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Familial Guilt: A Cross-Society Comparison of Judgments of Collective Family Responsibility

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Abstract

When a group member commits wrongdoing, people sometimes assign responsibility and blame not only to the wrongdoer but also to other members of the same group. We examined such assignment of collective responsibility in the context of exploitation of one family by another. Participants were recruited from the United States and South Korea, which are known to vary in cultural norms and endorsement of collectivistic values. Participants in both countries rated the degree to which an agent (grandson) should be held responsible for his grandfather's exploitation of a victimized family, while varying the closeness of familial connection. Participants' responsibility judgments showed sensitivity to whether the grandson received financial benefit from the wrongdoer and to the perceived closeness between the grandson and the wrongdoer. Korean participants imposed greater responsibility on the agent than did American participants. Implications for understanding the influence of social norms on moral judgments are discussed.

Keywords: collective responsibility, moral judgment, cross-cultural comparison, family relationships

Introduction

Over several generations, some White Americans have expressed guilt for the enslavement and mistreatment of African Americans and indigenous peoples by early White Americans (e.g., Chudy, Piston, & Shipper, 2019; Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003). Postwar generations in Germany have been apologetic to Jews for the atrocities committed under the rule of the Nazi party (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). Some Koreans expressed grief and guilt for Americans when the killer from the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007 was revealed to be a recent immigrant from South Korea (Choe & Onishi, 2007).

These examples are cases in which people experience vicarious, collective responsibility and guilt because they share group identity with a wrongdoer (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2014). In an ethnographic study that analyzed the electronic Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF; Curtin et al., 2020), indications of collective guilt were found in 45 out of 71 societies around the world. Here we focus specifically on guilt related to actions by other people in (or closely connected to) one's own family, which we term *familial guilt*.

Familial guilt can be considered a special case of the distribution of collective responsibility to individual members of a group (Smiley, 2017; Radzik, 2001). The very idea of collective responsibility runs counter to traditional accounts of how responsibility *ought* to be imposed as

formulated in Western philosophy (Smiley, 2017). Philosophers have postulated that, in a typical setting, to hold an individual responsible or blameworthy for a wrongdoing requires assuming that the individual has acted as a moral agent. That is, the individual must have acted freely rather than under coercion to cause harm, intended the action, and believed that their action was wrong (for a philosophical review see Talbert, 2019). Recent studies in moral psychology have confirmed that the mental states of the agent inferred by the reasoner—especially those pertaining to whether the agent had control over their action and harm—are indeed critical determinants of moral judgments of responsibility, wrongness, and blame (e.g., Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Cushman, 2008; Lagnado & Channon, 2008; Gerstenberg et al., 2018; Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007; for review see Bartels et al., 2015).

However, recent cross-cultural studies in anthropology (Barrett et al., 2016) have challenged the universality of these fastidious conditions for assignment of responsibility and blame. Barrett and colleagues argued that the emphasis on mental states as determinants of moral violations may be significantly weaker in non-Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. They found that when making moral judgments, participants from eight small-scale traditional societies were less sensitive to the intention of the agent and more focused on the outcome of the action than were participants from Western societies.

The case of familial guilt takes a step further: moral responsibility is assigned not only to people who lack awareness or intent of the wrongdoing, but to people who made no causal contribution to it at all. On the other hand, in the legal domain, blaming people based on their personal ties to a wrongdoer is typically dismissed as the fallacy of guilt by association. It remains controversial whether assigning responsibility and guilt based on group membership can sometimes be normative or justifiable (Radzik, 2001; Smiley, 2017; Silver, 2006).

We performed a study to assess the propensity to provide financial restitution to descendants of victims harmed by one's own ancestor (a grandfather). Importantly, we tested the hypothesis that different societies may assign collective responsibility to others differently. The United States and South Korea were chosen as useful examples of societies with distinct cultural norms. Many studies have investigated the 'East-West' distinction (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Graham, Meindl,

Beall, Johnson, & Zhang, 2016) and characterized Western societies influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition as emphasizing individual rights over collective goals and duties. In comparison, East Asian societies influenced by Confucian tradition have been viewed as assigning greater importance to maintaining social order and harmony and fulfilling the duty to serve the common good of one's group or society. More recent work on tight versus loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011) also identified the U.S. and Korea as typical examples of societies with tight and loose cultures, respectively. These general differences in norms suggest that Koreans may have a greater propensity to offer recompense for bad acts committed by an ancestor, thereby settling the historical 'moral debt' and restoring intergroup harmony.

