Cooperation in Face and Dignity Cultures:
Role of Moral Identity and Gender

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Abstract
We examined the effects gender and moral identity on collaborative behavior among Face (Chinese) and Dignity (Canadian) cultures. 105 participants engaged in a dyadic intracultural interaction via the FireSim computer game. Each participant was assigned a village and was tasked to protect the village from seasonal fires. Participants had the option of requesting or providing help to the neighboring village, i.e. their counterpart. We examined collaborative behavior by measuring help given, while controlling for help request. Using theories of face and dignity cultures, moral identity, and gender roles, we predicted and found that overall, Chinese individuals were less helpful than Canadians. This effect was stronger for males than females. Interestingly, more helping behavior was observed among Canadians with high levels of internal moral identity. Yet, this effect was not observed among Chinese individuals. Theoretical and practical implications for collaboration across culture are discussed.

1. Introduction
Cooperation is fundamental to the success of any organization, and with the increase of diversity and cross-cultural interactions, cooperative decision-making has become an important area of research [1, 8]. Scholars recognize the implications of culture for cooperation, reciprocity, and trust. Majority of culture research have implemented Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimension of individualism/collectivism to explain distinct cultural patterns for trust development, negotiation and cooperative behavior [13, 20, 22, 23]. However, this cultural dimension has its limitations in explaining differences in cooperative behavior and reciprocity. For instance, some studies found that in collectivist cultures where people emphasize collective goals of the social group, individuals tend to reciprocate cooperation with more cooperation. This pattern was less evident among people from individualist cultures, where there is more emphasis on individual goals, independence and uniqueness [7, 12]. In other studies, an opposite pattern of cooperation has been reported. For instance, Yamagishi (1988) found that collectivists would only cooperate and offer help to others when they themselves were under the pressure of social obligations, such as reputations and group honor [25]. In the absence of mutual monitoring and sanctioning, people from collectivist cultures were significantly less cooperative than people from individualist cultures [22].

Given the inconsistencies of cooperative behavior across culture and the limitations of individualism/collectivism cultural dimension in explaining such differences, we examine cooperation and reciprocity from the lens of face and dignity cultural framework. This framework goes beyond people’s emphasis on individual versus collective goals, onto the influence of culture on self-worth and how self-worth influences values and behavioral norms [15]. The core concept of dignity and face theory is self-worth – a person’s view of his/her value in society [2]. Self-worth is an outcome of the self-construal process – it is a construal of the way a person views him/herself in relation to others, either independently or interdependently. According to this cultural framework, the self-worth of people from dignity cultures, which are typically found in the west, is driven internally, independent of the perceptions of one’s social group. In contrast, the self-worth of people from face cultures, which are typically found in the West, is highly dependent on external factors, such as how others perceive the self. In accordance to this theory, we speculate lower cooperation among people from face cultures in situations where there are few external forces – i.e. presence of social group, social pressure, sanctions and monitoring.

We also examine how one’s moral identity can interact with one’s cultural norms and values to further influence cooperation and helping behavior, since moral identities determine behavior, which can differ across cultures [3]. Moral identity is defined as self-conception organized around a set of moral traits, and
this identity is considered as a self-regulatory mechanism that motivates moral action and behavior. This, this is a self-regulatory mechanism that motivates moral actions [3]. This framework distinguishes between symbolization and internalization moral identities, tapping onto one’s public and private moral self respectively. Based on this theory we predict that in situations that lack the presence social obligations, higher levels of internalization moral identity will positively predict cooperative and helping behavior. Thus, in this context the helping behavior of people form face and dignity cultures will be dependent on their internalized moral identity.

