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Authors

Wu, Kaidi

Kim, Jacqueline HJ

Nagata, Donna K

et al.

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## Perceptions of Sibling Relationships and Birth Order among Asian American and European American Emerging Adults

**Kaidi Wu,**

Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

**Jacqueline H. J. Kim,**

Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles

**Donna K. Nagata, and**

Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

**Stephanie I. Kim**

Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

### Abstract

Drawing from an ecological systems framework, we qualitatively explored how Confucian-heritage Asian American emerging adults compared with non-Hispanic European American emerging adults on views of sibling relationships and birth order. Thematic analysis of 48 semi-structured interviews revealed positive sibling relationship themes for both ethnocultural groups: mutual support, companionship, and appreciation; comfort from shared burden of negative parental interactions; and pride in one another. Birth-order themes were also similar across the groups. First-borns overall reported a strong pressure to be a role model to later-borns, provide sibling care, assume family responsibilities, and not expect to rely on younger siblings. Despite these similarities, Asian American first-borns were unique in taking comfort in having siblings who shared a less traditional Asian cultural perspective than their parents. They also described additional pressure from being the oldest within an immigrant family.

### Keywords

Asian American; birth order; immigrant; qualitative; sibling

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Almost 80% of children in the United States grow up with one or more siblings (Kreider & Ellis, 2011) and sibling relationships serve many important functions including identity formation, mutual regulation, and help provision (Dunn, 2007; Goetting, 1986). Many studies have examined sibling relationships at the *microsystem* level, predominantly focusing on how the immediate social context (e.g., family environment) shapes sibling dynamics within Western cultures (see McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2013 for a review;

Weisner, 1993). Studies on birth order have been especially prevalent, with many guided by social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to explore the processes of sibling role-modeling and observational learning. Typically, older siblings acted as role models and socialization agents for younger siblings while younger siblings engaged in learning and imitation (Whiteman et al., 2011). Studies specific to Western emerging adults' development find similar results. Older siblings are perceived—by both their younger siblings and themselves—to assume a protective and care-giving role by giving more advice, being less influenced by younger siblings, and serving as a source of knowledge for emerging adulthood (Paulsen, 2013; Voorpostel, van der Lippe, Dykstra, & Flap, 2007).

While birth order studies examining sibling relationships at the familial microsystem level have provided important insights, there is added value to examining sibling relationships at the *macrosystem* level in which the relationships are situated. As outlined by the *ecological systems framework* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), one such macrosystem is culture. The importance of this broader cultural context is demonstrated in previous findings indicating variability in common sibling relationship processes when there are diverging cultural values (Nuckolls, 1993; Weisner, 1993). The present study qualitatively explores the microsystem-level sibling and birth order experiences of emerging adults embedded within an ethnocultural macrosystem, by comparing the perspectives of Confucian-heritage Asian Americans with non-Hispanic European Americans. Rather than using an ethnic-homogenous design as found in past sibling studies (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012), an ethnic-comparative design was implemented to uncover cultural similarities or differences in emerging adult sibling relationships.

## Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Sibling Relationships

Cross-cultural research has shown that sibling relationships are shaped by their macrosystem-level cultural contexts (Cicirelli, 1994). For example, unlike sibling dynamics in North America, sibling care-taking plays a vital role in South and Southeast Asian sibling relationships, in which respect for the oldest sibling is paramount (Nuckolls, 1993). In light of such cultural variations, there has been increased attention towards the impact of culturally diverse family contexts on U.S. sibling dynamics (McHale et al., 2012). Research conducted with African American and Mexican American siblings has highlighted that values unique to ethnic minority cultures (e.g., familism) contribute to sibling dynamics and family adjustment issues in addition to those commonly assumed in European American families (East & Hamill, 2013; McHale, Whiteman, Kim, & Crouter, 2007). However, studies on sibling relationships within the Confucian-heritage Asian American context remain sparse despite the rising numbers of Asian Americans in the United States (Yee, Su, Kim, & Yancura, 2009).