The present study adapted a paradigm introduced by Uhlmann et al. (2012), who gave participants scenarios that varied the nature of the link between an agent (tasked to make financial restitution to descendants of the victims) and their grandfather (the wrongdoer). This link was either biological or not (in the latter case, the agent's grandmother had divorced and remarried before he was born, and her second husband was the wrongdoer). Their results supported Uhlmann et al.'s hypothesis that (possibly due to people's intuitive belief in common-sense essentialism) the guilt of the older wrongdoer would be transferred to his descendant more strongly when they are connected through blood ties. To examine the impact of a wider range of relations, the present study included additional conditions involving family connection via adoption, and a baseline in which the wrongdoer and the agent were unrelated. We hypothesized that perceived "oneness" of the wrongdoer and the agent as members of a common group (*entitativity*; Campbell, 1958) would be highest for the biological condition, followed by the adoptive, remarriage, and no-relation conditions. Acceptance of collective responsibility was expected to increase with entitativity.

Orthogonally to the relationship conditions, we varied the presence and absence of a financial benefit the agent had received from the wrongdoer. Historical exploitation often results in advantages for the exploiter group and disadvantages for the victim group. Radzik (2001; Iyer et al., 2003) argued that the collective responsibility of members of the exploiter group to make reparations can derive from the advantages they inadvertently received. By using a factorial design, our study can distinguish the effects of financial benefit and relationship on collective responsibility judgment. In addition, we tested the hypothesis that members of a collectivistic society (Koreans) as compared to members of an individualistic society (United States) may be more sensitive to the types of relations between the agent and the wrongdoer, or perhaps more generally accepting of collective responsibility to remedy a past injustice.

Experiment

Method

Participants and Design Uhlmann et al. (2012, Study 1) reported that the effect size based on biological relatedness between grandfather and grandson on recommended restitution was Cohen's d of 0.48. For a minimum power of .80 and α of .05 in a two-tailed independent samples t -test, 70 participants were required in each group. Because we were interested in examining more fine-grained variations in relatedness, we aimed for 80 in each of 16 groups. University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board approved the procedures of the experiments in both the U.S. and Korea. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Amazon Mechanical Turk was used to recruit 649 American participants (283 females, 1 non-binary gender; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.8$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.8$; 18 to 29 years = 27.6%, 30 to 39 years = 37.4%, 40 to 49 years = 17.6%, 50 years or older = 17.4%). Around 80 participants were assigned to each of eight between-subject conditions for the American portion of the study. Self-identified ethnicity was collected (European/European American: 71%, African American/Black: 12%, Asian/Asian American: 9%, Hispanic or Spanish origin: 6%, other: 2%). American participants were paid \$0.80 for completing the experiment, which took around 4 minutes on average. An additional 358 participants were recruited but excluded from analyses because they failed to correctly answer either of two comprehension checks (see Materials and Procedure).

After collecting data from American participants, we recruited 641 Korean participants (347 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.7$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.9$; 18 to 29 years = 35.1%, 30 to 39 years = 34.9%, 40 to 49 years = 15.0%, 50 years or older = 15.0%) from Hankook research's (<https://www.hrc.co.kr/eng/>) online survey panel. Quotas were used to roughly match the distribution of age between the American and Korean samples. Korean participants who failed the comprehension checks were automatically dropped during the experiment. Korean participants were compensated with points in Hankook research's online system, which were worth around \$0.80 and could be converted to currency. They took about 5 minutes on average to complete the experiment.

Materials and Procedure We used a 2 (culture: U.S./South Korea) \times 4 (wrongdoer's relation to agent: biological grandfather/grandfather in adoptive family/grandfather based on remarriage of agent's grandmother/no-relation) \times 2 (financial benefit: present/absent) between-subjects factorial design, with each participant reading just one scenario. For brevity, we will refer to the four levels of the relationship variable as *biological*, *adoptive*, *remarriage*, and *no-relation*.

