



# Ethnic and Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation Strategies: The Mediating Role of Face Concern

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## Abstract

Past research on emotion regulation strategies (ERS) has explored the benefits of different ERS and their relationship with mental health outcomes. However, little research has examined ethnic and gender differences in ERS and identified potential mechanisms that explain these disparities. In this study, we examined ethnic and gender differences in the utilization of nine ERS from a sample of 425 college students. Results indicated Asians engaged in more self-blame, positive refocusing, catastrophizing, and other-blame in response to adverse events, whereas Whites had a greater tendency for perspective taking. There were no ethnic differences in acceptance, rumination, refocus on planning, and positive reappraisal. Face concern, or the interest in maintaining one’s face or the face of others, mediated ethnic differences in the use of self-blame and positive refocusing. Asians had higher face concern than Whites, and individuals with higher face concern were more likely to engage in self-blame and positive refocusing. Males were more likely to report acceptance, refocusing on planning, and other-blame than females; however, face concern did not mediate gender differences in ERS. Our findings suggest that when Asians attempt to cope with adverse events, they may focus on unfulfilled roles and how to repair or improve role performance.

## Introduction

### Emotion Regulation Strategies and Mental Health

- An individual’s response to a negative event can have positive or negative implications on their mental health.
- *Self-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing* acted as predictors for depression and anxiety symptoms, while *positive reappraisal* acted as relief from depression and anxiety symptoms (Garnefski & Kraaj, 2007).
- Ethnicity and gender influences which emotion regulation strategies one utilizes.

### Ethnic Differences in Emotion Regulation Strategies

- East Asians use more *suppression* than Whites because of East Asian cultures’ emphasis on maintaining interpersonal harmony and Western cultures’ emphasis on autonomy and expressing one’s true inner abilities (English & John, 2012).
- Because of Chinese people’s belief that emotions could be changed through effort, Chinese people use more *appraisal* than Americans (Qu & Telzer, 2017).

### Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation Strategies

- Females are more likely than men to regulate emotion by *putting their problems into perspective*, while males are more likely than women to *blame others* for their negative experiences and emotional states (Zlomke & Hahn, 2010).
- Males use more *self-blame, catastrophizing, and other-blame* in reaction to a stressful life event (Extremera & Rey, 2014).

### Face Concern

- Face concern is the tendency to worry about one’s position and role in society, through one’s moral reputation and the value of one’s achievements (Hu, 1944).
- Asian Americans who spend less time in the US and identify less with the White American culture tend to have higher face concern (Zane & Ku, 2014).
- Females tend to have higher face concern than males (Tata, 2000).
- Face concern may explain both ethnic and gender differences in emotion regulation strategies.

### Purpose

The goal of this study was to determine ethnic and gender differences in the use of emotion regulation strategies and examine whether face concern mediated these differences.

### Hypotheses

1. There are ethnic differences in the use of certain emotion regulation strategies.
2. There are gender differences in the use of certain emotion regulation strategies.
3. Face concern will mediate ethnic and gender differences in the uses of some emotion regulation strategies.

## Method

### Participants

- 425 US-born UC Davis undergraduate students
- Age mean = 20.14 years; SD = 2.39 years; Age range = 18 to 36 years
- 256 Asians (60.23%); 169 Whites (39.76%)
- 178 Males (41.88%); 247 Females (58.11%)

### Procedures

- Participants took an online survey on a laptop.

### Measures

Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire

(CERQ; Garnefski & Kraaj, 2007)

Measures the use of different ERS in response to the experience of threatening or stressful life events. Each of the nine subscales are comprised of four items for a total of thirty-six questions. The questions are measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = almost never to 5 = almost always).

CERQ Subscales

- **Self-Blame:** Blame oneself for the event ( $\alpha = 0.77$ )
- **Acceptance:** Accept the event has happened ( $\alpha = 0.69$ )
- **Rumination:** Think about the feelings regarding the event ( $\alpha = 0.75$ )
- **Positive Refocusing:** Think about nicer things instead of the event ( $\alpha = 0.83$ )
- **Refocus on Planning:** Think about how to change the situation ( $\alpha = 0.77$ )
- **Positive Reappraisal:** Take away positive things from the event ( $\alpha = 0.82$ )
- **Putting into Perspective:** Compare the event to worse experiences ( $\alpha = 0.76$ )
- **Catastrophizing:** Think about how terrible the event was ( $\alpha = 0.70$ )
- **Other-Blame:** Blame others for the event ( $\alpha = 0.74$ )

Loss of Face Scale (LOF; Zane & Yeh, 2002) ( $\alpha = 0.84$ )

Measures sensitivity to face loss in different situations. Twenty-one questions are measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

### Data Analytic Plan

Using SPSS, we ran bivariate correlations between all the variables and one-way ANOVAs to examine ethnic and gender differences in ERS. When there were significant ethnic or gender differences in the use of an ERS, we ran linear regressions with ethnicity or gender and LOF as the independent variables and the specific ERS as the dependent variable to determine whether ethnicity or LOF was related to the use of that ERS.