Known cultural differences among Confucian-heritage Asian Americans and non-Hispanic European Americans suggest the value of exploring similarities and differences in sibling dynamics between these groups. Although there is significant heterogeneity among multiple groups falling under the label “Asian”, several Asian cultural values occur across East (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Japanese) and Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese) ethnic groups that share historical roots in Confucian principles (Kimmel & Yi, 2004). In this paper, the focus is on

Asian ethnic groups sharing a Confucian heritage (De Bary & De Bary, 2009), and the term “Asian Americans” will refer to those sharing a Confucian heritage. Regarding European Americans, we refer specifically to non-Hispanic whites with ancestry from Europe, following the terminology in the cross-cultural sibling literature spanning across the past few decades (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2013). While European Americans are not a monolithic group, extensive cross-cultural research points to overarching cultural axes signifying modern mainstream American values embodied by European Americans in contrast to values upheld by Asian Americans from Confucian heritage cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). These include three cultural distinctions that are relevant to sibling relationships: independent vs. interdependent self-construal, horizontal (equality) vs. vertical (hierarchy) structure, and the absence vs. presence of cultural brokering.

First, unlike the mainstream European American emphasis on independence and autonomy, Confucian-based Asian cultures embrace achieving family harmony via building interdependent relationships well into emerging adulthood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Embedded in a Confucian-based cultural context where interdependence continues to shape family dynamics, sibling relationships tend to foster strong feelings of connectedness (Maynard, 2004; Nuckolls, 1993). The communal orientation of interdependent cultures may buffer against sibling rivalry and negative family dynamics such as differential parental treatment (McHale et al., 2013). Note that while individualistic cultures may experience relatively more sibling rivalry (Nuckolls, 1993), European American emerging adults also develop largely positive sibling relationships with decreased contact and increased maturity during emerging adulthood (Stewart et al., 1998). In addition, interdependence within Confucian-based Asian cultures is practiced via *filial piety*—a core theme absent from European American families—such that older children (especially the oldest son) are morally obligated to carry out family duties that they “owe” their parents (Yee et al., 2009). First-borns from these Confucian-based cultures perceive higher norms of filial piety and provide more financial assistance and emotional support for elderly parents than later-borns (Ishii-Kuntz, 1997).

Second, unlike European American cultures’ emphasis on egalitarianism, Confucian-based Asian cultures place high value on the external aspects of selfhood (Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007; Wu, Garcia, & Kopelman, 2018) and maintaining a vertical social hierarchy (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Sibling roles tend to be more distinctly defined (Maynard, 2004): First-borns are ascribed a higher status, expected to provide more care for younger siblings (Zukow-Goldring, 2002; Weisner, 1993) and bear the obligation to help younger siblings with schoolwork. Anthropological accounts also show that siblings in East and South Asia are given nicknames based on their gender and birth order status, which can persist throughout their lives (Bradley, 2007; Watson, 1986). Based on this emphasis on vertical hierarchy, first-borns’ sense of care-taking and family responsibilities may be more salient for Asian American siblings.

Third, Asian immigrant children often acquire language proficiency faster than their parents, and filial obligation for first-borns in particular includes serving as language brokers and decision-makers for parents (Yee et al., 2009). This pseudo-parenting obligation, in

combination with the emphasis on vertical hierarchy within the family, may shape the birth order experiences of Asian American first-borns in emerging adulthood in ways that are absent for their European American peers (Pyke, 2005).

## Sibling Relationships in Emerging Adulthood

We focus on emerging adults for several reasons. First, emerging adulthood (ages 18–25) is a transformative life stage in which siblings develop greater independence and move away from home (Conger & Little, 2010). Given the Confucian cultural emphasis on interdependence, it is particularly interesting to explore the nature of Asian American sibling relationships during this stage. Second, most research has focused on sibling relationships in childhood, adolescence, and late adulthood (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2013), leaving emerging adulthood understudied. While sibling proximity and contact decrease during emerging adulthood, sibling relationships remain important (Scharf, 2005)

Data from European American samples also show that, compared with adolescents, emerging adults report a decreased level of antagonism and competition with their siblings (Stewart et al., 1998) and perceive their sibling relationships to be positive and emotionally close (Myers & Bryant, 2008). Although past studies have provided some insights into the sibling relationships of Asian American emerging adults (Pyke, 2005), additional research is needed to further understand how these relationships are similar or different from those of non-Hispanic European Americans.

