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Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 2005; 22; 283
DOI: 10.1177/0265407505050952

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Cognitive responses to favor requests from different social targets in a Confucian society

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ABSTRACT

Responses of Taiwanese graduate students to favor requests from different social targets (peer vs. superior) were compared across two scenarios. Factors influencing the decision to accept or reject the request were also explored. When the favor request was consistent with the relational context (academic research), participants were more likely to accept the request from a professor than from a classmate. Those who accepted the professor's request were more likely to report authority-oriented reasons. When the content of the favor request was inconsistent with the relational context, participants tended to reject the request from both a professor and a classmate. Those who rejected the professor's request reported more self-assertive reasons for their decision. Although participants rated Rational Reciprocity as the most important factor in making their decision, interpersonal closeness seemed to be a major concern in deciding to do a favor for a peer. Social interactions for acquaintances in a Confucian society are influenced by Confucian ethics advocating the principle of respecting the superior and the principle of favoring the intimate, rather than solely by the principle of social exchange.

KEY WORDS: cognitive frame • Confucian ethics • favor request • heterogeneous culture • horizontal relationship • vertical relationship

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to Dr. Olwen Bedford for her constructive comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kuei-Hsiang Han, Department of Psychology, National Chengchi University in Taiwan, 64 Chih-Nan Road, Sec. 2, Wensham, Taipei 11623, Taiwan [e-mail: jessyhan1020@yahoo.com]. Mark A. Fine was the Action Editor on this article.

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships Copyright © 2005 SAGE Publications (www.sagepublications.com), Vol. 22(2): 283–294. DOI: 10.1177/0265407505050952

Doing favors is a phenomenon common to every human society. When an individual asks someone to do something that the person is not obligated to do, it constitutes a favor request. Theories of social exchange or reciprocity developed in Western cultures postulate that when a person receives a favor from a resource allocator, that person feels a state of discomfort associated with the indebtedness (Chadwick-Jones, 1976; Gouldner, 1960; Roloff, 1987). According to Greenberg (1980), the sense of indebtedness in social exchange is an additive function of the recipient's (i.e., the person making request) net benefits and the resource allocator's (i.e., the person doing the favor) net costs from the exchange. Individuals are socialized to experience the pressure to reciprocate as a function of received benefits, and will try to restore the equality of the relationship (Greenberg, Block, & Silverman, 1971; Greenberg & Frisch, 1972). In fact, the recipient's feeling of obligation to repay increases the possibility that the resource allocator will be compensated, which increases the likelihood of the resource allocator's agreeing to the request in the first place (Gouldner, 1960).

Although the norm of reciprocity and its accompanying sense of indebtedness may be universal (Gouldner, 1960), the motivation to maintain equality in exchanges with others more likely reflects the presupposition of individualism embedded in Western culture. Individualism assumes that every individual is an equal and self-contained entity who should remain independent in dealing with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Sampson, 1988; Triandis, 1989). Numerous cross-cultural studies have indicated that the concept of self in Oriental cultures differs from the individualism of Western cultures (Heine & Lehman, 1999; Kashima et al., 1995; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Interpersonal relationships in cultures emphasizing individualism are established and maintained primarily on the basis of a person's costs and benefits in social exchange (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1981; Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In contrast, Oriental cultural traditions emphasize the importance of interpersonal interdependence and an interdependent self in order to maintain harmonious relationships with others (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Individuals in a Confucian culture are socialized to accept duties and obligations to others and to take appropriate action in accordance with their position within the social network (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Yang, 1992). For example, according to Confucian ethics, social interactions should follow the principle of respecting the superior (Hwang, 2000, 2001; Liu, 1986). This implies that subordinates are obligated to obey the requests of superior others (Spencer-Oatey, 1997).

