

## FAMILY COMES FIRST: CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON STUDENTS' TIME MANAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

This work examines how culture influences students' time management. Specifically, it investigates how family responsibilities prevalent in the Asian and Latino ethnic subcultures influence those students' approach to time management and subsequent task completion. Undergraduates listed tasks that they planned to accomplish in a month; four weeks later they noted which were completed, and which were family-related. Analyses reveal that Asian and Latino students' initial to-do lists, relative to their classmates, contained a higher percentage of family-related tasks. Also, Asian and Latino students completed a higher proportion of family-related chores. Discussion focuses on related educational applications and on future research.

### INTRODUCTION

Over a decade ago, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the typical undergraduate spends five and a half years getting a degree (Kronholz, 1998), a 37.5% increase from the once four-year norm. Graduation delays are caused by off-campus jobs (Nonis, Philhours, & Hudson, 2006), part-time college enrollment (Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001; Simmons, 2001), and changes in major (Kronholz, 1998). In addition, it is worthwhile for college administrators to understand what factors outside of work and school constrain students' time. This paper examines this issue from a cultural perspective.

One under-explored time constraint pertains to the changing demographics of university students. As the national population has become more ethnically diverse, so have college campuses (for a review, see Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001). In this study, we examine how an ethnically-linked factor, "family responsibilities," influences college students' time management. We begin with a description of past research on familial responsibilities, and then describe the method and results of our study.

In this work, family responsibilities pertain to an individual's expected participation in familial care-giving, household chores, social activities or financial support. Much research on filial piety has focused upon the Asian subculture. For example, Tseng (2004) asked undergraduates to respond to a

series of rating scales designed to measure both how much assistance they provide at home (e.g., running errands that the family needs done), and their respect for family (e.g., showing great respect for parents). In her study, Asian college students placed more emphasis on family interdependence than their European counterparts. In the same vein, researchers focusing only on the Chinese culture found that students have numerous familial obligations (Fuligni, Yip, & Tseng, 2002).

The Latino subculture also places a high emphasis on family. Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) found that Filipino and Latin American high school students in their study had a strong sense of familial duty, and were more likely than their counterparts to help their families financially. Other researchers have noted Latinos' high levels of care-giving activities (Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Casey, 2009). Finally, students from both subcultures report that family obligations are present during high school and in college (Fuligni, 2007).

As researchers have established that Asians and Latinos emphasize family life, this paper extends past work by investigating how students manage those responsibilities. For example, in a given month what proportion of time is spent on familial obligations versus on other to-do tasks characteristic of young adulthood? Based upon past work, it is anticipated that students from Asian and Latino cultures will have a higher proportion of chores related to helping family members. In addition, when asked to describe factors influencing their ability to complete tasks, they might refer frequently to factors outside of their control. That is, it is anticipated that Asian and Latinos will more frequently remark upon external forces (such as their parents) that influence their ability to complete their to-do lists.

This study also differs methodologically from past work. Researchers investigating family obligations have used participant interviews (Sy & Romero, 2008), or daily diaries (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Fuligni, Yip, & Tseng 2002). Although both are worthwhile data collection techniques, it seems appropriate to try a different measurement instrument that precludes the self-presentation pressures presented by the former, and any repeated-measurement biases of the latter. In this

study, participants responded privately. They answered questions about family responsibilities only once.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 54 undergraduate students taking Marketing classes at a large public university were asked to participate in the study. Although one declined to complete the materials, the remaining students provided responses during the scheduled lecture time.

### Procedure

In an initial session, participants were asked to list all the tasks they planned to complete within a four-week period. Because this research focuses on factors that constrain students' time (instead of how much time they spend at school), they were asked to create a to-do list of responsibilities *unrelated* to classes and to work. Sample tasks include rotating car tires, picking up new eyeglasses, taking items to the Goodwill, birthday gift shopping, cleaning the backyard, and reversing overdraft fees. Four weeks later, the lists were returned to measure successful task completion.

### Dependent and Independent Variables

After giving back the to-do lists, participants were asked to put a plus sign (+) next to each task they had completed. In addition, they noted with an "F" which tasks family members asked them to do.

Participants were then asked to write a paragraph describing why task completion was or was not successful. Two undergraduates were trained to code independently the open-ended responses. They placed all comments into one of two categories. The first reflected external "uncontrollable" factors affecting completion (e.g., "There was a date by which tasks needed to be completed"). The second referred to internal "controllable" factors (e.g., "I was lazy"). Coding agreement was 97%, with the few discrepancies resolved through discussion. At the end of the survey, participants noted the ethnicity with which they primarily identify. They were subsequently grouped into those who did, and those who did not, self identify as Asian or Latino. One additional measure was taken to account for an uncontrollable factor that had the potential to bias the study results. Namely, fundamental differences between the Asian and Latino group and the rest of

their classmates in the number of courses they were taking would make data interpretation difficult. To check for this potential problem, all participants were asked how many units of class they were taking. Fortunately, the Asian/Latino participants did not differ significantly from the rest of the sample in their course load, ( $M = 14.56$ ,  $SD = 3.08$ , and  $M = 14.60$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ , respectively),  $t(50) = 0.05$ , *ns*.

## RESULTS

A total of 32 participants, or 60% of the sample, primarily identified with the Asian or Latino subculture. (The high proportion stems from the study being conducted in an ethnically diverse city, and on a campus wherein 70% of the student body is bilingual.) Preliminary analyses revealed that although Asian and Latino students planned to complete more tasks in a month than the rest of their classmates, the mean difference is not statistically significant ( $M = 9.84$ ,  $SD = 4.97$ , and  $M = 8.24$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ , respectively),  $t(51) = 1.48$ , *ns*.