## The Present Study

To address the dearth of research on Asian American sibling relationships, the present study investigates perceptions of sibling relationships of Confucian-heritage Asian American and non-Hispanic European American emerging adults at the interface of microsystem-level individual characteristics (birth order) and macrosystem-level (culture) contexts. Rather than using the quantitative approach with Western-only samples predominant in past literature, the study uses qualitative methods to comparatively explore the following questions: 1) What are the sibling experiences of Asian American and European American emerging adults? 2) What are the birth order experiences of Asian American and European American emerging adults? How do the narrative descriptions of first-borns and later-borns relate and differ? 3) What is the role of cultural values on sibling and birth order experiences? How do the narrative descriptions of these experiences from Asian American emerging adults converge with or diverge from those of their European American peers? Based on prior national and international social learning studies on siblings, we expected that Asian American and European American participants would be similar in reporting birth order experiences in which first-born siblings lead and later-born siblings follow. However, given the previously noted Asian cultural emphases on vertical hierarchy and immigrant family-specific obligations, first-born Asian American emerging adults might report greater familial burdens associated with their birth order position than European Americans.

## Method

### Participants

The sample included 19 Confucian-heritage Asian American (36.84% male; age = 18–24 years,  $M = 19.89$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) and 29 non-Hispanic European American (51.70% male; age = 18–23 years,  $M = 19.03$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) university students with at least one sibling. Participants self-identified as being first-borns (FBs) or later-borns (LBs) (Asian American: 47.37% FB, European American: 48.28% FB). All were full siblings and included a combination of same-sex, opposite-sex, and mixed-sex (having one (or more) same-sex *and* one (or more) opposite-sex siblings) sibling pairings. Asian American participants were current U.S. residents of Chinese (9), Taiwanese (4), Korean (4), or Chinese-Vietnamese (2) ethnicity. All but two were second- or 1.5- generation, born natively in the U.S. or arrived in middle childhood (ages 6–12) and had immigrant parents. European American participants were non-Hispanic whites (of self-reported white (23); Irish/Polish (1); Iris/Dutch/Hungarian(1); Irish/German(1); Italian (1); Russian (1); Ukrainian(1) heritage) who were raised entirely in the U.S. by non-Hispanic white parents. Age spacing between siblings and their younger or older siblings was comparable across Asian and European Americans. On average, Asian American families had relatively fewer siblings ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = .45$ ; 14 families had 2 siblings, 5 families had 3) compared to European American families ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = .68$ ; 15 families had 2 siblings, 11 families had 3, 3 families had 4), although this difference was only marginally significant,  $t(45.98) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .06$ .<sup>1</sup>

### Procedure

With IRB approval, participants were recruited from a large Midwestern university psychology department subject pool for course credits and through posted advertisements offering \$10 monetary compensation. Recruitment materials requested East Asian American<sup>2</sup> and European American<sup>3</sup> participants for research on birth order and family relations. One co-author conducted all individual interviews in a private psychology lab room. After informed consent, demographic information (family composition including birth order, birthplace, length of time in the U.S., ethnicity) was gathered. Open-ended interview questions inquired about experiences of being a sibling and of being first- or later-born generally, and in relation to areas of achievement drive, sense of responsibility, family relations, and sense of support (e.g., “In what ways has having a sibling(s), in general, affected your achievement drive? In what ways has being the child of your specific birth order affected your achievement drive?”). Questions did not restrict responses to recent interactions. Although an interview guide was used, the semi-structured approach allowed interviewees to expand their comments spontaneously during the interview process, and a final question invited any additional comments about siblings and birth order experiences.

<sup>1</sup>See Supplementary File Table S1 for more details on sibling characteristics.

<sup>2</sup>Recruitment materials requested those who identified as East Asian so as to constrain our sample to those sharing a Confucian heritage culture. Some participants self-identified as East Asian (e.g., Chinese-Vietnamese), although Chinese-Vietnamese could be considered either geographically Southeast Asian or ethnically Chinese (belonging to the East Asian cultural sphere historically influenced by China; De Bary & De Bary, 2009). Nonetheless, they share a Confucian heritage with East Asians such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. For these reasons, we refrained from referring to our Asian American study participants as “East Asian Americans” and instead referred to them as Asian Americans sharing a Confucian heritage throughout the paper.

<sup>3</sup>Recruitment materials requested European Americans/non-Hispanic whites. Participants also self-identified as such in response to open-ended questions during the interview

Interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes on average and were conducted in English, in which all participants were fluent. The research team included one faculty member, two graduate students, and one undergraduate student, who were East Asian American females (of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descent); three immigrated to the U.S. as young children and one is third-generation. One U.S.-born non-Hispanic European American post-baccalaureate student served as a coding auditor.

