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# The Effects of Familial Expectations over Major Choice on the Emotional Well-being of College Students

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## Abstract

Previous research examined the effect of familial conflict on college students and how this affects familial relationships and causes feelings of guilt. However, there has not yet been a study looking specifically at emotional burden stemming from not fulfilling familial expectations in regard to major choice at college. In this study, we examined the correlation between negative affective experiences and familial conflict over major choice. We focused on the experience of negative emotions when deviating from familial expectations, as well as the cultural differences and similarities between Asian and European Americans going through this experience. We assessed participants' experience of familial expectations regarding major choice, their decision to fulfill or subvert those expectations, and their emotions as a result of their decision. Our findings showed that negative emotions such as sadness and guilt were stronger when subverting expectations while positive emotions such as happiness were stronger when fulfilling expectations. In addition, we found that Asian American students were more likely to experience a familial expectation regarding their major choice and reported significantly more guilt when subverting familial expectations than European Americans students. Overall, familial expectations play a crucial role in Asian American students' major choice and emotional well-being at college.

## Introduction

Expectations are a part of everyday life, from situations involving small favors or to ones involving important plans. Previous research has shown that when expectations are placed on people, people will generally attempt to fulfill these expectations to the best of their ability (Reggev et al., 2021). People find it rewarding to behave according to others' expectations in order to fit in and achieve approval from their peers. People could experience social pressure to behave in ways that would allow them to fit in with their community and comply with social expectations (Theriault et al., 2021). Therefore, we hypothesize that fulfilling others' expectations might result in a "reward", such as feeling pride or higher self-esteem, while failing expectations would cause students to feel negative emotions such as guilt or stress.

Previous studies have shown that college students, specifically first-generation college students, often experienced feelings of guilt when they have failed to live up to the expectations of success set by their families (Covarrubias, & Fryberg, 2015). This guilt stems from the perceived privilege they feel given the opportunity to attend college. They consequently feel that they must repay their parents with academic and financial success. In addition, studies found that students who reported higher family-oriented achievement guilt also demonstrated significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower levels of self-esteem (Covarrubias & Romero, 2015). These previous studies suggest that familial expectations play a role in college students' emotional wellbeing and behavior. However, this literature remains silent regarding perhaps one of the most important decisions that students make in their college life—namely, which major they choose and spend the rest of their college experience studying. This study looks specifically at expectations placed on college students when they are choosing their major and career, as well as their emotional state as a result of choosing to subvert or fulfill those expectations.

The emotional state of students in these situations also may vary across cultures. The Ideal Affect Theory posits that Asians tend to feel emotions differently than their European counterparts (Tsai et al., 2016). According to ideal affect theory, people from more individualistic cultures such as western Europe and the United States wanted to feel more positively about their situations compared to people from collectivist cultures such as Asia (Tsai, et al., 2016). In addition, studies found that people from more individualistic cultures such as the United States demonstrated more pride and less guilt than those in collectivistic cultures such as Asia when placed in the same situations (Eid & Diener, 2001). When students from both these cultures are placed on an American university campus, their personal values must be adjusted to fit their new environment. The idea of subverting expectations in pursuit of your passions in college is very aligned with the individualistic cultural mindset of European American students (Triandis, 2001). Therefore, there is little mismatch between their situation and their cultural values since both emphasize independence and self-discovery. However, for Asian American college students, there was a much greater mismatch between collectivistic cultural values such as obedience to one's parents and collective happiness with American college ideals (Triandis, 2001). This disconnect can cause Asian American students to suffer from significantly more guilt than their European American counterparts. These cultural differences demonstrate how Asian American students might suffer from greater negative affective experiences related to subverting familial expectations than European American students.