Although authority ranking has been conceptualized as one of the four elementary forms of social behavior (Fiske, 1991, 1992), and inequality of power within vertical relationships exists in every culture, tolerance of power distance varies from culture to culture. For example, Taiwanese culture is characterized by high power distance, whereas Western cultures

tend to be characterized by a smaller power distance (Choiu, 2001; Hofstede, 1980). Smaller power distance and the emphasis on maintaining equality with others might result in relative neglect in elaborating vertical relationship in individualistic societies. By contrast, because the superior-subordinate relationship has been well articulated by Confucian cultural tradition, vertical relationships might be overtly recognized in Taiwanese culture, and the motivation for doing favors between members of a vertical relationship might be much more complicated than that between two parties of equal status. Thus, it is worthwhile comparing the motivation of social exchange in these two types of relationship in Taiwanese society.

Like other Confucian societies in Asia, Taiwan has experienced tremendous political, economic, and social changes in the past decades (Choiu, 2001). Confucian teachings are still a major part of high school curricula, and Confucian ethics and related authority-oriented values are stressed in many domains of social life. Of course, along with industrialization and globalization, Taiwan's social structure and way of life have dramatically altered from that of traditional Chinese society. Equality-related values of Western origin have penetrated various aspects of people's lives (Yang, 1996), and Taiwanese culture is becoming a hybrid of East and West. In order to explain how people process information and behave with heterogeneous values, Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) proposed that different cultural values might be internalized as a loose network of knowledge structures that contain numerous domain-specific cultural theories. When the social context changes, an individual may switch cognitive frames to adopt the cultural theory most appropriate that situation.

By the same token, although people who are socialized in Western cultures may have a relatively larger 'private self' and those in Eastern culture may have a stronger 'collective self' (Triandis, 1989), all people in both Eastern and Western cultures possess both private and collective selves. For example, when the collective self was activated by context cues, participants from both cultures retrieved more units of collective self from their cognitive structures. More units of private self were retrieved by participants from both cultures when the private self was activated (Trafimow, Silverman, Fan, & Law, 1997; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). In other words, a specific cognitive construct may be automatically activated when responding to cues that are psychologically associated with specific cultural theories.

Thus, according to these theories, Taiwanese people may have internalized a number of domain-specific cultural theories to deal with various situations. Accepting or denying a favor request is likely one of such situations. When the content of a favor request is consistent with the relationship context and the situation conforms to the dominant social norms of obeying or serving a superior, an authority-oriented cognitive framework may be activated (i.e., the principle of respecting the superior). That is, Taiwanese people may tend to accept favor requests from a superior more often than from a peer. However, if the request is inconsistent with the relationship

context, a self-assertive cognitive structure might be primed. Psychological reactance may make the subordinate aware of the unreasonableness of the request, and thus lead to denying the request.

When there is no authority or power involved, Confucian ethics instruct that the resource allocator follow the principle of favoring the intimate (Hwang, 2000, 2001). In this case, the closeness of the interpersonal relationship is the most important factor in agreeing to or denying the request. When the relationship is characterized by closeness, the resource allocator tends to adopt the need rule and does not expect the recipient to repay the favor (Hwang, 1987). However, when the recipient is an acquaintance, the resource allocator tends to make decisions on the basis of calculated personal costs and benefits when agreeing to the favor request, as is most common in Western societies. In this case, the most important question for a donor to ask would be 'What can I get in return if I agree to help?' (Hwang, 1987). Thus, for Taiwanese people, just as predicted by Western theories of social exchange, the expectation of future reward might be an important factor in deciding whether to agree when faced with a request from a person of a horizontal relationship (i.e., a peer).