### Analytic Plan

Verbatim interview transcripts were analyzed in QSR NVivo 10 using an inductive and semantic analytic approach for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This bottom-up method was the most appropriate as our coding was driven by interview data rather than a priori conceptions. First, two of the authors *familiarized* themselves with the interview data, reviewed interview transcripts, and independently *generated initial codes* and candidate themes that represented participants' experiences. A coding dictionary of candidate themes was then compiled and used by two trained coders to independently code all transcripts. Next, the coders *searched for themes* and organized codes into thematic categories. Inter-rater reliability of codes was checked using kappa concordance analyses. The average Kappa score was .93, indicating excellent coder agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Finally, coders *reviewed* and *defined* the most prominent themes through consensus. Thematic results were independently confirmed through external audit review by a qualitatively trained U.S.-born European American post-baccalaureate coder.

### Results

Three key sibling relationship themes emerged from the interview responses: support, companionship and appreciation; comfort from shared burden of negative parental interactions; and pride in one another. Four additional birth order themes emerged: role-modeling; sibling caregiving; family responsibility; and reliance. Using a Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR)-informed approach (Hill, 2012) to assess the commonalities and differences across cultural (European American, Asian American) and birth order (first-born, later-born) groups, the following narrative frequency labels were applied within each subgroup: *general* = categories that occurred in all or all but one case; *typical* = least half of the cases; *variant* = at least two cases up to the cutoff for *typical*; *single* = single case. Subgroups were considered different when findings differed by at least two frequency categories. We supplemented frequency labels with raw frequencies rather than presenting numerical percentages or raw frequencies alone, because the latter would imply quantitative precision beyond the study's qualitative method. Frequency labels also allow for more meaningful comparison and communication of qualitative findings (See Table 1).

### Sibling Relationship Themes

**Support, companionship, and appreciation.**—Regardless of birth order, both European American and Asian American siblings reported a typical theme of strong feelings of *mutual support* via shared experience. For example, one European American LB described “definitely having a support system and people to talk to” as a part of her sibling experience. Another European American FB portrayed having siblings as “having support

and people who understand [her].” Responses were similar among Asian American siblings. One Asian American LB perceived her siblings as her “support system because they basically went through and are going through the same thing as [her]... and [they] can share what [they] are feeling.” An Asian American FB’s response exhibited the same pattern: “[My brother] supports me, and it helps to have someone going through similar things with me.”

Across birth orders, both European American (FBs general; LBs typical) and Asian American (FBs and LBs general) siblings emphasized experiencing *companionship*, which was seen as providing comforting assurance. One European American LB shared: “There is just someone else there; it’s not so quiet and lonely.” Similarly, one European American FB commented, “There is someone always to talk to, spend time with whenever you’re bored; you have someone to hang out with.” Asian American participants also referred to their siblings as “a companion that would never leave [her], like a best friend” (*FB*) and someone who is “always there for [her]” (*another FB*). Likewise, an Asian American LB stated: “I think [it is] that sense of comfort and security... I know there is someone else I can go to and talk about things and stuff like that.”

Furthermore, European American siblings (FBs general; LBs typical) and Asian American LBs (general) identified a shared *appreciation* for having siblings and celebrated their siblings’ capacity for unconditional acceptance.

- I can’t imagine having my life without siblings. I think, as you get older, you appreciate them more and more... I hope when I’m older, I’m gonna have more than one kid, because it’s a really valuable part of life. (*European American FB*)
- I’m so thankful for having siblings. I can go to them for anything ... And I can count on them for whatever. (*European American LB*)
- No matter what happens—maybe tomorrow I’ll have one of the best jobs or something and everything will come true—but if I lost all of that, I know no matter what I’ll have, my siblings would be there; and I could call them, and they will still love me. They’ll always love me for who I am. (*Asian American LB*)

Asian American FBs did not directly articulate “appreciate” or “thankful” but typically referenced their sibling relationships as reflected in relationship descriptions such as being “blood-related that can’t be really broken; even if we have a fight, they will come back.”

**Comfort from shared burden of negative parental interactions.**—Both European American (FBs typical; LBs variant) and Asian American (FBs variant; LBs typical) disclosed that siblings *alleviated pressure when family conflicts and parental nagging or blame arise*.