Finally, we examine how the effects of culture are magnified based on gender, as past research illustrates that cultural normative behavior is more evident in males than females [14]. Accordingly, if people from face cultures are less cooperative in situations that lack external sanctions and monitoring, then this effect should be stronger for males than females. Our study extends on past research on culture and cooperation by 1) understanding culture from the face and dignity theoretical lens, and 2) examining boundary conditions dependent on the actor’s gender and moral identity.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1. Face versus Dignity Cultures

Culture can be defined as the shared characteristics of a social group with regards to values, norms, schemas, and institutions that are dissimilar from other social groups [5]. Subsequently, we can think of culture as a prototype that describes the central tendency in the normal distribution of shared characteristics among its members. So, this means that not everyone in the group shared those values and attributes. However, majority of the people that fall under the normal distribution share those norms and values.

The dignity and face cultural framework presents two cultural prototypes with different characteristics, norms and values. Two main attributes that distinguish the prototypes of dignity and face cultures are self-worth, and the nature of social structure of the society, in which cooperation and collaboration can occur [9, 15, 16]. Self-worth is a person’s self-respect. It is what a person thinks of himself [19]. Self-worth can be based on intrinsic, or extrinsic factors, or some combination of both. Social structure reflects the status hierarchy in a culture [5]. Some cultures promote a more egalitarian structure, while other cultures show preference for a more rigid and hierarchical social structure.

In dignity cultures, self-worth is internal and intrinsic, independent on others. This means that the worth of an individual is not determined by the opinions or values of others, it is only evaluated and judged by the individual, and accordingly, this worth cannot be altered by others [2]. Similar to the cultural framework for individualism, dignity cultures promote independence and orientation toward personal rather than group goals [21]. The advantages of this type of intrinsic value system are that people are less likely to be corrupted by others, and people are able to act according to their own morals, which is seen as being more important than the morals of others [9]. Social interactions are often guided by the conscience of each individual, in addition to universal morals, a law system, and positive reciprocity that make for often rational social exchange systems [2, 9, 16]. However, the notion of positive reciprocity is not something that is expected in these cultures; rather, it is a matter of choice, and, usually, what is most rational for the situation [9]. In addition, for dignity cultures, in contrast to face cultures, it is unimportant whether or not others are aware of information about the self [9, 16]. Because these factors are all intrinsically related rather than influenced by outside sources, there is little to no fear of punishment for a person acting against any perceived rules of reciprocity, kindness, or social behaviour. Participants from the dignity culture in our sample are from Canada.

In face cultures, what is important for self-worth is the view that others have of you [18]. So, it is often necessary for those from face cultures to view themselves in a third-person perspective, in order to gain insight about their social status [9, 11, 15]. In cultures such as these, people can lose face if another person, or group of people, believes they have acted out, and other people can lose face because of your own views of their behaviour [11, 21]. In contrast to dignity cultures, in order for information about the self to be a true quality of one’s self-definition, it must be known to those around them, because they are the ones who ultimately judge their worth, their successes and their failures [16]. In dignity cultures, everyone looks out for themselves, but in face cultures, “people are obliged to work together to preserve each other’s face” [16] because it is seen as negative both to lose face and to cause someone else to lose face. Since face cultures promote a strong and stable hierarchy, the loss of face as viewed by a superior can mean the loss or decline in status, in addition to the shame of knowing that they have lost face in the eyes of others [13, 16, 17]. The face cultural prototype follows the logic of East Asian societies. Participants from the face culture in our sample are from China.
We base the theorizing in this paper on these cultural prototypes with the understanding that within a cultural prototype, many people will be influenced by the logics of thought and action that have developed historically and still hold normative valence in their culture. We examine cooperation in same-culture dyads via a computer game. For this particular study, we used a sample of students who were born in a dignity culture, Canada, and a sample of students who were born in a face culture, China. The game is played in a laboratory setting so that it would be free of external influences related to judgment from others and fear of loss of face. Because the dignity framework suggests that self-worth is intrinsic, it is likely that this game, being evaluated on an internal basis, will increase helping behavior in the Canadians. In contrast, because helping behavior in those from face cultures relies on external factors, we expect that the Chinese participants will engage is less helping behavior.

