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# Face concern: Its role on stress–distress relationships among Chinese Americans

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## Abstract

This study examined the effects of face concern and social support on stress–distress relationships, after controlling for preexisting distress and demographic characteristics in a stratified community sample of Chinese Americans ( $n = 1503$ ). Emotional support and instrumental support from family and friends were found to significantly predict psychological distress among Chinese Americans in addition to face-related daily hassles and financial strain. Face concern emerged as an important contributing factor above and beyond social support and stress variables although no interaction effect between face and face-related stressors was found. Testing this culturally salient variable has furthered our understanding of the stress–distress experiences of Chinese Americans and provided important implications for cultural dynamics in social relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of social-relation effects on distress has been expanded among immigrants and ethnic minorities (e.g., Kleinman, 1988; Lin, 1996). Despite the abundance of

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stress–distress research (Brookings & Bolton, 1997; Taylor & Aspinwall, 1996), only in the recent decade did researchers begin to pay close attention to the influence of culturally salient variables (i.e., acculturation, self-construals) on stress–distress relationships (Mak, Chen, Wong, & Zane, 2005; Okazaki, 2002; Shen & Takeuchi, 2001). The importance of incorporating specific cultural variables and addressing the issue of external validity in psychological research has been increasingly recognized (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Sue, 1999). Constructs that have substantial bearing in a particular culture can influence the way individuals interpret their daily experiences and express their distress. The present study attempts to explore the utility of face concern, a psychosocial variable that is salient in East Asian cultures, on stress–distress relationships in a large community sample of Chinese Americans. In particular, the purposes of this study are threefold: (1) to test the ameliorating role of social support on distress, (2) to determine the added value of face concern above and beyond social support on distress, accounting for demographics, preexisting psychological distress, and various types of stressor, and (3) to examine the possible interaction effects between face concern and face-related stressors on distress.

### 1.1. *Social support*

Social support encompasses psychosocial constructs that represent the perception of resource availability and the ability to elicit support from different sources. It can be conceptualized along different dimensions according to their functions and qualities: emotional support refers to the perception of being loved and cared for and is based on one's cognitive appraisal of his or her relationships with significant others (Cobb, 1976); instrumental support refers to the material assistance that individuals receive from others or project that they can extract from others (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991). Given the meaning of emotional and instrumental support and their effects on the individuals may be different, it is important that both forms of support be accounted for in the analysis. In past studies, social support has been found to be negatively associated with psychological distress among Asian and European American populations (e.g., Dalgard, Bjork, & Tambs, 1995; Kuo & Tsai, 1986; Lin & Lai, 1995; Sarason, Sarason, Potter, & Antoni, 1985). In the present investigation, social support, as indicated by both emotional and instrumental support, is hypothesized to be negatively related to psychological distress among Chinese Americans.

### 1.2. *Face concern*

Although the ameliorative role of social support is well-established, the role of face concern on distress awaits to be examined. Face concern is a culturally salient construct on social representation that may be particularly important in the understanding of distress among Asians. Face (*mian zi*) has been identified as a key interpersonal dynamic in East Asian cultures (Bond, 1991; Ho, 1976; Hu, 1944; Ting-Toomey, 1994). It is one's social image and social worth that is garnered based on one's performance in an interpersonal contexts (Choi & Lee, 2002; Hwang, 1997–1998). According to Hu (1944), face represents a person's social position or prestige gained by performing one or more specific social roles that are well recognized by others. It is independent from another construct of face (*lian*) that is related to the meeting of moral and ethical standards that are set forth by one's social network and has the implication of shame if one falls short of meeting such moral demands (Ho, 1976; Hwang, 1997–1998).

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