The basic structure of the scenarios was adapted from Study 1 of Uhlmann et al. (2012). In the English version, all scenarios started by stating the relationship between Sam (wrongdoer), an owner of a small factory in New York, and Brian Johnson, the agent in the scenario. The Korean version

was first translated from the English version by the first author and then back translated by another bilingual speaker to check for tone and content. In the Korean version of the experiment, the characters were given Korean names and the city was changed from New York to Seoul (see online repository <https://osf.io/ubj9h/> for all materials used).

To assess whether our English and Korean materials were equivalent in meaning and content, we conducted additional validation by recruiting four validators. Two of them (bilinguals who were native Korean speakers) independently translated our English materials to Korean and Korean materials to English, respectively, and jointly compared the English and Korean materials we used in our experiment to find any discrepancy in meaning. The third validator (native English speaker) compared the newly translated English materials with the English materials we used in the experiment, and the fourth validator (native Korean speaker) did the same with the Korean materials. The four validators did not report a notable discrepancy in meaning and content between the English and Korean materials, except for a difference in interpretation of the second item in the covariate measurement scale (identity fusion with family; see online repository). This item was excluded from all analyses.

In the no-relation conditions, the scenarios stated that young Brian had been told stories about Sam Miller, a factory owner around his grandfather's age. In the other conditions, how Brian was related to his grandfather Sam was described: either biologically, through adoption, or based on remarriage of Brian's grandmother. The scenarios then described Sam's wrongdoing in the past, which involved exploiting some of the poorest residents of New York as employees. The O'Neal family was the largest group of employees who were especially exploited. Sam threatened them with termination if they complained about their working conditions, even after the two youngest members of the family died while working at the factory.

Next, in the scenario for the no-relation condition with financial benefit present, it was stated that Brian received a scholarship award that was founded by Sam, which made it possible for him to attend college. In the other relationship conditions with financial benefit present, the scenarios stated that Brian inherited some of his grandfather Sam's fortune when he was 20 years old, which made it possible for Brian to attend college. When the no-relation condition was coupled with financial benefit absent, there was no mention of a scholarship. In the other relationship conditions with financial benefit absent, the scenarios stated that Sam's fortune ran out before Brian was born, and Brian received no inheritance from him.

Then, all scenarios described Brian as currently a middle-aged lawyer who recently won the lottery. He decides to donate a portion of his winnings, \$10,000 (converted to South Korean won of roughly equivalent value: 1,000 man-won) to charity, and considers two causes: the International Hungry Children's Fund, and the education of descendants of the O'Neal family who remain needy today. Participants were asked: "How should he distribute the money between the

O'Neal children's education and the International Hungry Children's Fund?" In the American version of the experiment, participants used two scroll bars to indicate the amount of money to be allocated to each cause. In the Korean version, two blank slots were provided for participants to type in the amount of money to be donated to each cause. (Due to technical limitations in the survey agency's system, scroll bars could not be implemented in the Korean version. A partial replication of the study with American participants showed that response format did not have any significant effect on the pattern of results.) In both versions, participants could proceed to the next question only when the two responses summed to \$10,000. The amount of money allocated to the O'Neal children's education was the first dependent measurement.

On the next page, participants were asked: "How responsible do you think Brian should feel for what happened to the O'Neal family?" (5-point scale, 1: *not at all responsible*, 2: *slightly responsible*, 3: *somewhat responsible*, 4: *very responsible*, 5: *fully responsible*) This score was used as the second dependent measurement. In the American version of the experiment, this responsibility question was added to the survey in the middle of data collection. As a result, only 285 out of 649 American participants answered the responsibility question, whereas all Korean participants answered this question.

On the following page, two questions were asked as comprehension checks: "What is Sam's relation to Brian?" and "Did Brian financially benefit from Sam's fortune?" Next, we administered the verbal version of a measure of participants' identity fusion with their own family (Swann Jr., et al., 2012). The identity fusion measure included seven items (one of which was excluded because of an issue in translation), each rated on a 7-point scale (1: *strongly disagree*; 7: *strongly agree*). The scale assesses how much people align themselves with an affiliated group and experience "oneness". In the present study, we replaced the word "country" in Swann Jr. et al.'s questionnaire with "family". Finally, basic demographic information was collected.