Previous studies have indicated that the behavior of Chinese people tends to vary depending on relationship factors (Leung & Bond, 1984; Li, 1993; Wei & Hwang, 1998; Zhang & Yang, 1998). A common feature of these studies is that they infer the nature of relationship between the members of the dyad from the quantity of resources allocated to the social target. They do not explore whether different contexts might influence the cognitive frameworks used in the decision-making process. As Miller (2002) suggested, cultural psychologists should study how contextual variation influences psychological functioning within cultures. Hong et al. (2000; Hong & Chiu, 2001) reported that internalized cultural theories could be activated by social contextual cues. This study uses scenarios as cues to prime the domain-specific cultural theories to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Taiwanese people are more likely to accept favor requests from superiors than from equals when the content of the favor request is consistent with the relational context. However, when the request goes beyond the social norm of serving a superior, the effect of the vertical relationship will disappear.

H2: When the favor request is consistent with the relational context, authority-oriented cognitions will facilitate subordinates' acceptance of the request from a superior. However, when the favor request is inconsistent with the relationship norm, self-assertive cognitions will be elicited, resulting in denying the request.

H3: Increasing closeness tends to make an individual more likely to accept a favor request from a peer.

H4: When controlling for relationship closeness, individuals tend to make decisions on the basis of personal costs and benefits in responding to favor requests from peers.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighty-two graduate students from six universities in Taiwan served as participants in this study. They were randomly assigned to either the professor or peer version of the questionnaire (44 males and 47 females for each version). Mean age was 25.15 years ($SD = 3.21$; range 21–42).

Research instruments

Two questionnaires were designed to study participants' reactions to favor requests. Each questionnaire contained two scenarios with similar themes to test whether participants would react differently to requests from petitioners of vertical (i.e., professor–graduate student) versus horizontal (i.e., classmates) relationships. Based on interviews with five graduate students, two requests were constructed. One was an academic request (entering data, conducting a statistical analysis, copying teaching material, etc.), which fits with the relationship context between professors and students. The other request focused on housekeeping (cleaning, baby-sitting, shopping, etc.). Although Confucian sayings emphasize that 'pupils should serve tutors' needs' (*yo shih di tze fu chih lou*), and evidence from the in-depth interviews suggested that some tutors indeed still ask their students to serve them in this way, it was expected that the request is beyond the interaction context of a student and a professor in modern society. The scenarios were designed in an exaggerated way so that there was a high cost for agreeing to help.

To construct the cognitive frame for decision-making, pilot participants reported their concerns stemming from a request for a favor from either a professor or a classmate. Their responses were sorted and used in a second pilot study to check for additional concerns.

Ten major points of concern were formulated with each scenario. The 10 points were designed to be applicable to both relationship types as they included almost all major concerns, except interpersonal closeness (see the Appendix for the content of the two scenarios and the 10 points of concern in the vertical version).

Research design

Two versions of questionnaire were designed for this study, professor or peer (between-subjects). Each version contained two favor request episodes: academic work or housekeeping (within-subjects). These two versions of the questionnaire were randomly assigned to participants. Participants were asked to indicate whether they would agree to or deny the request. In addition, participants evaluated the importance of each of the 10 points of concern on a 7-point scale (1 = *not important at all*, 7 = *very important*).

The measure of closeness and sex

Before reading the scenarios, participants were instructed to imagine either a professor or a classmate (depending on the relationship condition) with whom they had to interact frequently. They were also asked to rate the felt closeness with this social target on a 9-point scale (1 = *not close at all*, 9 = *very close*), and to indicate the target person's sex. Participants were then instructed to read both scenarios with the imagined professor (or classmate) in mind.

Results

As predicted in *H1*, participants were more likely to accept a favor request from a professor than from a classmate in the academic request (82.4 vs. 50.5%), $\chi(1)^2 = 20.737$, $p < .001$. In the housekeeping episode the percentage of participants who accepted the request did not depend on the person making the request (professor = 38.9% vs. classmate = 33%), $\chi(1)^2 = .689$, $p > .05$. Therefore, *H1* was supported: when the content of a favor request fits with the relationship context, Taiwanese students tended to accept more favor requests from a professor than from a classmate. When the content of the favor goes beyond the norm of the interaction context, the effect of the vertical relationship disappears.