## Results

Table 1

*Correlations between Ethnicity, Gender, Face Concern, and Emotion Regulation Strategies*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Asian (vs. White)	—											
2. Male (vs. Female)	.15**	—										
3. Face Concern	.20***	-.15**	—									
4. Self-Blame	.10*	.07	.33***	—								
5. Acceptance	.07	.12*	.08	.35***	—							
6. Rumination	.05	.01	.19***	.48***	.33***	—						
7. Pos. Refocusing	.11*	-.04	.14**	-.06	.12*	.01	—					
8. Planning	.05	.18***	-.05	.12*	.30***	.20***	.40***	—				
9. Pos. Reappraisal	.05	.07	-.13**	-.05	.29***	.08	.40***	.69***	—			
10. Perspective	-.14**	-.08	.03	.08	.32***	.10*	.29***	.34***	.52***	—		
11. Catastrophizing	.14**	.07	.21***	.35***	.17***	.41***	.02	-.04	-.20***	-.12*	—	
12. Other-Blame	.13*	.18***	.09	.08	.10*	.21***	.11*	.05	-.07	-.02	.51***	—

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Ethnic Differences in Face Concern and ERS*

Measure	Asian		White		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Face Concern	97.12	13.40	90.73	17.39	16.85	<.001
Self-Blame	10.64	2.79	10.05	3.14	4.00	.05
Acceptance	13.04	3.10	12.60	3.10	1.99	.16
Rumination	12.14	3.23	11.77	3.62	1.14	.29
Pos. Refocusing	10.43	3.34	9.71	3.37	4.65	.03
Planning	13.42	3.24	13.07	3.35	1.13	.29
Pos. Reappraisal	13.54	3.58	13.19	3.80	.90	.34
Perspective	12.06	3.38	13.04	3.43	8.16	.005
Catastrophizing	8.43	2.98	7.60	2.74	8.13	.005
Other-Blame	8.47	2.38	7.85	2.40	6.60	.01

Table 3

*Gender Differences in Face Concern and ERS*

Measure	Male		Female		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Face Concern	91.77	15.88	96.50	14.84	9.10	.003
Self-Blame	10.65	3.06	10.23	2.85	2.09	.15
Acceptance	13.31	3.15	12.54	3.03	6.41	.01
Rumination	12.03	3.18	11.95	3.56	.06	.81
Pos. Refocusing	9.98	3.22	10.26	3.46	.71	.40
Planning	13.98	3.01	12.78	3.39	13.73	<.001
Pos. Reappraisal	13.69	3.53	13.19	3.76	1.83	.18
Perspective	12.12	3.41	12.68	3.43	2.71	.10
Catastrophizing	8.34	2.99	7.93	2.84	2.05	.15
Other-Blame	8.73	2.60	7.85	2.18	13.84	<.001

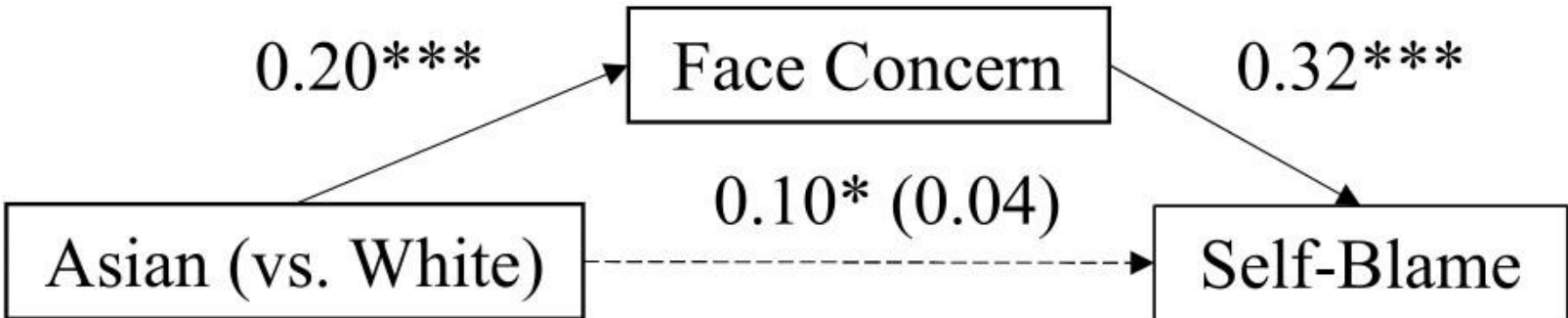


Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between Asian (vs. White) and self-blame as mediated by face concern. The dashed line indicates a non-significant path. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