However, the type of tasks on their to-do lists reveals the expected "family responsibilities" effect. It was anticipated that Asian and Latino participants would list more tasks that were requests from family members. Indeed, the Asian and Latino group provided a higher percentage of family-related tasks on their to-do lists than did their classmates ( $M = 22.50$ ,  $SD = 24.67$ , and  $M = 11.24$ ,  $SD = 12.90$ , respectively),  $t(49) = 2.17$ ,  $p < .04$ .

In addition, Asian and Latino participants focused more of their task completion on family duties. Of the tasks that were successfully finished, those in the Asian and Latino group had a higher percentage that were family-related than did the remaining participants ( $M = 23$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ , and  $M = 10$ ,  $SD = 0.14$ , respectively),  $t(46) = 2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ .

As described earlier, participants' open-ended comments describing their task completion were counted and coded. As expected, the mean total number of comments is not significantly different between the Asian and Latino group and their classmates ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ , and  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ , respectively),  $t(51) = 0.84$ , *ns*. However, as anticipated, there is a discrepancy in the content of their comments. Specifically, Asian and Latino participants were expected to emphasize that factors beyond their control affected their task completion. Indeed, the Asian and Latino participant group, relative to their classmates, had a higher proportion of open-ended thoughts about uncontrollable external factors ( $M = 0.77$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ , and  $M = 0.52$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ , respectively),  $t(48) = 3.16$ ,  $p < .004$ .

## DISCUSSION

This research not only underscores the expectation that Asians and Latinos partake in family responsibilities, but also outlines the extent to which such tasks occupy their time. First, according to this study's findings, family-related tasks comprise a large proportion of Asian and Latino students' to-do lists. Next, when those students pursue task completion, much of their energy is focused on tasks for family members. Finally, as anticipated, Asian and Latino students make more mention of uncontrollable external factors that influence completion of their chores.

These findings have a number of applications in campus settings. First, understanding the time pressures students face may help instructors fine tune coursework materials. To illustrate, one common complaint at the university where this research was conducted is that students face difficulties when meeting for group projects. Part of the issue may be that it is difficult to schedule around family-related chores (e.g., taking relatives to previously scheduled appointments). To address that concern, an instructor could state upfront to students that scheduling might be difficult, and that they must be patient when allocating responsibilities. Students may then discuss their time constraints with the hope of avoiding conflicts. If that approach is not sufficient to address timing issues, it might be helpful to have assignment procedures that make the experience more equitable for everyone. Students, for example, can be instructed to document attendance at meetings; if a classmate misses one, he or she must make up the time. If that student then takes responsibility for inputting project data, and if an error is found, he or she could bear a proportionately larger point reduction.

Although there is no perfect solution to the issue of differential family responsibilities, this plan of action may be better than none at all. Students of all ethnicities who have family responsibilities would receive the benefit of a more flexible time schedule, with a penalty trade off if the make up work lacks quality. Although faculty must spend energy carefully constructing such instructions, any subsequent reductions in student complaints might well compensate for the added effort. In sum, an understanding of changing student demographics, and of related cultural differences in family responsibilities, can be used to generate course materials that provide students with a means of dealing with such issues.

Another application to this paper's research stems from a student of Asian descent who volunteered that her immigrant single mother asked her to financially support their family. When the student continued to perform well academically with a 20-hour a week job, her mother insisted she increase her work hours to 40. Subsequently, when her grades dropped, she explained to her mother that college required study time, and then returned to 20 hours. This illustration suggests that some parents need to be educated about the college process. This might especially be true for immigrants to the United States who are not familiar with the American college system. Exacerbating the issue is the research finding that individuals in the immigrant generation have higher levels of family responsibilities; that is true in both the Latino and Asian subcultures (Sy & Romero, 2008; Tseng, 2004). In other words, immigrant parents may be less knowledgeable about student life in the United States, and additionally may have higher expectations for their children's involvement at home. Perhaps freshman orientation is an opportunity to deliver to parents materials (translated in appropriate foreign languages) that explain the number of hours a week students are expected to spend on coursework.

Having demonstrated how pre-occupying family-related tasks can be, there are many ways to extend this work. It would be worthwhile to further investigate if family chores add to students' to-do lists, or supplant tasks the students would otherwise choose to do. In this research, the Asian and Latino group did not differ statistically from their classmates in the number of chores they planned to complete; this suggests that familial responsibilities are not an added burden. Yet, the Asian and Latino group's mean number of planned tasks was 19% higher, which suggests that the lack of significance may be the result of low cell sizes or high variance. A research replication, or a larger scale study (e.g., in terms of sample size or duration), could provide insights into the opportunity costs of family chores. In addition, there is room to explore the type of tasks upon which students without family obligations focus, and the related consequences they face. That is, although a to-do list free from nagging family members may sound tempting, there may be trade offs in the amount of independence less involved parents expect, in the opportunity to become close to family members, or in the pressure to perform well given few time constraints or excuses. Finally, this research was conducted on a campus wherein students' families are both recent and distant immigrants. It would be worthwhile to see how long

the norm of family responsibilities persists over subsequent generations.

It is hoped that this research stimulates more investigations into how family responsibilities and more general cultural differences influence students' time management.

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