Factors of concern for favors in vertical relationships

Participants rated the importance of 10 points of concern for each scenario. The data were analyzed by principal components factor analysis with a promax rotation. Four factors were generated for both scenarios: Obedience to Authority, Self-Assertion, Anxiety about Social Rejection and Expectation for Reciprocal Repayment (factor analytic data are available from the corresponding author). Two items were omitted due to cross loadings.

H2 predicts that when a favor request is consistent with the relational context, authority-oriented cognitions will facilitate subordinates' acceptance of the request from a superior, whereas when the favor request is inconsistent with the relationship norm, self-assertive cognitions will be elicited, resulting in denying the request. Testing this hypothesis involved two steps of data analysis. The first step compared participants' acceptance rates from a professor for both scenarios. As the data showed in Table 1, the acceptance rate was significantly higher than the rejection rate for the academic scenario, while the result was reversed for the housekeeping scenario. The results supported the first part of *H2* that participants tend to accept favor requests from a superior when the content of the favor request is consistent with the relationship context. They tend to reject the request when its content is inconsistent with the relationship context.

TABLE 1
Decision-making on different scenarios in vertical and horizontal relationships

		Academic issue			Housekeeping		
		Yes (%)	No (%)	χ^2	Yes (%)	No (%)	χ^2
Professor	Total	82.4	17.6	38.25***	38.9	61.1	4.44*
	Male	81.8	18.2	17.82***	52.3	47.7	.09
	Female	83	17.0	20.45***	26.1	73.9	10.52***
Classmate	Total	50.5	49.5	.01	33.0	67.0	10.56***
	Male	54.5	45.5	.36	43.2	56.8	.82
	Female	46.8	53.2	.19	23.4	76.6	13.30***

Note. For the professor version, men = 44, women = 47 (one missing case in housekeeping scenario); for the classmate version, men = 44, women = 47.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

With regard to the second part of *H2*, in order to determine participants' concerns in making the decision, a 2 (acceptance vs. rejection) \times 4 (factors of concern: Authority, Anxiety, Self-Assertion, Reciprocity as repeat measured variables) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. Participants' age and sex, the target person's sex, and closeness between the dyad members were included as covariates. None of the covariates interacted with the predictors in either scenario. For the academic scenario, only the interaction effect between decision group and factors of concern was significant ($F(3,255) = 5.499$, $p < .001$). Because the importance of Obedience to Authority and Self-Assertion in the decision-making process is our main concern in this part of analysis, only these two variables of acceptance and rejection groups were compared using Scheffe's post-hoc tests. The results indicated that participants in the acceptance group rated these two variables very differently from the rejection group ($t(89) = 4.24$, $p < .05$). The acceptance group rated Obedience to Authority ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.40$) as more important than Self-Assertion ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.37$), whereas the rejection group rated Self-Assertion ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.74$) as more important than Obedience to Authority ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.13$).

For the housekeeping scenario, the ANCOVA replicated the results for the academic scenario. Only the decision group and factors of concern had a significant interaction effect ($F(3,252) = 8.479$, $p < .001$). Scheffe's test revealed that participants in the acceptance and rejection groups rated the importance of Obedience to Authority and Self-Assertion in a different way ($t(88) = 5.43$, $p < .05$). Self-Assertion ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.67$) was rated as more important than Obedience to Authority ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.37$) by the rejection group, whereas Obedience to Authority ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.47$) was rated as more important than Self-Assertion ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.48$) by the acceptance group.

Thus, results of these analyses supported the second part of *H2*. When the favor request fits with the norm of the interaction, participants tend to accept the request from a figure of a vertical relationship because the context is psychologically related with the traditional authority-oriented values. When the content of a favor request goes beyond the norm, they tend to reject the request since the self-assertive cognition is made salient.