A difficulty that Asian American college students face in choosing majors is their family's lack of knowledge about possible career pathways in the United States compared to European American families. Asian Americans who are less acculturated within the U.S. are more likely to choose an occupation in which they do not have any interest in due to lack of information available to them (Tang et al., 1999). These findings are supported by previous studies that found that Asian Americans hold significantly greater cultural values in choosing careers with high extrinsic value (e.g., salary, prestige) and stability (Shen, 2015). With the context of an immigrant household in which parents often hold strong desires for upward mobility and social prestige, many Asian Americans choose to fulfill familial expectations for a more conventional career (Poon, 2014). While Asian Americans can have a multi-faceted approach to choosing their major and career, research shows that their choice is still intrinsically linked to a perceived responsibility to their parents (Tran, 2011).

When these expectations for careers are not met, conflict can arise in Asian American families. Asian American college students experienced parental disapproval that is perceived to stem from reasons such as concerns for financial prospect and stability, parents' lack of knowledge in various career options, and cultural values favoring certain fields (Ma et al., 2013). Asian American students understand that there is a certain expectation from their parents regarding their career and was met with disapproval when they failed to fulfill those expectations. Asian Americans often placed a greater emphasis on academics and family, implying a greater weight when these expectations were not met (Saw et al., 2013). Even if these expectations were not explicitly stated, Asian American college students can still feel the influence of their parents' expectations. Asian cultural values regarding conventional career choices could intrinsically affect the child even if the parent did not enforce it in an authoritative manner (Park et al., 2010). Therefore, we hypothesize that the greater influence of parental and familial expectations being placed on Asian American students could lead to higher levels of guilt than European American students.

In addition to perceived expectation and disapproval, college students are also affected by intergenerational conflict with their parents. Intergenerational conflict is defined as conflict resulting from the differing values between family members from different generations. While intergenerational conflict can be found in all populations, Asian Americans are particularly affected. Asian cultural values such as conformity to the norm and obedience to elders can invoke conflict with offspring who were raised in the United States which is considerably more individualistic (Tsai-Chae & Nagata, 2008). Family conflict has been linked to poorer psychological adjustment among Asian American offspring as they try to compromise between maintaining familial relations with their independent values (Pham et al., 2020). Higher levels of assertiveness or individualism in Asian Americans were associated positively with subjective well-being and negatively with negative affect. This is likely because these students are better able to openly and effectively communicate their opinions rather than passively accept their situation to maintain peace. Asian American college students who perceived that their parents are overly controlling felt like they must show resistance to become an autonomous individual (Kim et al., 2017). These students might see college as an environment where they can be free from their parents' control and choose to subvert expectations despite the conflict it could provoke. Therefore, it is important to examine how individual differences and family environments affect the perception of familial expectations and how they are affected by any potential conflict.

## The Present Research

Previous research studies have shown that Asian American cultural values can place a heavy burden on students to follow the career pathways that their parents approve of. In order to avoid potential conflict with their family, Asian American students might choose to fulfill expectations regardless of any negative affective experiences. To directly test this hypothesis, the present research tries to understand how familial expectations affect the emotional well-being of college students.

This study focused on four hypotheses: 1) Subverting familial expectations will lead to a greater emotional burden through negative affective experiences; 2) How much a student likes the major, how motivated they are to pursue their major, and how much influence their family has over their major choice will moderate the emotional burden students feel. Students who like their major or who are very motivated will experience less emotional burden. Students who score low on parental influence would also experience less emotional burden; 3) The factors of individualism-collectivism, familial achievement guilt, and family atmosphere will moderate the emotional burden students feel. Students who score high on individualism or lower in family achievement guilt will experience less emotional burden. Students who score high on family atmosphere would also experience less emotional burden; 4) Asian American students will experience more emotional burden than European-American students in similar circumstances. Many Asian American students experience more familial expectations and often come from more collectivistic cultures than European American students.

## Methods

### Study Overview

This study follows a correlational design examining the relationship between familial expectations and different emotions. The independent variable was the participant's situation: fulfilling or subverting familial expectations. We defined familial expectations as related to any pressure, both implicit and explicit, felt by the participants from their family members relating to their chosen field of study or career path. The dependent variable for this study was the measurement of emotion felt by the participant in their given situation. There were 5 main emotions being studied: sadness, guilt, happiness, gratitude, and stress. The moderating variables were how much the participants liked their major, how motivated they were in pursuing their major, and the amount of influence their families exert over them. Other moderating variables were individualism-collectivism, family achievement guilt, and family atmosphere.

