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Cross-cultural differences in giving critical feedback: A comparison between the United States and China

By

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Abstract

Giving feedback is a crucial part of communication in many settings. However, it is often hard to give direct and honest feedback to others. Some previous studies have shown that, in the context of the US, people are reluctant to give critical feedback because they perceive it as having negative consequences. However, it is not clear how feedback-giving behaviors and the decision processes behind these behaviors are different across cultures with different social norms and values. While research on communication styles in US and China has suggested that differences might exist between these two countries in feedback-giving, there are conflicting theories about the scene in China. There is also a lack of empirical evidence to support the trends in China. The present study examines behaviors and perceptions of the consequences of giving critical feedback across the US ($N = 200$) and China ($N = 184$) through an online Qualtrics survey. The results suggest that Chinese are more willing to give critical feedback, as their emphasis on the value of feedback is greater and they perceive less harm in doing so than Americans. Unlike the traditional understandings of collectivistic Chinese, the levels of perceived relational harm in China were not different from those in the US. Some reasons why these differences exist are explored. Findings from this study provide evidence for the theory of responsibilism in understanding collectivism in China. Future research could further investigate the underlying mechanisms that influenced differences in perceived consequences and willingness to give feedback.

Cross-cultural differences in giving critical feedback: A comparison between the United States and China

People often find it difficult to break negative information to others, even when they are well-intended. Studies examining the reasons behind this phenomenon have shown that the difficulty of delivering direct, negative information lies in the perceived consequences of this type of speech (e.g., Abi-Esber, 2022; Dibble & Levine, 2013). However, as one type of constructive feedback, critical feedback is an important aspect of effective communication across various settings including the workplace, educational environments, and personal relationships (e.g., Abi-Esber, 2022; Fong et al., 2016; Tian & Lowe, 2013). Therefore, it is more important to explore more on how the perceived consequences of giving critical feedback to others influence communicators' willingness to give such feedback. There is also a particular gap in understanding of the differences in feedback communication across different cultures, such as individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures. Cultural and social values could make feedback-giving processes fundamentally different between cultures. Given that feedback communication is directly relevant to applied settings, such as work environments and personal relationships, it is important to build a basis for understanding feedback conversations between people of different cultures.

Currently, findings on the relationship between perceived consequences and willingness to provide critical feedback suggest that most perceived consequences are generally more negative, which leads to a lower willingness to provide criticism (Abi-Esber, 2022). In terms of cultural differences, some evidence suggests low willingness among individualistic Americans is driven by avoidance of unnecessary harm (Levine, 2021). For Chinese collectivists, there are multiple theories that predict different outcomes in willingness (e.g., Triandis, 1993; Talhelm,

2019). While some research on communication styles implies a low willingness to give feedback in order to avoid conflicts in groups, some evidence suggests otherwise (Talhelm, 2019). A more recent theory of responsibilism that provides a novel perspective examining the Chinese collectivism has suggested that Chinese tend to, in fact, be more willing to give others honest and direct feedback, for the ultimate good of the ones they care about (Brew & Cairns, 2004; Chen, 2002; Talhelm, 2019).

The present study aims to provide empirical evidence to gain a clearer understanding of feedback-giving psychology in China and how it differs in the US. This study also further delineates the relationships between culture, perceived consequences, and willingness to give feedback.

The psychology of constructive criticism

Critical feedback has been thought to improve performance and skills (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hornsey, 2006). However, research has previously found that communicators hesitate to give such feedback to others. Several reasons could explain this. First, feedback communicators believe that giving critical feedback causes emotional pain in the feedback receivers (Tesser & Rosen, 1975; Levine, 2021). Tesser and Rosen's (1975) ''recipient's emotionality hypothesis'' suggests that communicators assume harsh information has a negative influence on the receiver's emotions and thus communicators avoid putting receivers in a negative affective state. Evidence from Levine's work (2021) has confirmed this hypothesis as participants in empirical studies have agreed that honest but harsh news are perceived to lead to immediate emotional harm. Further, the instrumental value of the feedback has also been found to play a part in potential harm toward the receivers (Levine, 2021). Especially when communicators believe that their honest information might not be of

high value for or have a meaningful impact on the receiver, the potential emotional pain is perceived as unnecessary, leading to an even lower willingness to provide the honest information (see Figure 1; Levine, 2021). Results from four empirical tests have suggested that when honesty introduces emotional pain and little value for receivers, communicators favor deception over honest information (Levine, 2021). Further, communicators consistently underestimate the value of their feedback as well as the receivers' desire for their feedback, before they give it out (Abi-Esber et al., 2022). This further decreases the perceived necessity of emotional harm and discourages communicators from giving critical feedback.