Results

A 3-way full-factorial ANOVA was conducted to assess the influence of culture, relationship, and financial benefit on the amount of donation to the O'Neal children's education (see Figure 1). Donation amounts reported by Korean samples were analyzed after conversion to U.S. dollars based on the rate of 1 man-won = \$10.

The main effects of all three categorical variables were significant. The main effect of culture ($F(1, 1274) = 84.5, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .063$) reflected greater overall mean donations for Korean ($M = \$6,996, 95\% \text{ CI} = [\$6,784, \$7208]$) as compared to American ($M = \$5,647, 95\% \text{ CI} = [\$5,436, \$5,858]$) participants. The main effect of financial benefit ($F(1, 1274) = 16.9, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .013$) reflected greater overall mean donations when financial benefit was present

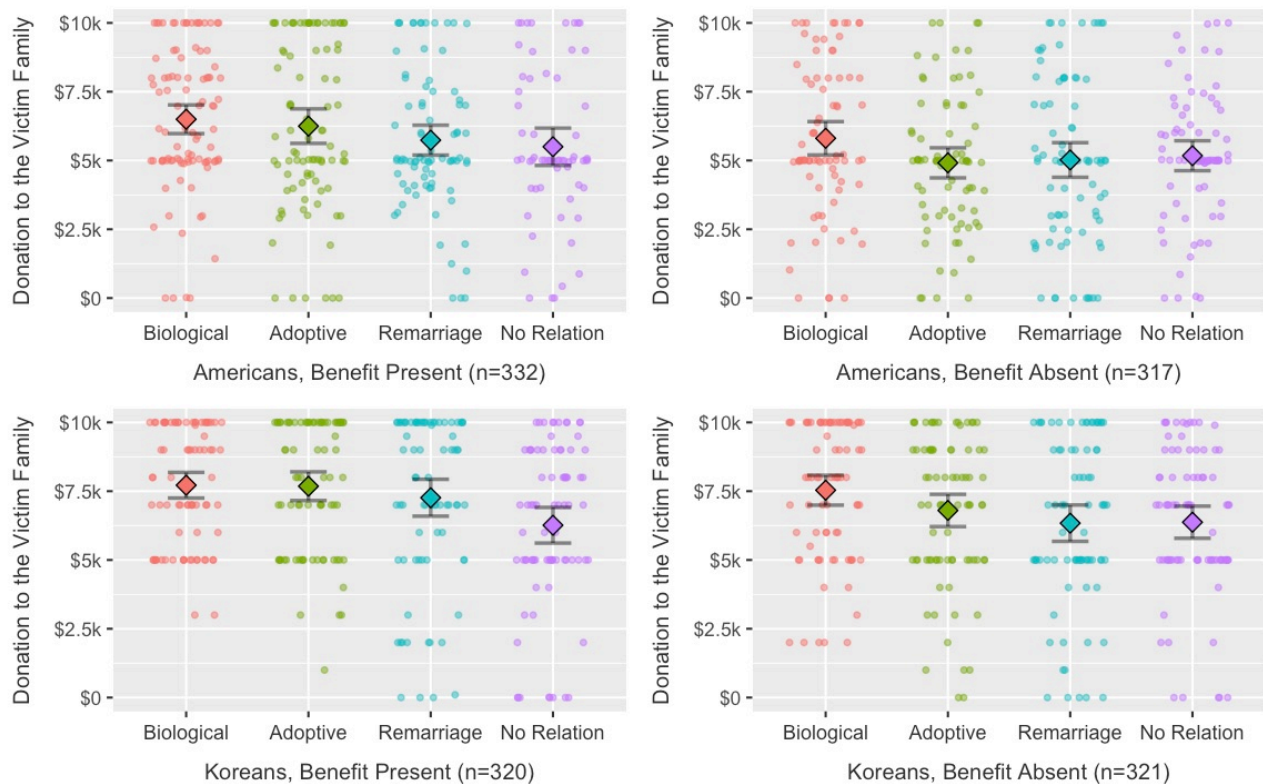


Figure 1. Amount of money donated to O’Neal children’s education in each of the sixteen conditions. Diamonds indicate group means. The dots show the distributions of responses across the range from \$0 to \$10,000. Error bars indicate 95% confidence interval (assuming normal distribution).