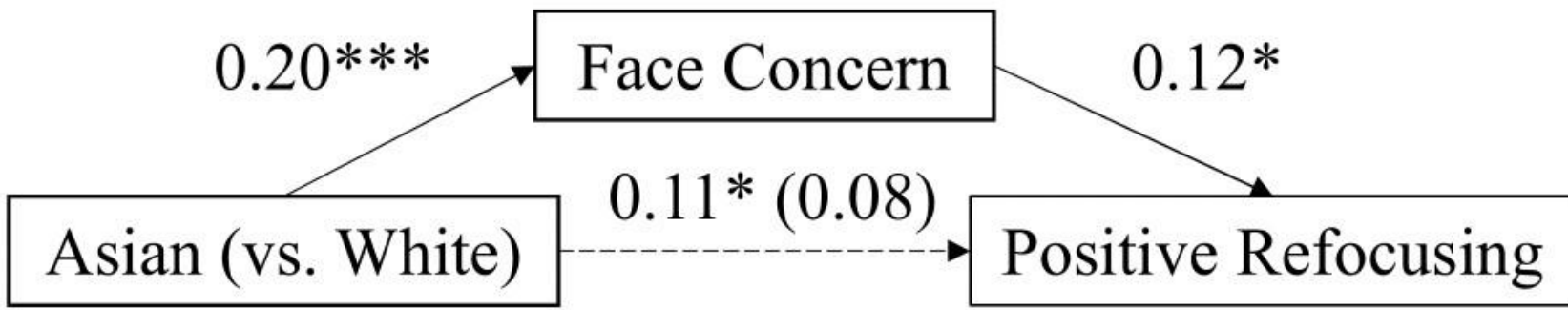


Figure 2. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between Asian (vs. White) and positive refocusing as mediated by face concern. The dashed line indicates a non-significant path. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Results

- Asians used more self-blame, positive refocusing, catastrophizing, and other-blame than Whites.
- Whites used more perspective taking than Asians.
- Males used more acceptance, refocus on planning, and other-blame than females.
- Face concern mediated ethnic differences in the use of self-blame and positive refocusing.
- Asians had higher face concern than Whites, and individuals with higher face concern used more self-blame and positive refocusing.
- Females had higher face concern than males, but face concern did not mediate gender differences in use of the acceptance, refocus on planning, and other-blame.

## Discussion

### Ethnic Differences in Emotion Regulation Strategies

- Differences in use of catastrophizing and other-blame are due to cultural reasons, perhaps related to pride and thinking too highly of oneself or a situation.
- However, as we will discuss below, ethnic differences in use of self-blame and positive refocusing are present due to other reasons.

### Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation Strategies

- The strategies that males utilized most were emotion regulation strategies that removed them from the negative situation and allowed them to move on.
- The acceptance, refocus on planning, and other-blame strategies externalize the event from the person rather than reminiscing on or ruminating about the event.

### Face Concern as a Mediator

- We found self-blame and positive refocusing in response to negative events are related to one’s role performance and their perceived ability to maintain face.
- Asians may use self-blame to improve their role within a group to uphold their face.
  - While self-blame may be a negative short-term strategy, blaming oneself may actually be an effective long-term cognitive strategy. It allows for self-reflection on one’s own performance in response to adverse events in order to identify what change can be made directly within oneself without disrupting the group harmony and keeping face.
- Asians may also use positive refocusing for the same reason as self-blame: to improve their role within a group and to uphold face.
  - With positive refocusing, one can ignore the recent negative events and focus on more positive things. By shifting attention away from one’s failures, one can maintain face and a positive self-image.

### Conclusion

- The importance of face concern as it contributes to ethnic differences in emotion regulation strategies is important to understand, and it must be taken into account when developing culturally relevant treatments.

### Limitations

- The sample consisted only of US-born undergraduate students and may not be representative of broader Asian or White populations.
  - Results may change if foreign-born Asians were included in the sample, because previous studies have shown higher levels of face concern in foreign-born Asians than US-born Asians (Abe Kim, 2001). Thus, if foreign-born Asians were in the sample, ethnic differences in emotion regulation strategies may have been more pronounced.

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