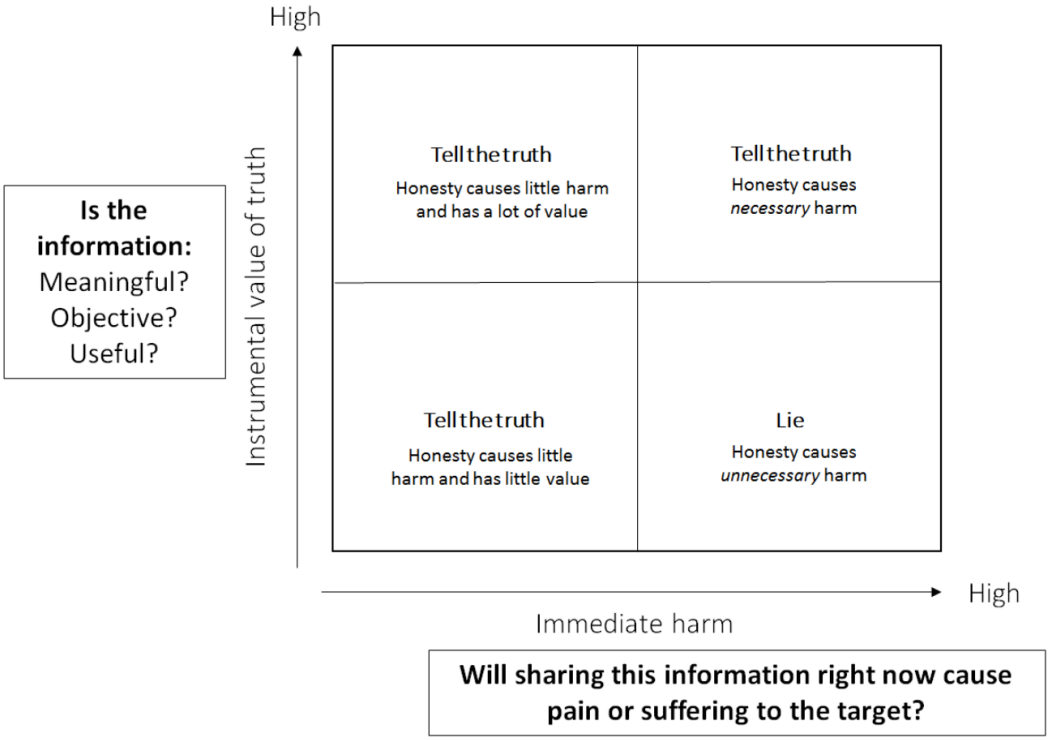

Figure 1. Unnecessary Harm Model (Levine, 2021)

Another set of reasons to explain hesitation in giving critical feedback is the communicators' concerns about how honesty will negatively harm themselves and their relationships with the receivers. Research has shown that fear of interpersonal relational harm motivates communicators to avoid direct and harsh feedback (Waung & Highhouse, 1997).

Recent research also suggests that communicators' expectation of relational harm predicts the receiver's desire for feedback (Abi-Esber et al., 2022). Finally, potential harm could also be done to the communicators themselves. Dibble and Levine (2013) provided evidence that communicators fear that giving critical feedback could have a negative influence on their reputation. Similarly, the work of Jeffries and Hornsey (2012) suggests that people avoid telling harsh feedback to avoid negative evaluations by others.