($M = \$6,629$, 95% CI = [$\$6,415$, $\$6,843$]) rather than absent ($M = \$5,998$, 95% CI = [$\$5,780$, $\$6,217$]). The main effect of relationship ($F(3, 1274) = 9.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .020$) was investigated further using t -tests between pairs of relationship conditions for the four levels of this factor, with Holm-Bonferroni correction (adjusted p -values are reported). Participants judged that the amount of donation to the O’Neal children’s education should be greater in the biological condition ($M = \$6,875$, 95% CI = [$\$6,596$, $\$7,155$]) than in the remarriage condition ($M = \$6,069$, 95% CI = [$\$5,745$, $\$6,393$]; $t(661) = 3.70$, $p_{adj} = .001$, $d = 0.29$) and no-relation condition ($M = \$5,859$, 95% CI = [$\$5,548$, $\$6,170$]; $t(629) = 4.78$, $p_{adj} < .001$, $d = 0.38$), but not the adoptive condition ($M = \$6,412$, 95% CI = [$\$6,106$, $\$6,718$]; $t(662) = 2.19$, $p_{adj} = .086$). The average recommended donation was higher in the adoptive condition than in the no-relation condition, although this difference was not significant after correction ($t(625) = 2.48$, $p_{adj} = .053$). The other two comparisons were not significant ($p_{adj} > .26$).

None of the second- or third-order interaction effects were significant ($F_s < 2.06$, $p_s > .103$). We had anticipated that Korean participants might be more sensitive than Americans to variations in the family relationship between the agent and the grandfather. However, the 2-way interaction between culture and relationship was not significant ($F(3, 1274) =$

0.87 , $p = .46$). Regression models with dummy coding were used to test more specifically whether the effect of relationship significantly varied across cultures. Six 2-way interaction terms between relationship manipulation and culture were tested, but none of them were significant ($p_s > .22$). Hence, the relative differences between relationship conditions did not vary across cultures.

Next, an analogous 3-way ANOVA was used to analyze predictors of the level of collective responsibility assigned to Brian (see Figure 2). As a reminder, 285 out of 649 American participants answered the collective responsibility rating question. As in the analysis of monetary donations, significant main effects of culture ($F(1, 910) = 142.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .140$), relationship ($F(3, 910) = 11.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$), and financial benefit ($F(1, 910) = 58.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .062$) were found. As predicted, Koreans ($M = 2.90$, 95% CI = [2.82 , 2.98]) assigned generally higher responsibility to the agent than did Americans ($M = 2.03$, 95% CI = [1.89 , 2.17]). Across both cultures, collective responsibility score was higher when financial benefit was present ($M = 2.90$, 95% CI = [2.80 , 3.01]) than absent ($M = 2.36$, 95% CI = [2.25 , 2.47]). In addition, the interaction between culture and relationship was significant ($F(3, 910) = 4.8$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$). No other interaction effects were significant ($F_s < 2.58$, $p_s > .052$).