- If you have problems with your parents, they understand because they have lived with your parents the whole life ... we can always talk, because we understand exactly what’s going on; and just having someone to grow up with, you will



always have them, and having that kind of family setting makes you more grounded. (*European American FB*)

- When you have a conflict with your parents, you have someone to share that with besides your friends. They can help you in certain situations. In some situations, you can split the blame. (*European American LB*)
- Conflicts with parents — I'd share with my sister, always. It's kind of like a funny joke to make fun of our parents. (*Asian American FB*)
- Having siblings definitely made [my life] better because otherwise, my mom will be nagging at me the whole time instead of spreading it out between all three of us, which is already a lot of nagging. (*Asian American LB*)

Only Asian American FBs (variant) spoke of an additional kind of shared burden among siblings in relation to an *acculturative mismatch* with their parents. These FBs appreciated having siblings who shared a less traditional Asian cultural perspective than their parents, as reflected in a FB's description: "My parents are of older generation and more Korean, whereas my brother is more American, which I'm more used to." Another FB lamented, "My parents want me to end up marrying a Chinese person, but honestly I don't really think that's realistic for me and my sister." Yet another FB appreciated her brother's understanding "especially because [her] parents are so different from [her], like language, culturally, and generationally."

**Pride in one another.**—Both Asian American FBs and LBs (variant) extolled their siblings' accomplishments and expressed pride in siblings' success. For example, one Asian American FB commented, "When good things happen to my siblings, I'm super self-confident because their achievements kind of feel like my achievements, so I am really happy"; and a LB Asian American participant stated, "Most of the time I'm very proud of my brother." Pride in siblings was mentioned by one European American FB ("I'm proud of her when people tell me things about her"). Among European American LBs (variant), one recounted that his older brothers "support him and were proud of their little brother"; another mentioned pride of his older brother but immediately linked it to a pressure to follow standards.

### Birth Order Themes

**Role-modeling.**—European American and Asian American FBs (general) reported a *motivation to role-model* by demonstrating high levels of achievement, confidence, and behavior that younger siblings can follow. This occurred across all gender pairings. One European American FB stated, "I think I want to do good to show her good examples ... I'm always pushing [my sisters]. Another Asian American FB similarly shared, "I have to go do things first so I have to be confident no matter what I do. You're the first and your siblings will follow behind." Such role-modeling was most often attributed to perceived parental expectations and a pressure to be a family leader.

- I think being the first-born in general is a big responsibility. It's natural that your parents are really excited for their first kid, they want the best for you and they

want you to do the best you can. And then having siblings that are younger than me—they want me to be the role model. (*European American FB*)

- I feel that I'm kind of a leader in terms of my family. I have to try things out and figure things out and share them with my sister and my brother. I try to be very independent and try to be smart and as mature as possible (*Asian American FB*)

In contrast, European American LBs only reported motivation to role-model of variant frequency, and only one Asian American LB mentioned so. Notably, all such LBs were mid-borns, some of whom described having to live up to their older siblings' standards and be a role model for their younger siblings at the same time, as captured in this European American mid-born quote: "Being a middle child is interesting because you have people to look up to and people who look up to you. So you have kind of a dual responsibility."

European American LBs and Asian American LBs (typical; general) reported feeling a *responsibility to follow the standards* set by older siblings and a need to "catch up" with their older siblings, a phenomenon alluded to in the earlier described comment from the European American LB who linked pride in his older brother to a felt need to live up to the brother's achievements. LBs across cultures acknowledged their older siblings' achievements as pushing them towards higher excellence despite feeling a sense of competitiveness. One European American LB shared, "Maybe being a later-born has pressured me a little more because if an older sibling is very intelligent, that puts more pressure on me to follow his footsteps and be successful;" while an Asian American LB admitted, "I probably resented my brother a little bit because I felt like he did better than me, so that made me want to be the better, excelling person ... he did things first, set the bar higher for me." For some Asian American LBs, the pressure to measure up stemmed in part from Asian parents' tendency to compare siblings. One LB followed up: "My father compares me with my brother a lot, academic-wise, expectation-wise, ... maybe it's stereotypical, but Asian parents are always comparing children with other children or their siblings."

**Sibling caregiving.**—European American and Asian American FBs (general; typical) reported *providing care* for their siblings by offering emotional or financial support. As one European FB noted, "If my brother is having a tough time, I would feel the need to talk to him and make him feel better." An Asian American FB also acknowledged her obligation to support her younger sister: "I kind of want to look after her and make sure she's OK. And if she needs anything financially, I always get it for her." European American and Asian American LBs only reported providing help in academics and romantic relationships of variant frequency. All were mid-borns offering support for their younger siblings.

