

# Gender does not drive cross-cultural differences in familial guilt

Soojin You

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The present study examines whether gender influences cultural differences in collective responsibility. To do so, I conducted a follow-up analysis using available data from Lee & Holyoak (2022), who investigated cross-cultural differences in judgments of collective responsibility between the United States and South Korea. Prior work suggests that women demonstrate higher collective social responsibility relative to men. Thus, I hypothesized that women may also feel more familial guilt. In contrast to this hypothesis, however, analyses revealed differences in feelings of familial guilt were primarily driven by social differences rather than differences related to gender.

## Introduction

When it comes to the topic of guilt, cross-cultural differences are highly prevalent. For instance, consider the situation of a group of individuals witnessing a close friend harming someone's reputation. If the group belongs to a collective society (e.g., China), these individuals may be more likely to apologize for their friend's poor behavior. In contrast, if the group belongs to an individualistic society (e.g., USA), they may be far less likely to apologize. Such differences stem from whether individuals wish to take partial or whole responsibility for another person's actions.

These cultural differences are highlighted in the news as well. In 2007, a mass shooting occurred in the United States at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, resulting in 32 victims. The perpetrator was a South Korean man named Cho Seung Hui. In response to this tragedy to Times, South Koreans felt a profound sense of guilt. In the words of one South Korean citizen: "I and all of South Korea want to apologize to all Americans about what happened".

As this real-world scenario demonstrates, citizens from collectivist societies such as South Korea feel a sense of shame and burden when a member of their society commits a dishonorable act. And, similarly, they rejoice when a member accomplishes something benevolent<sup>1</sup>. This phenomenon is known as collective responsibility.

One may argue that collective responsibility extends to individualistic societies as well. For example, White Americans show collective responsibility for the enslavement of African Americans/indigenous people<sup>2</sup> or Germans show collective responsibility for the mass genocide of the Jewish people during the Nazi era<sup>3</sup>. In both cases, these individuals experienced collective guilt because they identified as belonging to the same social group as the wrongdoer. According to Western philosophy, is defined by an individual (a) intending to or

acting to cause harm, and/or (b) recognizing the action was wrong<sup>4</sup>. Thus, an individual's mental state serves as a key factor for judging responsibility, wrongness, and blame<sup>5,6</sup>.

Interestingly, one type of collective responsibility known as familial guilt significantly diverges from the Western definition of responsibility<sup>7</sup>. Familial guilt is more complicated than just a difference between Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (i.e., WEIRD) societies and non-WEIRD societies. With familial guilt, responsibility extends to individuals who have no contribution to the wrong deed at all. Thus, it is considered a fallacy of guilt to blame individuals based on personal ties and is controversial whether family guilt is normative or justifiable<sup>7-9</sup>.

The study by Lee & Holyoak (2022) examined the propensity to provide financial restitution to descendants of victims harmed by one's own ancestor (a grandfather)<sup>10</sup>. They hypothesized that different societies would assign responsibility differently<sup>11</sup> and chose the US and South Korea as two countries for their cross-cultural study based on their distinct differences in cultural norms. Previous research has characterized Judeo-Christian tradition as influencing Western societies and Confucian tradition as influencing East Asian societies<sup>11,12</sup>. Western societies, therefore, value individual rights over collective goals while East Asian societies put importance on maintaining social order and serving the common good of one's group or society. Another study identified the US and South Korea as exemplary countries with tight and loose countries. Therefore, Lee and Holyoak assumed that people from South Korea will offer to compensate for immoral acts by their ancestors and to pay for 'moral debt' and restore harmony in their group.

The study adopted a paradigm introduced by Uhlmann et al. (2012) in which participants are presented with scenarios that varied the link between an agent (who tries to make financial restitution to descendants of the victims) and their grandfa-

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ther (wrongdoer)<sup>13</sup>. The link was originally either biological or not but further family connection by adoption, remarriage, and baseline in which the wrongdoer and agent were unrelated was added. They hypothesized that the perceived connection between the wrongdoer and the member of that group would be highest for biological connection, followed by adoptive, remarriage, and no relation, and the acceptance of collective responsibility is expected to increase with entitativity, a feeling of solidity in societal groups. This study also added the condition of presence and absence of the financial benefit agent had from the wrongdoer since historical exploitation usually leads to an advantage for the wrongdoer and a disadvantage for the victim. They aimed to test the hypothesis that collectivistic societies may be more sensitive to relations between agents and wrongdoers than individualistic societies.