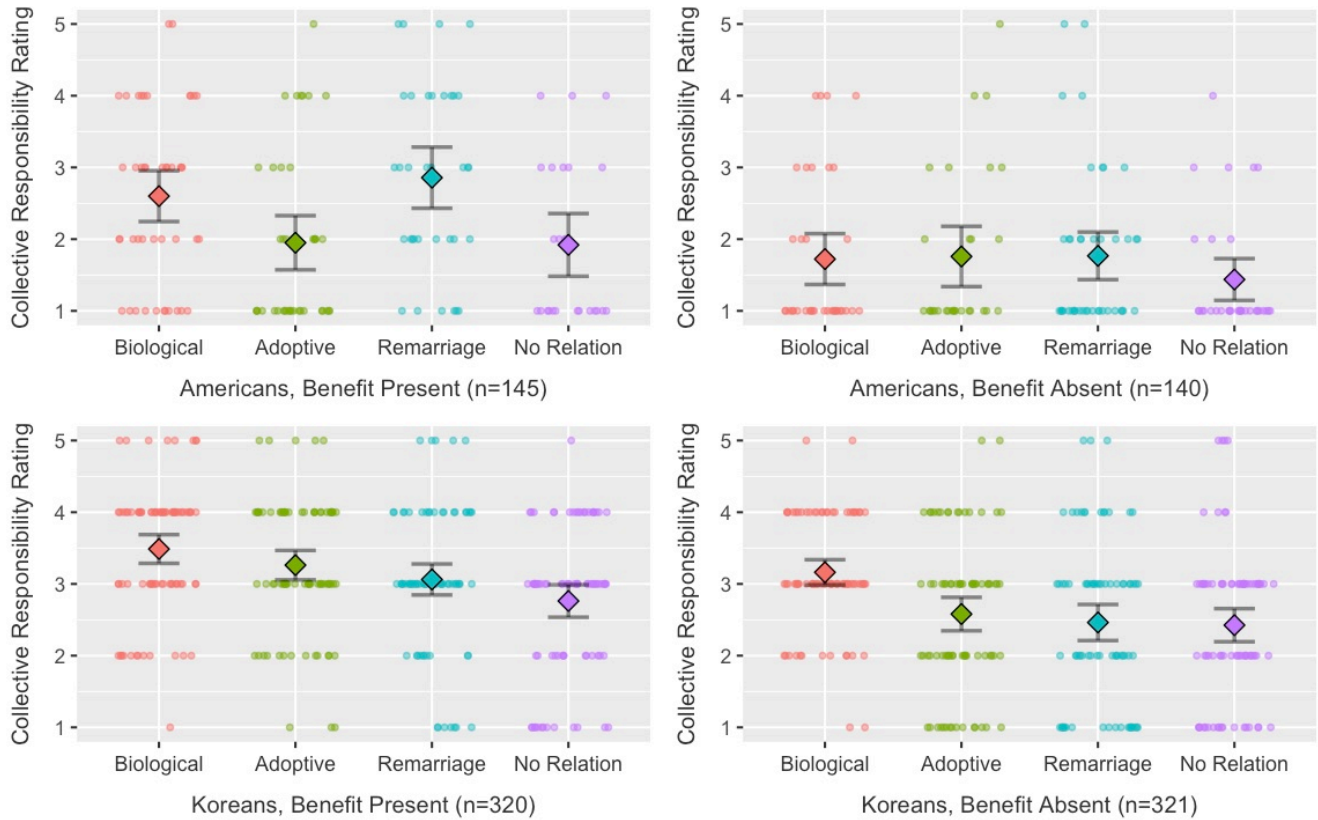


Figure 2. Participants' ratings that Brian should feel collective responsibility for what happened to the O'Neal family, in each of the sixteen conditions. Diamonds indicate group means. Distributions of data points across the range from 1 (*not at all responsible*) to 5 (*fully responsible*) are shown by the dots. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals (assuming normal distribution).

The significant interaction between culture and relationship was due to an unexpectedly high rating of responsibility in the remarriage condition among American participants but not among Korean participants (see Figure 2). This deviation from the pattern likely reflects the less reliable estimation of group means in the U.S. dataset due to smaller sample size. In any case, the pattern did not support our hypothesis that Koreans are more sensitive to relationship information than Americans. The difference in identity fusion with family (average of six ratings; $\alpha = .93$) between American ($M = 4.95$, 95% CI = [4.84, 5.05]) and Korean ($M = 5.21$, 95% CI = [5.12, 5.31]) participants was significant ($t(1288) = 3.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.20$). The identity fusion score was added to the two 3-way ANOVAs reported above as an additional first-order predictor. Results showed that over and above the significant effects of the three predictors already tested, the identity fusion score had a small effect on collective responsibility ratings ($b = 0.10$, $t(696) = 3.23$, $p = .001$), but not on the amount of donation ($b = -\$12.52$, $t(980) = -0.19$, $p = .85$).