European American and Asian American LBs (variant; typical) reported *receiving care* from older siblings. A European American LB recounted receiving "help with application process for school and job," while an Asian American LB reported, "He has helped me out in explaining things, applying to colleges, academic things ... There is always that feeling that your older sibling has to take care of you." In contrast, only one European American FB and one Asian American FB spontaneously described being the recipient of care from their younger siblings.

**Family responsibility.**—European American and Asian American FBs (typical; general) were *perceived* both by themselves and by their younger siblings (variant; typical) *to assume major family responsibilities*, responsibilities that stem from greater accountability to parents. FBs were viewed as older, more experienced, having more resources, and receiving more parental expectations than their younger siblings.

- I think I'm given a lot of responsibilities if it came to me and my brother ... if my parents were deciding who they can rely on for things, they usually will rely on me. I just have more resources, just being older. I have more experiences than him. (*European American FB*)
- My mom always makes me do stuff like cut onions or look at her cook because she thinks that I need to learn and watch those things, but with my sister and my brother, not really. That doesn't really happen. (*Asian American FB*)
- As an older sibling, you are expected [to have] more responsibility in the family. And as a younger sibling, I can just follow my sister's footsteps." (European American LB)
- "I guess since there is an ideal for first-borns, especially first-born sons for Asian culture... my brother has a bigger burden and responsibility." (Asian American LB)

Asian American FBs additionally reported feeling sandwiched between *supporting their younger siblings and assisting their immigrant parents* with family duties of variant frequency. Noted one Asian American male FB, "My parents aren't as aware of customs or laws or the English-language in general. I have to step in a lot when it comes to dealing with daily business stuff or just anything: school, helping my brother out with it." Another Asian American female FB shared, "[My parents] don't really know what kind of pressure first-born children are under. I work and provide my younger brother his allowance and pay part of my rent, but my brother doesn't have those responsibilities."

European American and Asian American LBs (typical; general) reported *feeling little family responsibility*. "I think I probably have the least responsibility out of everyone," stated one European American LB, "I feel like most people [in the family] are looking out for me, and I don't have as much to give back because I don't have the same experiences." An Asian American LB similarly shared, "I realize how much responsibility my brothers are covering for me." This lack of feeling family responsibility was only experienced by European American FBs of variant frequency and was absent among Asian American FBs.

**Reliance.**—European American and Asian American FBs (typical; general) reported that they did *not rely on their siblings for advice*. Some European American FBs attributed the lack of reliance to age difference: "I just don't rely on him that much because he is younger than me." Likewise, an Asian American FB acknowledged that "her [siblings] are still a bit behind, so they might not understand." Other FBs withheld their personal distress from younger siblings because they feared the emotional burden they might bring onto their loved ones. "For emotional distress," shared one European American FB, "I would have to say I don't wanna get her worried or concerned with my problems", while an Asian American FB

noted that, “School and problems with emotional distress ... sometimes it’s overwhelming when you have only one sister and you tell her everything ... I don’t want to give her too much stuff to listen to.” European American FBs described relying on their younger siblings only of variant frequency; this mention of reliance was absent among Asian American FBs.

Both European American and Asian American LBs (typical) reported that they could *rely on their older siblings for advice*, sharing comments such as “I feel like I can pretty much go to him for anything” (*European American LB*) and “[For] anything, like if I needed help with family conflicts, I would rely on him. He’s always there for me” (*Asian American LB*). However, of variant frequency, some European American and Asian American LBs reported a lack of sibling reliance and wished for their older siblings to be more reliable and emotionally close.

## Discussion

This qualitative interview study compares sibling and birth order experiences of Confucian-heritage Asian American and non-Hispanic European American emerging adults to explore the role of cultural values in sibling relations. Narratives from both groups reported similarly positive sibling experiences across birth orders (support, companionship, appreciation; comfort from shared burden of negative parental interactions; pride), framing even potentially negative aspects of siblinghood such as sibling competition with an affirmative outlook of mutual growth and self-improvement. This offers support for the generalizability of positive emerging adulthood sibling relationships beyond Western samples (Myers & Bryant, 2008).

Birth order findings from this study also largely support the social learning theory of sibling dynamics. Consistent with past research, FBs across cultures differed from LBs in reporting role-modeling tendencies more frequently (findings differed by at least two frequency categories; Hill, 2012), and LBs across cultures were unique in reporting following older siblings’ standards. European American FBs more frequently reported sibling care provision than LBs, and Asian American LBs described receiving care and relying on siblings’ support and guidance more frequently than FBs. Lastly, FBs across cultural groups were perceived to assume major family responsibility by themselves as well as their LB counterparts.