### Participants

Participants ( $N = 236$ ) were recruited from Prolific (age:  $M = 22.31$  years,  $SD = 5.03$ ), 63% female and 37% male. The participants were all current American college students with 117 participants identifying as Asian American and 119 participants identifying as European American. Of the 236 participants, 115 participants reported experiencing familial expectations (65% female, age:  $M = 22.26$  years,  $SD = 2.56$ ).

## Measures

### Dependent Variables

The emotion matrix contained 13 items measured from not at all (0) to extremely (100). The participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt each emotion regarding their relationship to their family after fulfilling/subverting expectations about their major. Participants started with the bar at 50 to encourage them to use the entire range of the scale.

### Interest, Motivation, and Parental Influence

Interest was defined as how much the participant likes their major and was measured from 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Motivation was defined as how much the participant was motivated to pursue their major and was measured from 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Parental influence was defined as the extent to which the participant felt that their major choice was influenced by the family's expectations and was measured from 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

### Individualism-Collectivism

Individualism-collectivism was measured using a modified scale with 4 items (Eom et al., 2016). This scale was modified for brevity while still allowing for an accurate measurement of the individual's mindset in regard to individualism or collectivism. Individualism was defined as prioritizing one's own goals and happiness while collectivism was defined as prioritizing the happiness and goals of one's close relationships. Examples of questions included "I seek to be myself rather than to follow others" and "One of my main goals in life has been to make my parents proud". The scale for each question was measured from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### Family Achievement Guilt

Family achievement guilt was measured using a modified version of the family achievement guilt scale (Covarrubias et al., 2020). This modified scale contained 5 items specifically regarding guilt in relation to failing familial expectations. This scale was used to measure the participant's mindset when faced with the idea that they were unable to fulfill their family's expectations for them as a college student. An example of a question was "I worry that I won't be able to meet the expectations of my family." The scale was measured from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

### Family Atmosphere

Family atmosphere was measured using the family atmosphere scale (Yu et al., 2022). Family atmosphere measures how warm and inviting or cold and distant the individual's family is perceived as. This scale was used to see why a participant might feel more inclined to make their family happy and fulfill their expectations. An example item was "My family members are proud to be close with each other." The scale was measured from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## Procedure

Participants accessed the survey through Prolific. The participant first read and signed the consent form before engaging in the online survey. Participants were asked if they were a college student; the survey would automatically end if they responded negatively. The following procedure is used to categorize participants (see Figure 1 for more detail). Participants filled out scales regarding their interest and motivation for their current major as well as how much influence their family had over their decision to choose their current major. Finally, all participants were asked to fill out the individualism-collectivism, family-achievement guilt, and family-atmosphere scales.

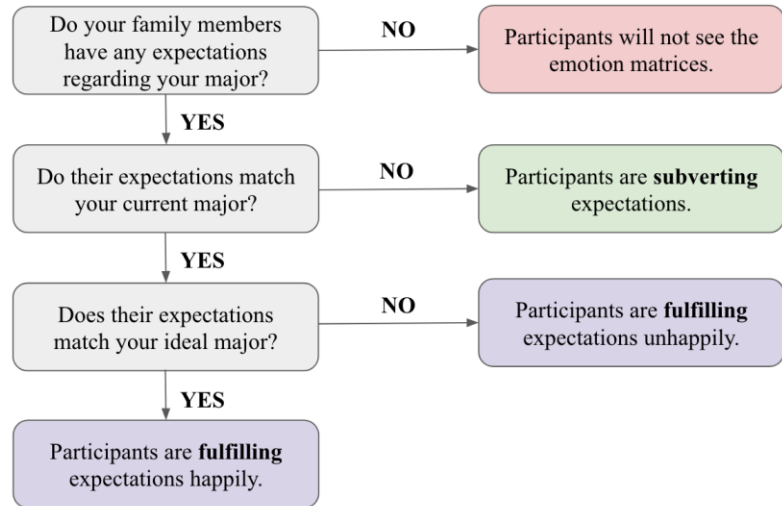


Figure 1: Flowchart depicting the questions posed to participants in the survey and how they are categorized.