**Hypothesis 1:** Members of a dignity culture (Canadians) will engage in more helping behavior than members of face culture (Chinese).

### 2.2. Moral Identity and Cooperative Behavior

As briefly mentioned earlier in this paper, moral identity is another characteristic that varies in its manifestation as well as its origin based on an individual’s cultural background [3]. A study carried out by Cohen and Gunz (2002) investigated the perspectives of the self in Easterners (face culture) versus Westerners (dignity culture). The study revealed that Easterners define themselves in terms of their relationships with influential people in their lives, whereas Westerners define themselves in a more autonomous, independent way [9]. In other words, the self-worth of those from dignity cultures is internalized and unaffected by context and outside sources, whereas the self-worth of those from face cultures is externalized and dependent on context and outside sources.

Moral identity is directly related to self-worth, because moral identity predicts moral behavior, which in turn determines an individual’s self-worth. Although this is true, people from different cultures define their moral identities in different ways, and thus they have varying moral identities [3]. More specifically, the moral identity of a given person encompasses a sort of self-regulatory mechanism that promotes moral behavior in favor of immoral behavior, and can be used as a tool to construct their own identities, based on what they perceive as being moral [3]. An individual’s moral identity includes their self-worth; that is, the way in which they evaluate themselves and determine the amount of self-worth they have is a part of their moral identity [3]. More importantly, an individual’s moral identity is also related to certain behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes [3]. Although the reasons for believing a given behavior is moral may be either intrinsic or extrinsic in nature, Aquino & Reed (2002) emphasize that moral identity is inherently intrinsic [3].

Individuals use moral identity as a way to construct their self-identities, through their moral beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors [3]. If we are to assume that this theory is correct, in that moral identity is intrinsic in nature and is only relatively influenced by outside sources, then we can make an assumption about the role of a moral identity in helping behaviors for collectivists and individualists. Because Chinese people and others from face cultures are more concerned with extrinsic beliefs and values, it is unlikely that they will be influenced by their moral identity than by the views of other people.

On the other hand, Canadians and those from dignity cultures greatly value their moral identity, because they do not construct their identities based on outside sources; their moral identity defines a large chunk of their overall identity [3]. Thus, we would expect that in tasks that involve the use of intrinsic beliefs and values, such as one’s moral identity, Canadians would be more likely to value and utilize their moral identity than the Chinese, because they relate more to their moral identity on a regular basis. If, on the other hand, the task were to involve outside sources, Chinese people may be more influenced by their moral identity than Canadians because it is constructed based on the views of others.

**Hypothesis 2:** We expect a culture by moral identity interaction for helping behavior, primarily driven by dignity culture.

### 2.3. Gender and Cooperative Behavior

Though we expect to find a difference between cultures and helping behavior, individual differences also exist within cultures [10]. One of the most prominent individual differences in behavior in cultures comes from gender differences [14]. Kashima et al. suggest that in addition to differentiating between individualism and collectivism, there is another type of culture that is also contrasting to individualism. These two types include one that is the well-known collectivism type, in which individuals have a sort of relationship with the collective, and put the collective before the individual, or not distinguishing at all between the self and the collective [14]. The other contrasting type brings into questions whether or not the individual relates well to the collective, and this
type often separates themselves from the collective. This sort of culture is referred to as a relational culture [14].

Gender effects have been found on dimensions related to this relational sort of culture, including “competence versus security and personal morality versus success” [14] suggesting that the two genders value different aspects of social interactions. In addition, women have been shown to be more relational than men, regardless of culture, suggesting that their interpretations of others are based on intrinsic values, which are inconsistent with collectivist cultural norms, whereas men are not as relational [14]. These findings make the distinction between males and females and the manifestation of cultural norms, beliefs and values. More specifically, they make the suggestion that males display more prominent characteristics of their cultural norms whereas women are more relational in nature [14].