Cross-cultural differences in feedback-giving

Limited cross-cultural research has been done on differences in feedback-giving. Existing *empirical* work on cross-cultural differences in feedback communication is mostly based on data collected from Western countries such as the US and UK, which represent the individualistic type of culture. The collectivistic East Asian participants from these studies are mostly ethnic minorities that are local to these Western countries (e.g., Brew & Cairns, 2004; Tian & Lowe, 2013; Park & Sim, 2008). This poses a potential limitation in the generalizability of the findings to the individuals from East Asian cultures who are in their home countries. Collectivism and individualism in individuals are socially constructed and malleable, rather than fixed (Ji et al., 2004). Therefore, to ensure greater accuracy in our understanding of the influence of cultural factors on feedback communication, it is essential to collect data directly from participants who have been primarily socialized within the specific cultural context in question.

Existing knowledge on cultural differences in feedback-giving is based on empirical cross-cultural comparison studies mentioned above and theoretical comparisons and reviews (e.g., Brew & Cairns, 2004; Chen, 2002; Triandis, 1993). Based on an initial assessment of existing understanding, one might tend to expect people from collectivistic cultures to be even more sensitive to potential harm and *disharmony* than those from individualistic cultures, thereby

being even less willing to deliver feedback to others. In general, the typical understanding of collectivism and individualism is that collectivism values warmth and harmonious social relationships, whereas individualism emphasizes independence and freedom (Triandis, 1993; Yum, 1988). This line of understanding is also reflected in findings on communication styles between these two cultures. Findings about directness of speech in the US versus indirectness in China imply that Chinese are less likely to engage in honest and direct conversations (e.g., Brew & Cairns, 2004; Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003; Yum, 1988). Specifically, collectivists are more prone to use indirect communication in order to avoid confrontation and focus on finding solutions (Brew & Cairns, 2004). This is mainly motivated by the Chinese pursuit of group harmony, a core value for Chinese social relationships that consists of norms of saving face for social ties and maintaining reciprocal relationships (Chen, 2002). This mode of communication endures also because it is rational and logical from the receivers' end. The use of an indirect or evasive style of communication, when facing potentially honest and harsh conversations, is related to the general expectation within Chinese society that receivers should be sensitive to underlying messages of any indirect speech (Yum, 1988). In summary of the cultural differences, unnecessary emotional pain is the main driver for Americans to be unwilling to give critical feedback, but consideration of potential conflicts and relational harm are more significant for Chinese and more rooted in their culture, which may lead them to be even less willing to give feedback (Brew & Cairns, 2004; Chen, 2002; Levine, 2021).

However, despite the current understanding, this study predicts that communicators from collectivistic Chinese culture (versus individualistic American culture) will be more willing to deliver feedback to others for new lines of theoretical reasoning. First, Talhelm's research (2019) revealed that a significant part of the Chinese population (the rice population) tends to care much

more about people to whom they have duties and responsibilities - a new way of interpreting collectivism in China as “responsibilism”. They are more motivated and invested in helping them improve as compared to acquaintances and strangers (Talhelm, 2019; 2020). A study on Chinese teenagers has found that Chinese from the rice population are much more loyal to their closer friends than to others by maximizing their benefits and minimizing their loss (Dong et al., 2019). Therefore, the Chinese may be honest and harsh when they believe it is useful for those that they are responsible for. Also, the Chinese have greater tightness in social norms, meaning that norms are stronger and greater effort is made to avoid deviance from the norms, especially in rice populations (Talhelm & English, 2020). Evidence from Gelfand and colleagues’ (2011) multi-national comparison of the tightness of culture has provided evidence that Chinese (tightness score = 7.9) have tighter norms than Americans (tightness score = 5.1). These scores complement the theory of responsibilism to suggest that Chinese are more motivated than Americans to point out and correct their friends’ behaviors and performances that are below normally expected levels.

Current Study

Previous studies have outlined some perceived consequences of giving critical feedback and how they influence communicators’ willingness to give feedback, but there is no clear understanding of how they differ in different cultural environments. In the present study, we aim to build a complete model of perceived consequences and willingness that elucidates cultural differences. This study aims to address the unclear pattern of feedback-giving in China, provide more evidence for the theory of responsibilism, and discover any cross-cultural differences between US and China. To achieve this, the study collected data from Chinese and American populations. Through a recall mechanism, participants responded to a survey while they had in

mind a shortcoming of a friend that they might give feedback on. To better define the scope of the feedback being examined, this study focuses on competence-based feedback and participants were prompted to identify shortcomings in skills and competencies. Further, this study also makes an initial attempt to explore underlying reasons for any cross-cultural differences, particularly whether they stem from different social norms and beliefs. To achieve this, we measured participants' perceptions of certain characteristics of their friends' shortcomings and related social norms.