## Results

### Overview

For all four hypotheses, we ran a linear regression model to examine the effects of familial expectations on the self-reported emotions of sadness, guilt, happiness, gratitude, and stress.

### Descriptive Statistics

We ran a  $\chi^2$  test to examine whether the proportion of participants who reported experiencing familial expectations regarding major choice differed between the Asian American and European American samples. Asian American participants were significantly more likely to report experiencing familial expectations than European Americans,  $\chi^2(1, N = 236) = 18.4, p < 0.001$ . However, there was no significant difference between Asian Americans and European Americans in likelihood to violate these expectations,  $\chi^2(1, N = 236) = 3.37, p = 0.066$ .

### Hypothesis 1

For the first hypothesis, we examined the effects of expectation fulfillment on the self-reported emotions of sadness, guilt, happiness, gratitude, and stress. There was a significant negative effect of expectation fulfillment on sadness ( $t(107) = -2.72; p = 0.0076$ ) and guilt ( $t(107) = -3.70; p < 0.001$ ). There was a significant positive effect of expectation fulfillment on happiness ( $t(107) = 4.38; p < 0.001$ ) and gratitude ( $t(107) = 3.71; p < 0.001$ ). There was no significant negative association between expectation fulfillment and stress ( $t(107) = -0.77; p = 0.443$ ).

## Hypothesis 2

For the second hypothesis, we looked at interest, motivation, and parental influence as moderating variables. There was a significant moderating effect of interest ( $t(105) = 2.33$ ;  $p = 0.033$ ), motivation ( $t(105) = 2.04$ ;  $p = 0.044$ ), and parental influence ( $t(105) = -4.11$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) on happiness. Interest and motivation increased the amount of happiness reported by the participant when subverting expectations while parental influence decreases the amount of happiness reported. There was a significant moderating effect of parental influence ( $t(104) = -2.25$ ;  $p = 0.026$ ) on gratitude. There was no significant moderating effect of any of these variables on sadness, guilt, or stress.