Hypothesis 3: We expect a culture by gender interaction on helping behavior, primarily driven by males.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Design

3.1.1. Participants. A total of 105 (male=39, female=66) undergraduate students from the University of Waterloo participated in this study, including individuals born in China (N=46) and individuals born in Canada (N=59). Individuals participated either for credit towards their psychology courses or for pay. Chinese participants were born in China, lived in Canada for less than 10 years and identified primarily with the Chinese culture. The Canadian Caucasian participants were born and raised in Canada and only identified with Canadian culture.

3.1.2. Design. This study employed a 2 (Culture: Canadian, Chinese) x 2 (helping behavior: help, no help) factorial design in which participants interacted in pairs. Within these dyadic pairs, one participant’s helping behavior was manipulated by a suggestion either to help or not help their partner, while the other participant always remained neutral, in that they were given no suggestions at all. The two moderators in this study were moral identity and gender, while the dependent variable was the amount of help given to the partner.

3.2. Materials and Procedure

3.2.1. FireSim Game. To examine helping behavior and cooperation, we had dyads engage in a computer task “FireSim”, a real life decision-making simulation game that involves saving various assets from seasonal fires [22]. The FireSim game [22] is one that is designed to measure the helping behavior of dyads participating in a simulation in which they are inhabiting two different villages and are given assets that they have to protect from seasonal fires. Each season the individuals have the option to either use all of their resources to put out their own fires or to use some of their resources to help the neighboring village put out their fires.

We used this game since the behaviors occur in a vacuum setting without external social influences and obligations. In this laboratory setting, each individual was seated by a computer station placed on opposite sides of the room with a divider wall placed in between participants to prevent them from interacting with each other face-to-face or viewing each other’s computer screens. Accordingly, we were able to create a situation free of external forces that might influence a person’s helping behavior.
that they received. At the end of each season, participants were given a summary of total assets lost and help received and requested.

During each round, participants were given six fire trucks and four flags to use to save their village from the spreading fires. Each fire truck was capable of performing three functions: 1) putting out a small area of fire with water, 2) digging a trench in one direction of the fire source, and 3) transporting people and/or animals to a different location in the village, free of fires. Participants played two seasons, the first with two rounds and the second with four rounds.

3.2.2. Manipulation. This study had three conditions that participants were randomly assigned to: neutral, help, or no help. These conditions were present only for the second season; the first season was played with only neutral subjects. In the neutral condition, participants were simply reminded of the rules of game and which village they were assigned to. They were also reminded that their task was to protect the assets of their village from catching fire to the best of their abilities.

In the help condition, in addition to the information given in the neutral condition, participants were also informed that they had a strong and friendly relationship with the neighboring village, and in order to keep up the relationship, they are obligated to respond to at least two of the flags from the other village in each round of the game. In the no help condition, in addition to receiving the same information as in the neutral condition, participants were informed that the two villages had a very bad relationship due to conflicts over resources and land, and were instructed to NOT send fire trucks whenever help was requested from the neighboring village. In each dyad, one individual was always neutral while the other was randomly assigned to being either in the help or no help condition.

3.2.3. Procedure. All participants were required to complete a mass-testing questionnaire prior to completing the experiment that had no direct relation to the experiment. We selected participants who primarily identified with the Chinese or Canadian culture, and excluded individuals who were bicultural, i.e. identified with two or more cultures.

Qualified participants signed up for the study online and were then contacted by a research assistant in the lab to schedule a time to come in to the lab for one hour with an unknown partner of the same cultural background. When the dyads arrived at the lab, they were placed side-by-side at computers separated by a divider (to make communication more difficult and less likely) and prior to beginning the game, watch a short 10 minute tutorial on how to play the FireSim game. Participants were then informed that they would be participating in this game in three stages.