Based on the data, donations should be greater in biological than remarriage and no-relation conditions, but similar in an adoptive condition. The adoptive condition was higher than in the no-relation condition, although the difference was not significant. The biological condition has a distinct difference from other relations in that only biological condition has a direct relation by blood. Although other forms of familial connection are by one's decision, the biological connection is not what the agent could have decided and that is permanent even if they do not want it to be.

In the present study, I expand on Lee and Holyoak's study by investigating whether gender modulates this relationship between culture (Western vs East Asian) and familial guilt. Eagly (2009) has shown that women are more relational/communal while men are more strength intensive and explain the gender difference in perception of Corporate Social Responsibility in a study by university students in South Africa<sup>14</sup>. In this study, women showed higher sensitivity to Corporate Social Responsibility which showed that they value more the moralistic, justice, and impact of one company than the merely monetary success of it. This corresponds with the idea that women are more attracted to green consumption compared to men. Although green consumption should be a responsibility of all, women accept more responsibility, suggesting that women and men possess distinct perspectives towards communal responsibility. With this in mind, it seems plausible that this phenomenon also extends to familial guilt.

From Lee and Holyoak's study, we know how US and South Korean people valued familial guilt differently. The question remaining is if this difference is articulated from gender. If the phenomenon of women's tendency to have communal responsibility is true in general, no cross-cultural difference should exist. Therefore, we hypothesize that women will show high familial guilt: including more repayment to the victim's family and feeling of guilt towards the victim than men in both countries.

## Methodology

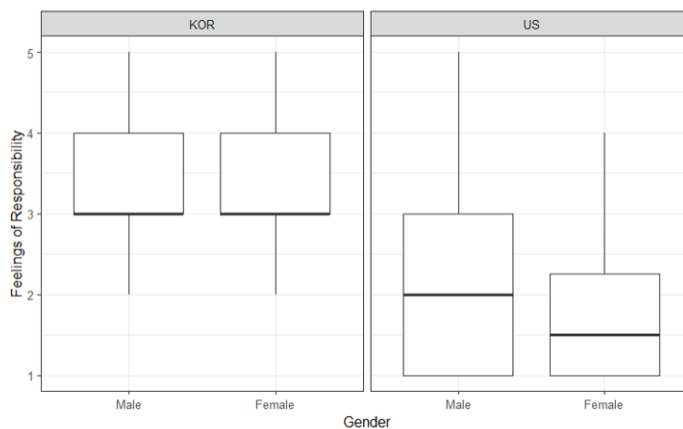
Lee and Holyoak (2022) wanted to examine more subtle variations, so they recruited 80 people in every 16 groups. Amazon Mechanical Turk was the method for American participants and South Korean Survey was used to gather 641 South Korean participants. All participants gave consent and received approximately 1 US dollar for completing the experiment.

Two conducted studies had their first scenarios which participants read exerted from Study 1 of Uhlmann et al. (2012). The scenario started with the relationship between Sam, the wrongdoer who ran a business in New York, and Brian, the agent. For the South Korean version, names were changed to South Korean names, and the city was changed from New York to Seoul. To validate that the two forms contain the same meaning, Lee and Holyoak (2022) recruited four validators to help check it. Two of the validators each translated Korean to English and English to Korean and checked to see if there was any difference. The other one compared Uhlmann et al.'s version and their latest version of the English version and the other one did the same for the Korean version.

The scenario started by stating four conditions of the relationship between Brian and Sam. In no relation conditions, young Brian had been told stories about Sam and the other three conditions included how Brian was related to his grandfather by biological, adoption, or remarriage. Then, Sam's wrongdoing in the past was listed. He exploited poor residents at his company. He threatened employees with their work. The O'Neal family was the largest group who were exploited the most that Sam kept threatening the O'Neal family even after their two youngest family members died.

The second scenario indicated whether there was a financial benefit present or not. In no relation conditions but Brian still got financial benefits, Brian received a scholarship founded by Sam that helped him to get into college. In the other three conditions, when the financial benefit was present, it was what Brian inherited as Sam's fortune at 20. If there was no relation and no financial benefit, there was no mention of scholarship and no financial benefit for other conditions, it was set as Sam's fortune ran before Brian was born.