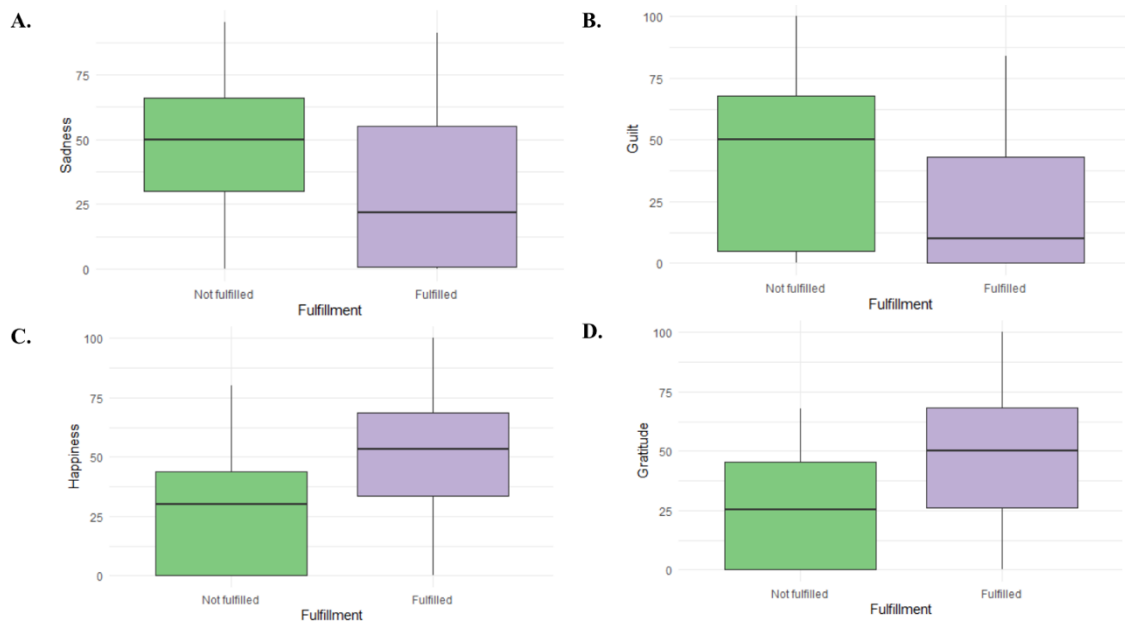


Figure 2: Self-reported emotions A) Sadness, B) Guilt, C) Happiness, and D) Gratitude as a function of fulfillment.



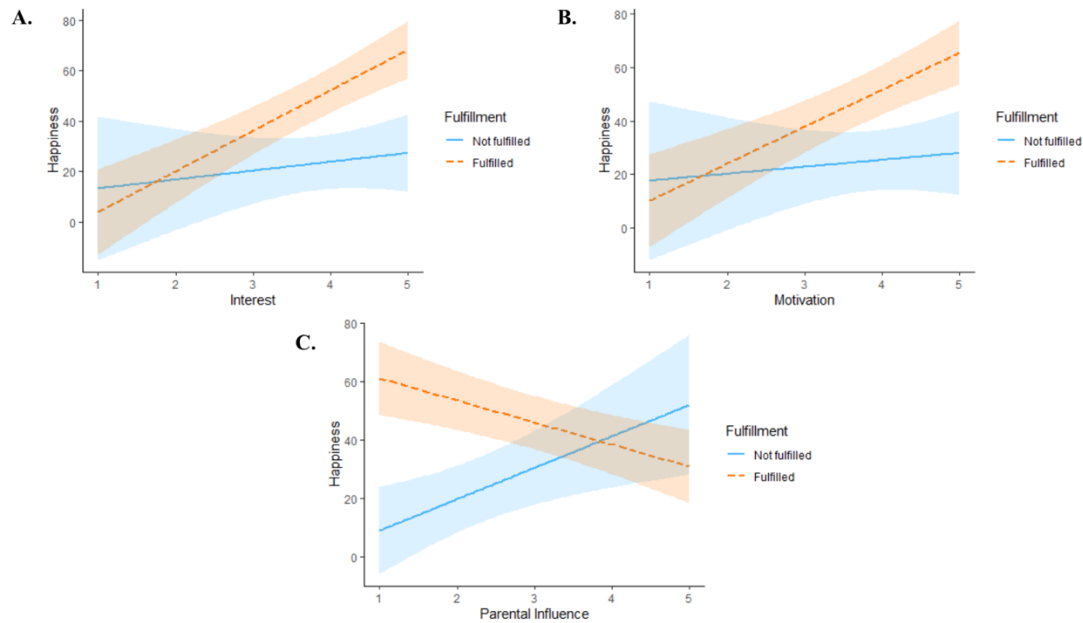


Figure 3: Self-reported Happiness as a function of fulfillment with A) Interest, B) Motivation, and C) Parental Influence as a moderating variable.

### Hypothesis 3

For the third hypothesis, we looked at the moderating effect of family-achievement guilt (FACG), individualism-collectivism, and family atmosphere on the relationship between expectation fulfillment and emotions. There was a moderating effect of FACG ( $t(105) = 2.13$ ;  $p = 0.035$ ) and family atmosphere ( $t(105) = -2.90$ ;  $p = 0.005$ ) on sadness. Higher FACG resulted in lower reported sadness for those who subverted expectations while family atmosphere resulted in higher reported sadness for those who subverted expectations. There was a moderating effect of collectivism-individualism ( $t(105) = -2.07$ ;  $p = 0.041$ ) on happiness. There was a moderating effect of family atmosphere ( $t(105) = -2.00$ ;  $p = 0.048$ ) on stress. There were no moderating effects of FACG, individualism-collectivism, and family atmosphere on guilt or gratitude.

