interaction between suppression and acculturation level on our outcome variables. Results were again nonsignificant; however, it is possible that a study with a larger sample may yield a more robust result. It should be noted that the SL-ASIA is based on a unidi-

mensional model of acculturation, and as such, does not capture the bicultural nature of acculturation and enculturation that exists for many Asian Americans (see Ponterotto, Baluch, & Carielli, 1998, for a review of the limitations of the SL-ASIA).

In addition to the significant racial differences in socialization patterns between White Americans and Asian Americans, we also found that there were significant racial differences in the way that positive emotions were expressed such that most White Americans endorsed a pattern of primarily expressive positive emotions and most Asian Americans endorsed a pattern a pattern of primarily instrumental positive emotions. This result is consistent with ethnographic and psychophysiological research, though past research has primarily focused on the negative results of emotional restraint. For example, in a study of Korean American and Vietnamese American young adult children of immigrant parents, Pyke (2000) found that the participants defined love based on instrumental care and support. A study by Tsai and Levenson (1997) examining self-reported, behavioral, and physiological responses of Chinese American and White American dating couples to emotional stimuli and found that Chinese American participants reported fewer instances of positive emotion. Tsai and Levenson's post hoc analyses reveal that for Asian Americans, there was no significant relationship between the pattern of positive emotional expressiveness and current distress, suggesting that the absence of a pattern of verbalizing positive emotions was not related to distress. Certainly, as the current findings revealed, many Asian Americans recognized that love and happiness were expressed in non-verbal ways such as through the sacrifices their parents made on their behalf or through taking care of their physical and material needs. This is supported anecdotally by the writings of Asian American scholars (e.g., Nam, 2001; Wu, 2002; Zia, 2000), who suggest that hearing about parental sacrifice propels Asian American children to give back to their parents, often through academic success. Though little empirical research has been conducted examining the psychological impact of parental instrumental support on children, work by scholars such as Ruth Chao suggests that instrumental support is valued as a parenting strategy. For example, Chao (1994) found that Chinese mothers endorsed the

ideology that mothers primarily express love by helping their child succeed, especially academically. Further research should examine what role instrumental love, sometimes expressed as parental sacrifice, plays in the emotional experiences of Asian American children (e.g., Does instrumental love moderate the relationship between closed emotion suppression and later affective distress?).

Although systematic analyses of the narrative accounts of White American and Asian American young adults' experiences with emotion revealed patterns largely consistent with hypotheses, this study was limited in its retrospective nature and our results were consequently subject to memory and reporting biases. It has been suggested that though White Americans and Asians (specifically, Chinese in Beijing) do not differ in the volume of memory recall from childhood through peak midlife, there are cultural differences in the theme (social/historical vs. personal), specificity, emotionality, and interpersonal versus self focus of spontaneously generated memories between White Americans and Chinese such that Chinese individuals tend to recall more social and historical versus personal memories, provide less specificity in their descriptions of memories, make less reference to emotions, and focus more on memories of social interactions than of the self, compared to their American counterparts (Wang & Conway, 2004). Although this study involved a semistructured interview protocol, it is possible that there may be racial or cultural differences in the ability to accurately recall emotion socialization experiences. It may also be possible that affectively distressed individuals may be more likely to view their family socialization experience in a more negative light. Prospective longitudinal research is needed to understand the causal nature of the relationship between emotion socialization and later affective distress. In addition, further qualitative study is needed to elucidate the meanings Asian Americans make of their family socialization and how Asian American children negotiate mixed messages received from their immigrant parents and from mainstream society.

Because of the small sample size, limited variability of emotion socialization experiences within both the Asian American and White American subsamples, and nonclinical college student sample, our results should be interpreted

with caution. We were unable to test whether the impacts of particular emotion socialization patterns on psychological distress were unique to one racial group or common for both Asian Americans and White Americans. Theoretically, messages to suppress emotions would socialize individuals to suppress their emotions, and emotional suppression has been linked to negative consequences such as greater negative affect, less positive affect, poorer interpersonal functioning, poorer subjective well-being (Gross & John, 2003), and increased psychophysiological arousal (Gross & Levenson, 1997). However, at least in nonclinical female college samples, studies have found the psychological costs of emotional suppression for Asian Americans to be less so than for White Americans (Butler et al., 2007; Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2009). Our study suggests that the psychological costs of emotional suppression may indeed be felt by Asian Americans, yet more research is needed to understand the mechanisms of this relationship and to understand whether culture moderates this relationship.

We recognize the heterogeneity among Asian Americans and the limitations of our study in grouping different Asian ethnic Americans into one group. In addition, our study was conducted at a large Midwestern university with a predominantly White student body. It is possible that our Asian American participants had a heightened sensitivity to their minority status and racial prejudice because of their being visible numerical minorities. Future research should examine the complex interactions between race, acculturation level, and environmental influences such as ethnic density (e.g., living in an ethnically dense Chinatown vs. living in a predominantly White American town).

The limitations notwithstanding, this study demonstrated that there were racial differences in the recalled socialization of emotions in families of Asian Americans and White Americans currently experiencing subclinical psychological distress. Furthermore, for Asian Americans, family socialization that encouraged emotional suppression was associated with greater affective distress. Our findings have significant implications for emotion and psychopathology research and clinical work with Asian Americans. Researchers and clinicians must be sensitive to the nuanced influences of family, culture, and

ethnic minority status on the emotional experiences of Asian Americans.

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