In the first stage they engaged in a practice round of the game in which the other person was not playing with them, and the experimenter was present for this round to clarify anything and answer any questions about the game. In the second stage participants engaged in season one with their counterpart, at which point there was no manipulation of helping behavior. Here the participants had the opportunity to interact with the other village and make their own executive decisions about their helping behavior without any sort of manipulation. This season had a total of two rounds with low-threat fires in which there was little risk of losing important assets. In the third and final stage of gameplay, participants were randomly assigned to either the neutral condition or the manipulation condition (help or no help). Participants were provided with a confidential sheet of paper with the instructions for each condition written on it; these sheets were not shared between partners. Season two consisted of a total of four rounds, most of which included more threatening fires in which there was a higher risk of asset loss.

4. Results

Data from season one was analyzed using hierarchical regression where help given was collapsed across two rounds of gameplay. For the second season, data was analyzed via repeated measures ANOVA to examine patterns of helping behavior during the course of four rounds of gameplay. Data from both seasons were employed to determine whether or not there was an effect of moral identity on helping behavior, as well as if there was an effect of gender on helping behavior. Because of the uneven sample size in terms of gender, help given was controlled for. In our analyses, the main independent variable was culture, and the moderators we used were moral identity as well as gender.

In hypothesis 1 we predicted that there would be a main effect of culture on helping behavior. More specifically, those from a face culture (Chinese) would display less helping behavior than those from a dignity culture (Canadian). For the first part of the analyses, we included gender and help as control measures, and added culture as an independent variable to examine the main effects on help given. For this particular analysis, culture was dummy coded as the comparison group. In season one, in which there was no manipulation, we found a main effect of culture on helping behavior (b = -.254, t (101) = -1.071, p = .036). These results, generated from a series of hierarchical
regression analyses, are consistent with our hypothesis that Canadian participants would display more helping behavior than their Chinese counterparts (see Figure 1).

We posited that there would be an interaction between culture and moral identity on helping behavior, and those effects of moral identity would be stronger for Canadians than for Chinese participants. In other words, there would be a greater difference in helping behavior between high and low moral identity individuals from China and Canada. A regression analysis revealed that, for season 1, there was a greater effect of moral identity on behavior for Canadians (b = -2.554, t(101)=-2.204, p=.031). This effect is illustrated in figure 2, which displays the average amount of help given for high and low moral identity individuals from both China and Canada. As you can see from the graph, Canadians who had a high moral identity gave more help than Canadians with low moral identity, whereas there was an insignificant difference between high and low moral identity individuals from China.

Our second hypothesis posited that there would be an interaction between culture and moral identity on helping behavior, and those effects of moral identity internalization would be stronger for Canadians than for Chinese participants. In other words, there would be a greater difference in helping behavior between high and low moral identity individuals from Canada than high and low moral individuals from China. A regression analysis revealed that, for season 1, there was a greater effect of moral identity on behavior for Canadians (b = -2.554, t(101)=-2.204, p=.031) (See Figure 3). For season two, again with culture as the independent variable with gender and moral identity as moderators, we did repeated measures ANOVA with time as the independent variable and helping behavior as the dependent variable. We used culture and gender as covariates, but found no interaction, suggesting that helping behavior decreased over time regardless of culture. In addition, we also did repeated measures ANOVAs for culture and symbolic moral identity, and found that there was an effect of symbolic moral identity and culture on helping behavior (F(1, 83) = 4.479, p<.005) (See Figure 4).

Our third hypothesis stated that we expected to find an interaction between gender and culture on help given. That is, we expected that males would display less helping behavior than females, and that Chinese males would display the least amount of helping behavior. We did not expect there to be a significant difference in helping behaviors among females of the two cultures. To examine this effect, we ran a regression analysis, which showed a marginally significant effect confirming our hypothesis that gender does in fact have an effect on the amount of help given (b = .337, t(101) = 1.724, p = .089). Chinese
males were the least likely to give help, and Canadian males were the most likely to give help, which suggests that males are more likely to display the typical behaviors of their culture than females. We did not find a significant difference between females of the two cultures. The graph below displays these differences, emphasizing the fact that Chinese males are the least likely to provide help to their partners.