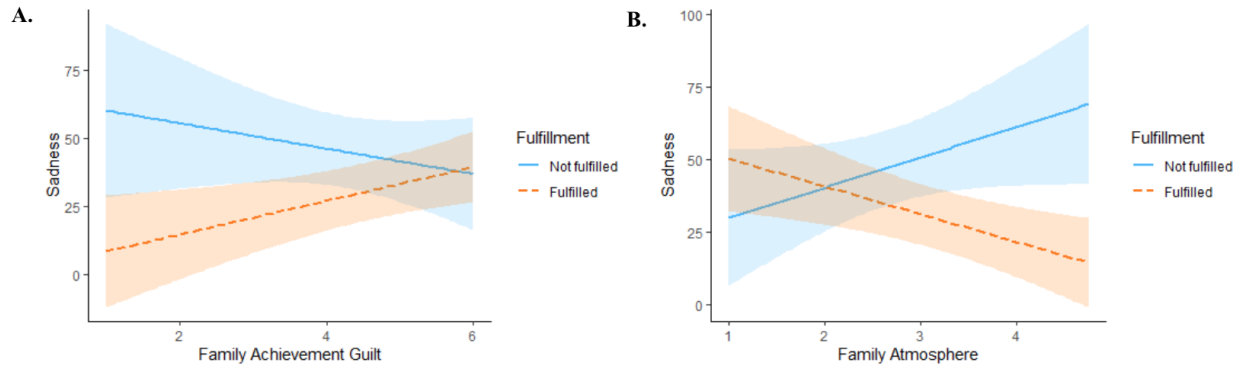


Figure 4: Self-reported Sadness as a function of fulfillment with A) Family Achievement Guilt and B) Family Atmosphere as a moderating variable.

### Hypothesis 4

For the fourth hypothesis, we looked at the moderating effect of ethnicity (Asian American vs. European American). Ethnicity moderates the relationship between expectation fulfillment and guilt ( $t(105) = 2.03; p = 0.045$ ), such that not fulfilling familial expectations regarding major choice is associated with higher guilt only in the Asian American group ( $t(67) = -4.08; p < 0.001$ ), but not in the European American group ( $t(34) = -0.27; p = 0.791$ ). There was no significant moderating effect of ethnicity on sadness, stress, happiness, and gratitude.

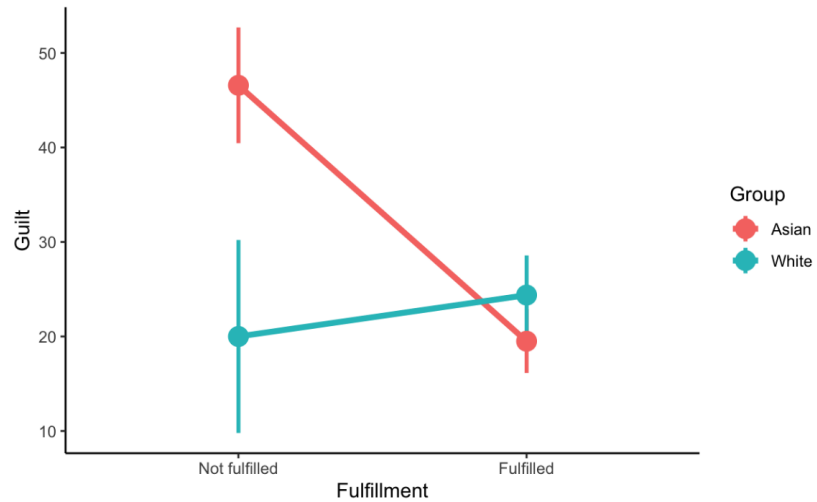


Figure 5: Self-reported Guilt as a function of fulfillment with Group (Asian vs. White) as a moderating variable.