Factors of concern for favors in horizontal relationships

The same analysis procedures were performed for the classmate (peer) data. The points of concern, as rated by participants in considering a favor request across scenarios, were separately subjected to principal components factor analysis with a promax rotation. Three factors were obtained, namely Egocentrism, Social-Orientation, and Rational Reciprocity (factor analytic data are available from the corresponding author).

In order to test the first part of *H3* that the closeness between the interacting dyad members will influence an individual's decision to accept the favor request from a classmate, a between-groups *t*-test was conducted to compare the judgments of closeness made by the acceptance and rejection groups. The results indicated that the acceptance and rejection groups were significantly different in their judgments of closeness between the participant and the favor-demander in a horizontal relationship for both the academic ($M = 6.26$ vs. $M = 5.40$, $t(89) = 3.13$, $p < .01$) and the housekeeping scenarios ($M = 6.43$ vs. $M = 5.54$, $t(89) = 3.04$, $p < .01$). Thus, *H3* was supported. Relational closeness affects the participant's decision in peer relationships.

To test *H4*, closeness between partners was statistically controlled. We expected reciprocity would be an important concern for deciding whether to accept a favor request from a peer. A 2 (acceptance vs. rejection) \times 3 (factors of concern: Egocentrism, Social-Orientation, Reciprocity as a repeat measured variable) ANCOVA was conducted with closeness between the dyad members as a covariate (when participants' ages and sex, and the target person's sex were also controlled, results were similar). For the academic scenario, the decision group had a significant main effect, ($F(1,85) = 8.548, p < .01$). The rejection group rated higher on all three of the factors, i.e. Egocentrism, Social-Orientation, and Rational Reciprocity ($M = 3.05, 3.25$ and 4.82 respectively for acceptance group; $M = 3.44, 3.49$ and 5.26 respectively for rejection group). The interaction effect between the factors of concern and the covariate (closeness) was also significant ($F(2,170) = 6.301, p < .01$). Closeness correlated with Egocentrism ($r = -.25, p < .05$) and Rational Reciprocity ($r = -.21, p < .05$). For the housekeeping scenario, although participants rated Rational Reciprocity ($M = 4.77$ for acceptance group, $M = 4.97$ for rejection group) higher than Egocentrism and Social-Orientation in both acceptance ($M = 2.92$ and 3.33 respectively) and rejection ($M = 3.89$ and 2.79 respectively) groups, only closeness between the dyad had a significant covariate effect ($F(1,85) = 7.362, p < .01$). Specifically, participants in the acceptance group rated closeness higher than the rejection group.

Overall, when considering peer relationships, relationship closeness is an important factor affecting an individual's decision to accept the favor request. In addition, the negative correlation between closeness and Rational Reciprocity in scenarios implied that the closer the favor-demander, the less the participants expected to receive future repayment. When the effect of closeness between the dyad was statistically controlled, Rational Reciprocity was rated as the most important factor to be considered in participants' decision making. However, the data did not indicate that participants from rejection and acceptance groups rated significantly different in Rational Reciprocity. *H4* was not supported for either scenario.

Discussion

Responses to a favor request from a superior

Participants were more likely to accept a favor request from a professor than from a classmate when the content of the favor request was consistent with the professor-student relationship (academic issue), even though it was not really legitimate for a professor to ask a student to do personal academic chores. Graduate students in Taiwan were still constrained by the norms of traditional ethics. As a result, most participants (82.4%) indicated that they would agree to this request, and the major factor that differentiated participants' decisions was Obedience to Authority. This result is consistent with previous findings that Chinese people behave in accordance with the principle of respecting or obeying the superior (Leung & Bond, 1984; Li, 1993; Wei & Hwang, 1998; Zhang & Yang, 1998).

The professor's nonacademic request (i.e., housekeeping) likely made another cognitive framework accessible as the content of the favor request

was not consistent with the professor–student relationship. This is true even though the dominant Confucian ethics stress that ‘Pupils should serve tutors’ needs.’ The insulting connotation of this request might have caused psychological reactance, and focused students’ attention on the unreasonableness of the request, although 38.9% of the participants agreed to the request for housekeeping. Participants likely have been influenced by Western ideas but still relied on the authority-oriented values when accepting the unreasonable request.