Fig. 5. Culture by gender interaction illustrating a stronger effect among males than females.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of culture, moral identity and gender on helping behavior. Our results indicated that internal moral identity has a stronger effect on helping behavior in Canadians than in the Chinese, as those with higher internal moral identity tended to give more help and accordingly be more cooperative than those with lower moral identities. This pattern was only evident among Canadians but not so much with the Chinese individuals. We found that there was no effect of culture on helping behavior over time, and that helping behavior decreased over time for both Canadians and Chinese. Results also demonstrated that culture does indeed have an effect on helping behavior, as does gender (moderately). We found that compared to females from both cultures and Canadian males, Chinese males were the least likely to give help. We also found that overall; Canadians were more likely than Chinese participants to give help to their counterpart. This effect may have been moderate because of the unequal sample size of the two genders. Thus, it would be beneficial to increase the overall sample size for future studies.

The findings from this study further support theories on cultures and prosocial behavior posed by Pilgrim & Rueda-Riedle (2002), which put forth important differences in cultural norms and values between dignity (Canadian) and face (Chinese) cultures [5]. The effects of culture on helping behavior also further support work by Gelfand et al. (2006) and Yamagishi et al. (2008) who bring to our attention the important of context effects on cultural behaviors [10, 24]. These two theorists suggest that although, in general, Chinese people may be more likely to help than Canadians, in a context in which the helping behavior and consequences are internalized, Chinese are less likely to help due to the lack of social constraints. Work done by Kashima et al. (1995) suggested that cultural norms and behaviors were more likely to be passed down by males than by females [14]. Our finding that Chinese males were less likely to help than Chinese females is further evidence for this theory.

This study provides evidence of the strength of moral identity effects in Canadians as compared to Chinese, as Canadians were much more likely to help if they had a strong sense of moral identity, whereas this was not the case for Chinese participants. Previous work investigating moral identity in cultures supports this view, suggesting that moral identity is likely to be a much more prominent and important trait in individualist (dignity) rather than collectivist (face) cultures [10, 24]. Because identity is internalized in those from dignity cultures, their sense of moral identity is a key characteristic of their overall identity [3]. Thus, if there is any threat to their moral identity, as there would be in tasks in which their morals are put to the test (such as being given the decision between helping another person or not, as in this study), Canadians and others from dignity cultures are more likely to give help so that they can preserve their moral identity.

Since individuals from face cultures do not define themselves in terms of their internal moral, situations that are internalized have an opposite effect, and they are less likely to help because there are no social constraints present. Because of this, the internal or external factors of a given situation are able to provide insight as to how individuals from face and dignity cultures will behave. If you think about women from various cultures, you may notice that, compared with men, their roles are fairly generalized across cultures, even if they are present to varying degrees [14]. Because female roles are more generalized and perhaps have a more historical foundation, it is males more than females that tend to take on cultural norms and values [14]. This study supports this theory by showing that in this particular task, males from each of the cultures displayed stronger culture-specific behavior than did females, perhaps because men seem to interact more with their own culture. For women, gender roles seem to be stronger when faced with a task that
involves helping behaviors, whereas men’s gender roles are more likely to interact with their cultural norms, thus displaying behavior that is more consistent with cultural norms than that of their female counterparts.

Although we were able to construct a task in which an internal measure was used, this only confirmed that individualists are more internally guided and that collectivists are not. It may be useful in future studies to include a measure that involves external sources, in order to be able to confirm that collectivists are guided by external factors. Symbolic moral identity, which is not internalized, was found to be more significant for Chinese rather than Canadians, which could be used for future research. This may be done by having a similar measure of moral identity, however making it so that this measure is defined by close friends and relatives and other important people in their lives; in other words, moral identity as defined by those around them. Another direction that could be explored is to have helping behavior examined in a situation in which cultures are not segregated and where individuals from different cultures interact with each other, to see if interaction with your own versus another culture influences helping behavior, or if it is more focused on the individual.

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6. References


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