## Discussion

### Hypothesis 1

We hypothesized that negative emotions would be strongly correlated with subverting expectations. Interestingly, stress was not significantly associated with subverting expectations. This might indicate that while participants might feel bad about their general situation and their relationship with their family, they do not feel that it was an active stressor in their life. The significant positive correlation

between positive emotions such as happiness and gratitude with fulfilling expectations demonstrated that there was a general sense of joy that students associate with fulfilling their family's expectations of them regardless of their passion for their major.

## Hypothesis 2

We hypothesized that the variables of interest, motivation, and parental influence would moderate the effect of familial expectations on a participant's emotions. The significant moderating effects of these variables on both the positive emotions being studied might indicate that these variables intensify the happier emotions that participants feel when subverting expectations to pursue their major choice. These variables did not have any significant moderating effect on the negative emotions of sadness, guilt, and stress. This means that higher interest and motivation as well as lower parental influence were causing participants to feel better about their situation, but also not alleviating any of their negative emotions. Therefore, participants might be able to feel happy to pursue a major that they were passionate about, but still feel just as guilty that they were unable to fulfill their family's expectations.

We also noted, however, that the moderating effects of interest and motivation are extremely similar. Running a correlation test ( $t(113) = 10.7; p < 0.001$ ) showed us that there is no significant difference in the way these variables are perceived by the participants. In future studies, we will combine these variables into a singular variable of interest.

## Hypothesis 3

We hypothesized that family achievement guilt (FACG), individualism-collectivism, and family atmosphere would moderate the effects of familial expectations on emotions. We found that there was a moderating effect of FACG and family atmosphere on sadness as well as a moderating effect of family atmosphere on stress. This indicates that experiencing less FACG and having a higher family atmosphere could increase the amount of sadness a student feels when subverting expectations. The less supportive a participant's family is, the more negative emotion they will feel when subverting expectations. There was also a moderating effect of collectivism-individualism on happiness which demonstrates that for students who were more individualistic, they generally felt happier when pursuing the goal of pursuing the major they are passionate about at the cost of defying expectations.

## Hypothesis 4

We hypothesized that Asian American participants would experience more negative emotions from subverting expectations than European American participants. This seemed to hold true only for guilt. There was a significant difference between Asian Americans and European Americans when experiencing guilt with Asian Americans feeling significantly more guilt when subverting expectations and less guilt when fulfilling expectations. For European Americans, there did not seem to be any change in feelings of guilt across situations. There was also higher variability in answers for European Americans compared to Asian Americans. This might indicate that there was a cultural aspect to this difference as there was a more cohesive, generalized experience for Asian Americans to be experiencing guilt after subverting familial expectations.

## Limitations

One of the limitations of these studies was the sample size. While we were able to recruit many participants in this study, half of the participants reported no familial expectations and were not shown the emotion matrix. In future studies, we would like to collect a higher sample size of participants so our results would be more representative of both populations being studied and have higher statistical power.

## Future Research

This study can be further expanded by looking specifically into the internalized cultural values of Asian American students and if these values were being reinforced by their family. In addition, we can also look at family background including economic status, number of siblings, and parental education level to see if any of these factors can potentially affect how intense expectations are. It would also be interesting to look at whether these factors would cause participants to experience little to no familial expectations or if they could intensify emotions.

We would also like to supplement this data with interviews and more qualitative records of student experiences. Every student goes through a slightly different approach to handling family expectations and finding compromise. We already have several very interesting answers to the question about the current ideal major with some students expressing widely different preferences for their ideal major compared to their current major. It would have been interesting to also speak to these students personally and understand how they feel about their family's expectations, current career path, and whether they would be open to changing their majors to suit the topics that they were more passionate about.

The conclusions found by this research were important in developing intervention-based counseling techniques targeted at college students. By developing a narrative that students can learn to compromise with expectations or change their family's way of thinking, students can better balance their passions with a supportive relationship with their family. Further research into this topic can help develop intervention counseling that aids students of all situations, backgrounds, and ethnicities that struggle with familial expectations when going to college.

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