Responses to a favor request from a peer

The overall findings of the peer requests were consistent with the speculation that closeness between individuals influences the resource allocator’s decision to accept or reject a favor request. Rational reciprocity was more important than egocentrism and social orientation in making the decision. Furthermore, results of correlation analyses indicated that closeness correlated negatively with rational reciprocity. This implies that the expectation of future reward becomes less important when the resource allocator is closer to the person making the request. Therefore, compared to its insignificance in superior–subordinate relationships, the effect of closeness in peer relationship implies that the social interaction between peers in a Confucian society such as Taiwan is influenced most strongly by the principle of favoring the intimate.

Reconsideration of social exchange theory

The findings of this study suggested that agreeing to perform a favor in Taiwan cannot be fully explained by theories of social exchange or reciprocity developed in the Western cultures. These theories emphasize that helping behavior is mainly motivated by the expectation of future reward (Chadwick-Jones, 1976; Gouldner, 1960; Roloff, 1987). When the favor-demander was a professor, participants rated the factor of Expectation for Reciprocal Repayment as relatively unimportant, no matter whether they accepted or rejected the favor requests. Although reciprocal repayment was rated as important when the requester was a peer, only closeness could determine whether or not the participants would accept the favor request. The decision to agree to a favor might not be made according to costs and benefits, and reciprocity might not fully account for participants’ decisions. Confucian ethics for ordinary people, which advocate the principle of respecting the superior, and the principle of favoring the intimate when facing a peer (Hwang, 2001) are better ways of understanding agreeing to favors in a Confucian society.

Limitations

This study used scenarios as an instrument to examine the participants’ cognitive processes. Scenarios provide a controlled way to manipulate the contents of the favor request. Because the participants’ actual behaviors were not observed in this study, care should be taken in generalizing findings to actual social interactions.

Because participants in this study were all graduate students, it is likely that their responses to favor requests may not represent those of the general population, as only a small portion of the population has the experience of graduate education in Taiwanese society. However, although they might be different from the general population in their exposure to some particular aspects of Western culture, they still tended to be influenced by Confucian ethics in responding to favor requests in this study.

Furthermore, because this research was conducted only in Taiwanese society, it would be worthwhile conducting cross-cultural research to test whether similar patterns of behaviors can be observed in other Confucian societies. Moreover, comparisons between Confucian and Western societies would be valuable as well.

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Appendix

Scenarios and points of concern in the vertical version

Academic scenario. Professor X is conducting some research. This research has nothing to do with you. Today, Professor X came to you and gave you a bundle of questionnaires saying that he (she) has been very busy recently, and that the research needs to be completed in a hurry. The professor needs you to do a favor of keying in the data from the answered questionnaires and conducting the primary analysis of the raw data this week. You look at the questionnaires and estimate that it may take you at least three days to finish. Would you accept the request from the professor?

Housekeeping scenario. Professor X asks you to help with some housekeeping again this weekend. As you are his (her) teaching assistant, Professor X has occasionally asked you to help with his/her housekeeping in the past, will you accept the request from the professor this time?

Points of concern:

1. It's a student's responsibility to help professors.
2. It should wait until I finish my own work.
3. People should be responsible for themselves. People should solve their own problems by themselves.
4. I am afraid that the professor will be mean to me if I reject the request.
5. It's very honorable to serve professors.
6. This is a good chance to train myself.
7. I don't think that I will need the professor's help in the future. Therefore, there is no need to help the professor now.
8. I am afraid that there will be some strange feelings between us if I reject the request.
9. If I help the professor this time, he/she will also help me with my request in the future.
10. I don't want to help the professor because the feeling of being used is bad.