All scenarios described Brian as a middle-aged lawyer who won the lottery, and he decides to donate a portion of his winning to charity: International hungry Children's Fund and education of descendants of the O'Neal family. Participants then answered the question of how Brian should distribute his money and they had to allocate all \$10000 to move to the next question. The next question asked how Brian should feel about what happened and had follow-up questions of "What is Sam's relation to Brian?" and "Did Brian financially benefit from Sam's fortune?". A 7-point scale measured how related they are.



**Fig. 1** Two-way interaction between Gender and Culture in the Biological condition. Gender is depicted on the x-axis, Feelings of familial guilt are depicted on the y-axis, and Culture (US vs KOR) is depicted by panel. The median and range for each condition is represented by the black bar (median) and whiskers (range) in each of the boxplots above.

## Results

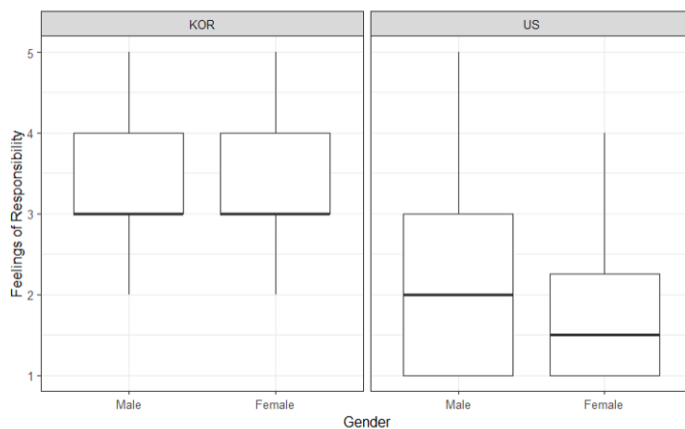
I conducted a preliminary analysis using a linear mixed effects (LME) model via the lme4 package in R<sup>15</sup>. In this analysis, we had Culture (USA vs South Korea), Condition (Adoptive, Biological, Remarriage, No Relation), Gender (Male vs Female) as our fixed effects, Age as our random effect, and Responsibility (levels: 1-5) as our dependent measure. As in the prior study, we observed a significant main effect of culture,  $t = 4.50, p < 0.001$ . However, our results indicated no significant two-way or three-way interactions among Culture, Condition, and Gender (all  $t$  values  $< 1$ ). Thus, gender did not appear to drive the interaction between culture and condition in the prior study, regardless of whether the hypothetical person was classified as Adoptive, Biological, Remarriage, or No Relation. We hypothesized that we would be most likely to observe a difference between Culture and Gender in the biological condition.

To address the issue of extremely unbalanced conditions, we conducted a second analysis. Here, we limited the analyses such that equivalent numbers were present for (a) Americans and South Koreans, and (b) male and female participants. We then conducted a between-subjects ANOVA wherein Culture and Gender served as our between-subjects factors and Responsibility served as our dependent measure. As in the LME analysis, we did not observe a two-way interaction between Culture and Gender,  $F < 1$ . Follow-up analyses for this interaction in each of the conditions (Adoptive, Biological, Remarriage, and No Relation) also did not reveal any significant differences (all  $F$  values  $< 1$ ).

## Discussion

My main hypothesis was that gender may drive the two-way interaction between culture and familial guilt, with women showing higher responsibility. Among the four different relationships present in Lee and Holyoak's study, the most influential relationship between the ancestor and descendant was biological. Contrary to my hypothesis, however, the data indicated that gender did not influence the relationship between culture and feelings of familial guilt. The data showed that South Koreans felt more responsibility than Americans do, although not significant, but numerically showing men showed more feelings of responsibility than women. Our findings indicate that the difference in familial guilt is largely dependent on culture rather than gender. Previous research has studied how men and women respond to communal responsiveness and showed women to be more responsible. Prior studies examined responsibility in a similar context and showed a significant difference between men and women<sup>16-19</sup>. Those studies looked at familial guilt in relationships with female and male family members. They concluded that perceptions of responsiveness are usually part of relations for women rather than men, and people expect more communal responsiveness from a female and women place greater importance on maintaining ties to relatives.