While same-gender sibling composition and a wider age gap may make role-modeling more likely (McHale et al. 2013), gender composition among siblings did not emerge as related to experiences of modeling, caregiving, family responsibility, or reliance. This is similar to the findings of Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter’s (2007) study. Our sibling accounts also did not differ by age gap, although future studies with larger samples are needed to assess the impacts of gender-pairing and age-gap.

### The Unique Experience of Asian American First-Borns

Consistent with prior research on Confucian heritage cultures, Asian American FBs in the present study uniquely reported experiencing a cultural obligation to both assist with their immigrant parents and care for younger siblings. Though it is possible that Asian American parents rely on the help of FBs more heavily than European American parents because there

may be more siblings in the Asian American family unit, our samples actually show a larger number of siblings for European American participants. Another explanation could be that Asian American families were of lower socioeconomic status (SES), such that the parents required the older siblings' help more than in families of higher SES. While we did not collect the SES information of our participants, university-wide student data from the time of the study showed similar parent education and family income distributions across European and Asian Americans. Further, prior research on family dynamics supports a higher sense of family obligation among Asian Americans compared to European Americans even after accounting for variations in SES and family composition (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). While future research should directly assess the impact of SES, our findings of a higher sense of family responsibility among Asian American FBs point to underlying cultural factors aside from family size and SES.

The present study also contributes to the literature on older children serving as brokers and caretakers for immigrant parents. Although there is similarity in the high sense of responsibility across older immigrant children of various cultural backgrounds (Kiang & Fuligni, 2009), the cultural motives underlying felt responsibility may vary. Familism in Confucian Asian American cultures emphasizes face-based *filial piety* (Leung & Cohen, 2011; Kiang & Fuligni, 2009), which entails hierarchical subjugation of the self for one's family, and the oldest child is morally obligated to fulfill more duties than later-borns (Uba, 1994; Yeh & Bedford, 2004). While one study on Latino immigrant youth documented spontaneous positive reactions towards cultural brokering and family assistance as a shared family activity that is reciprocated by family members (Dorner, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2008), such positive sentiments were absent among Asian American FBs in our study, suggesting the possibility of greater culturally-specific stress.

The gendered responsibility of family and sibling caretaking may also differ across immigrant families. Research on Confucian cultures suggests greater obligation for the oldest son in traditional Asian families (Su, McMahan, Williams, Sharma, & Sudore, 2014). Interestingly, in our study, both male and female Asian American FBs endorsed carrying out filial duties, and female FBs did so even when there were younger male siblings in the family. This parallels some studies noting higher levels of family obligation, regardless of gender, in Asian American FBs (Juang & Cookston, 2009). One reason for the absence of gendered responsibility may be due to a re-shaping of traditional gender roles towards more egalitarian ones in recent Asian American immigrant families of Confucian heritage (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Future work should continue examining gender roles—or the disappearance of such—in siblings' brokering responsibilities.

Regardless of gender, greater familial obligations may have adverse impacts on the older Asian American siblings. Language brokering responsibilities have been associated with greater levels of depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms for Korean and Chinese American youth, but not for Latino American youth (Dorner, et al., 2008). Asian American college students are also more likely to experience family conflicts compared with both Hispanic and non-Hispanic European American college students (Lee & Liu, 2001). Confucian-heritage Asian American FBs in our study described dual pressures of assisting immigrant parents and serving as caregiving role models for younger siblings. These

findings suggest that practitioners be alert to particular stresses experienced by Asian American FBs emerging adults.

Pyke's (2005) sibling research with Korean and Vietnamese emerging adults identified important tensions that can occur between LBs, who acculturate more easily into the mainstream American culture, and their older siblings who more closely resemble parents' stance on traditional Asian values. Instead, our FB participants uniquely expressed an appreciation for having LBs to relate to when struggling with their parents' more traditional perspectives. This finding converges with research identifying a wider acculturation gap between children and parents rather than among children themselves (Chung, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Qin, 2006).

## Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

A strength of this study is its examination of sibling relationships and birth order dynamics using an ethnic-comparative design that overcomes the limitation of ethnic-homogenous studies focusing only on within-group variability (McHale et al., 2012). Second, the study emphasizes the period of emerging adulthood, extending beyond research on childhood and adolescence. In particular, our findings indicate that Asian American FBs of Confucian heritage may experience culturally specific stressors during emerging adulthood. Lastly, the semi-structured interview approach allowed for both structure and flexibility in capturing participants' responses (Barriball & White 1994).

We also acknowledge limitations of the study. All interviews were conducted by an East Asian American female and only the Asian American participants were racially-matched with the interviewer. However, a European American external auditor who independently reviewed the data and found no detectable difference in the quality or quantity of interviewees' responses for the two cultural groups. Current narratives are limited to college students and may not generalize to emerging adults from more diverse socioeconomic contexts (Arnett, 2003). These narratives apply to Confucian-heritage Asian Americans, and future research is needed to determine their generalizability to other Asian groups, particularly those from South and Southeast Asian American cultures not heavily influenced by Confucianism. In addition, the birth order differences identified by Asian American participants may not transfer to later generations that adhere less to traditional family caregiver roles (Pyke, 2005).

The mid-born narratives suggested a unique pressure of following the footsteps of their older siblings and setting an example for the younger siblings (cf. Saroglou & Fiasse, 2003). However, given mid-borns were better represented in our sample of European Americans than of Asian Americans, this finding may not generalize to Asian American mid-borns as a whole. Future studies with larger samples should examine mid- and last-born siblings separately to see if mid-borns across cultures are likely to assume the roles of both FBs and LBs.

Lastly, individuals with negative sibling relationships may have been less likely to volunteer for the present study and self-reported experiences are always subject to social desirability.

The high educational expectations and use of social comparison characteristic of Confucian parenting practices (Cheah, Leung, & Zhou, 2013) might be expected to induce negative sibling competition, although Asian American siblings in our study shared largely positive narratives. Future investigations should examine whether such positivity reflects a resiliency stemming from a collectivist upbringing or a cultural need to save face and maintain harmony, masking potential sibling conflicts in self-report.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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**Table 1**  
**Frequency of Sibling Relationship and Birth Order Themes and Categories**

Themes and Categories	Frequency			
	European American		Asian American	
	First-Born ( <i>n</i> = 14)	Later-born ( <i>n</i> = 15)	First-born ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Later-born ( <i>n</i> = 10)
Sibling Relationship Themes				
Support, Companionship, and Appreciation				
- Support	Typical (7)	Typical (12)	Typical (6)	Typical (7)
- Companionship	General (13)	Typical (13)	General (8)	General (10)
- Appreciation	General (13)	Typical (10)	Typical (7)	General (10)
Comfort from Shared Burden of Negative Parental Interactions				
- Alleviating pressure of family conflicts	Typical (7)	Variant (6)	Variant (4)	Typical (7)
- Shared burden in relation to acculturative mismatch	-	-	Variant (3)	-
Pride in one another	Single (1)	Variant (2)	Variant (2)	Variant (2)
Birth Order Themes				
Role Modeling				
- Motivation to role-model	General (13)	Variant (4 mid-born, 0 last-born)	General (9)	Single (1 mid-born, 0 last-born)
- Responsibility to follow standards	-	Typical (13)	-	General (10)
Sibling Caregiving				
- Providing care	General (13)	Variant (5 mid-born, 0 last-born)	Typical (5)	Variant (2 mid-born, 0 last-born)
- Receiving care	Single (1)	Variant (6)	Single (1)	Typical (7)
Family Responsibility				
- Perception of first-borns assuming major responsibility	Typical (10)	Variant (3)	General (9)	Typical (6)
- Feeling sandwiched between supporting siblings and assisting parents	-	-	Variant (2)	-
- Feeling little family responsibility	Variant (4)	Typical (12)	-	General (9)
Reliance				
- Not relying on siblings for advice	Typical (10)	Variant (6)	General (9)	Variant (2)
- Relying on siblings for advice	Variant (4)	Typical (9)	-	Typical (8)

*Note.* General = all (or all but one) cases within each subgroup (*n* = 8–15). Typical = at least half of the cases within each subgroup (*n* = at least 5–7). Variant = at least two cases to the cutoff of *typical* within each subgroup (*n* = at least 2–4). Single = single case within a subgroup (*n* = 1). Subgroups are considered meaningfully different when findings differ by at least two frequency categories. Thematic categories are not mutually exclusive; a participant may mention both or neither of the categories under a theme.