We conducted mediation analyses using PROCESS macro version 3.0 for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). Pre-defined model 4 in PROCESS was used. Three dummy variables coding the levels of independent variables (indicating adoptive, remarriage, and benefit-present conditions, respectively)

were entered as covariates for predicting the mediator (identity fusion score) and the dependent measurements. Indirect effects were estimated through bootstrapping ($n = 20,000$). The direct effect of culture on the suggested amount of donations was significant ($b = \$1,517$, $t(987) = 8.84$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [\$1,180, \$1,854]), while the indirect effect through identity fusion score was not ($b = -\$3.5$, 95% CI = [-\$43.3, \$33.2]). Similarly, when predicting the collective responsibility rating, the direct effect of culture ($b = 0.89$, $t(703) = 10.43$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.72, 1.06]) was significant but the indirect effect through identity fusion score ($b = 0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.003, 0.041]) was not. Thus, our data did not support the hypothesis that participants' identification with their family mediates the influence of culture on collective moral judgments.

Discussion

Assignment of collective responsibility based on group membership deviates from the traditional moral norms supported as philosophical principles within the individualistic Western societies (Smiley, 2017; Talbert, 2019). Nevertheless, laypeople across societies seem to take group membership into account when making moral judgments. We found that for both American and South

Korean participants, normative judgments of collective responsibility were greater when the agent had received a financial benefit traceable to the wrongdoer. Participants also demonstrated sensitivity to the type of relation between the wrongdoer and the agent.

Americans and Koreans were similar with respect to the impact of both familial relationship and financial benefit, but Korean participants showed a greater imposition of collective responsibility across all conditions, even when the agent was unrelated to the wrongdoer and had not received a financial benefit traceable to the wrongdoing.

Our results demonstrate an intriguing exception to the connection between causality and judgment of responsibility. Psychological theories of morality have postulated that a causal relation between an agent's behavior and harm is critical for an observer to assign blame and moral responsibility to the agent (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007). The influence of non-causal factors (group identity, moral obligation, social norms; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Holyoak & Powell, 2016) remains to be incorporated into rational computational models of moral judgments.

Although South Koreans scored higher than Americans on a measure of identity fusion with family (Swann Jr. et al., 2012), this variable had a weak relationship to collective responsibility judgments. Future studies should explore the underlying mechanisms that lead to within- and between-culture differences in group-based moral judgments. It is possible that people use different heuristics for making moral judgments in first-person versus third-person perspectives. Our scenarios instantiated the latter case, which may have led participants to rely more on the appraisal of the situation (e.g., perceived entitativity between the wrongdoer and the agent) and social schemas that determine the extent to which individuals' behaviors should be regulated by imposed duties and responsibilities (cf. tight versus loose cultures, Gelfand et al., 2011). That is, collectivistic thinking and tight culture may have led Koreans to perceive greater collective duty to remedy harms done to (and/or by) group members in a relatively unconditional manner.

However, we refrain from making strong claims about broad cultural differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies based on the current results. Our study only included samples from two countries, which may not be representative of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. Moreover, we did not include a direct measure of collectivism because our preliminary study ($n = 361$) could not find a significant relation between vertical collectivism scale (Singelis et al., 1995) and collective responsibility judgments across the two countries, and we opted to measure identity fusion with family as an alternative. More generally, the impact of culture is likely to interact with particular types of social situations (e.g., people interact differently with coworkers, friends, and strangers; Chen & West, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2002). Therefore, our findings should be viewed as evidence that social and cultural norms can shape people's moral judgments in significantly different ways.

Another unanswered question is whether there is a distinction between imposition of responsibility to the agent and responsibility that people think ought to be voluntarily taken by the agent. Our second dependent variable related to the latter, which asked how responsible participants think Brian should feel. We phrased the responsibility question this way to capture the normative expectations in each culture. However, it is possible that Korean participants were not inclined to explicitly impose responsibility to the agent but still preferred that he feel morally responsible for the harm done, which could lead to reparation.

A particularly potent social influence impacting people's everyday moral reasoning may be historical group dynamics, which has received less attention in moral psychology (but see Brown et al., 2008). Historically, intergroup conflicts have produced cruelty and exploitation of one group by another. Such events then shape one group's collective emotions (e.g., guilt, indignation) and attitudes toward the other. With the rapid increase in ethnic and cultural diversity in modern societies, conflicts between groups based on historically derived beliefs, values, and norms may become more frequent. Future work in moral psychology should examine how people apply concepts such as responsibility, guilt, and reparation to realistic situations involving intergroup relations.

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