Another study showed that women display higher sensitivity to green consumption such that women are more sensitive to corporate social responsibility<sup>20</sup>. Women, therefore, are thought to have higher collective responsibility in general. If gender influences responsibility, women in both the US and South Korea should have had the same rate of responsibility that is higher than that of men. However, why did we not find any significant gender difference? Not just collective respon-



**Fig. 2** Two-way interaction between Gender and Culture in the Biological condition. Gender is depicted on the x-axis, Feelings of familial guilt are depicted on the y-axis, and Culture (US vs KOR) is depicted by panel. The median and range for each condition is represented by the black bar (median) and whiskers (range) in each of the boxplots above.

sibility in Koreans higher than in Americans, men had a higher collective responsibility than women.

A similar study by Burton, Farh, and Hegarty compared corporate social responsibility among students in Hong Kong and the United States. Their finding suggested that Hong Kong students demonstrated more responsibilities<sup>21</sup>. Contrary to their hypothesis that the US would weigh legal responsibilities higher than Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong students had more responsibilities demonstrated in monetary values than in non-economic situations suggesting that they emphasized materialism and pragmatism. To this difference, they reasoned that although people recognize different types of responsibilities in similar ways, the relative weighting given to each type of responsibility varies across cultures. This research marks that social influence affects how people perceive morality as a collective responsibility. If a follow-up study is planned, it should focus on specific subsets of men and women that drives the differences like age, economic status, and education level, especially in US which showed relatively lower familial guilt than South Korea.

## Limitations

Lee and Holyoak's original methods of collecting data contain limitations that also affect this study. In particular, the sample size varied between US and South Korean participants. 163 men and 122 women tested as a US participant whereas for Korean participants 294 men and 347 women participated. For women, Korea had around 3 times more female participants and around 2 times more participants for men. The number of participants was not controlled so the two samples have different participant numbers which might cause more participant

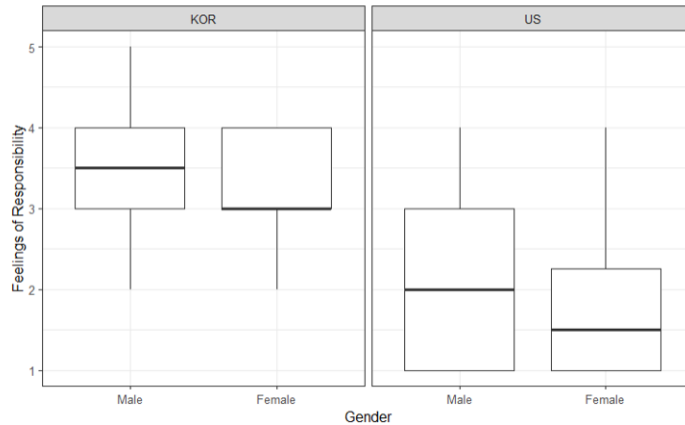
variance. When sample sizes were not equivalent, the median and range of results in Korean men and women were identical.

Secondly, a large amount of data was missing. Some of the data was missing at random parts c without specific reasons. This missing data suggests not all the participants were included as a result and therefore it is not conclusive data.

Lastly, only a 5-point scale is available when measuring the feeling of responsibility. The unit was 1 which eliminated the possibility of representing decimal values. The probable reason the median numbers looked similar is because of this lack of detailed scale. Because the scale is too vague, the variety between the feeling of responsibility would have been ignored since it cannot represent any midpoints.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to look at cross-cultural differences in familial in the US and South Korea and how gender especially affects it. Therefore, we hypothesized that women will show high familial guilt: including more repayment to the victim's family and feeling of guilt towards the victim than men in both countries. Contrary to this hypothesis, we found that gender has no influence and culture has more influence. It is currently unclear whether collective responsibility's relationship to gender can be applied to other Western and Nonwestern countries. This, therefore, leaves a potential direction for further research. Future research should focus on general notions of collective responsibility and specific situations where guilt is triggered, especially on how women and men react differently to it.



**Fig. 3** Two-way interaction between Gender and Culture in the Biological condition but equivalent numbers in each condition. Gender is depicted on the x-axis, Feelings of Responsibility are depicted on the y-axis, and Culture (US vs KOR) is depicted by panel. The median and range for each condition is represented by the black bar (median) and whiskers (range) in each of the boxplots above.

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