We predicted that Chinese communicators would be more willing to deliver critical feedback than American communicators, based on the reasoning of responsibilism and tightness of norms. We also hypothesized that perceived emotional harm would be more negatively associated with willingness in the US than in China whereas perceived instrumental value would be more positively associated with willingness in China than the US. Finally, we ran a parallel mediation analysis to understand which perceived consequences mediate the relationship between culture and willingness to give feedback. We expected emotional harm and instrumental value to be mediators.

Method

Participants

This preregistered study recruited 200 U.S. participants from Prolific Academic (42% female) and 184 Chinese participants from Aishiyan (75% female). All participants completed the study and fulfilled the criteria for inclusion (i.e., country of origin, primary country of residence, and age 18 years and above. An additional 30 participants from the U.S. and 12 participants from China participated but were dropped for not reaching the end of the study. 1 response from the Chinese sample is excluded because no sensible content is written in one of

the questions in the study. Participants from both countries were compensated $2 (for Chinese participants, the equivalent of $2 was provided in Chinese currency) for completing the entire survey. The study was conducted entirely online using Qualtrics. The University of Chicago IRB approved both studies for data collection in the U.S. and China.

Procedure & Materials

Recall mechanism. Participants were first prompted to think of a friend who they believed had shortcomings in a certain skill and they wrote down the shortcoming in the survey in a few full sentences. Participants were asked to write about a shortcoming that they have not talked to their friend about. An example of a shortcoming (i.e., "my friend does not study very hard, so he/she isn't performing well on their exams") was given to the participants. At this time, participants were also told that they would focus on this particular friend and shortcoming for the rest of the study.

Perceived consequences. Participants were then asked to imagine themselves actually sharing with their friends the information they just wrote. They then reported their perceptions of the consequences of giving feedback on their friend's shortcoming. Each type of consequence was measured with three items that started with "If I share this information with my friend, ……". They responded to four main types of consequences, including emotional harm (e.g., "it will make my friend upset"), relational harm (e.g., "it will damage my relationship with my friend"), reputational harm (e.g., "my friend will think I am too critical"), and instrumental value (e.g., "it will change my friend's behavior"). The consequence of demotivation was also measured, but with one item "it will discourage my friend and lead them to do worse". Participants rated their level of agreement with these items from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). The sequence of these items was randomized.

Willingness. After participants considered and reported perceived consequences, they rated their willingness to give critical feedback on their friend's shortcoming from 1 (*completely unwilling*) to 8 (*completely willing*). For this scale, responses of 1 to 4 could be interpreted as a decision to not provide critical feedback in a realistic situation, and responses of 5 to 8 could represent a decision to provide the feedback.

Exploratory measures. Participants then respond to a set of questions that measure potential mechanisms that lead to communicators' perception of consequences, including two questions on the level of control the receiver has over their shortcomings. Questions ask about the communicator's perception of the extent to which the shortcoming is inside or outside the receiver's control from 1 *(completely outside their control)* to 7 *(completely inside their control)* and the receiver's intentionality of having the shortcoming from 1 *(completely unintentional)* to 7 *(completely intentional)*.

Three questions were asked about the extent to which the receiver is aware of their shortcoming. Questions included the communicator's perception of the extent to which the receiver knows about their shortcoming from 1*(completely not know)* to 7 *(completely know)*, the extent to which the receiver accepts their shortcoming from 1 *(completely not accept)* to 7 *(completely accept)*, and the extent to which the receiver wants to change their shortcoming from 1 *(completely not want to)* to 7 *(completely want to)*.

Participants also reported the prescriptive norms on behaviors in the domain of receiver's shortcoming and descriptive norms on feedback communication in their respective cultures - whether it's a common thing to give and whether people normally receive it well. Participants responded to two questions for each type of norms using a 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) scale.

Closeness. Finally, participants rated the closeness of the relationship between themselves and their friends relevant to their responses from 1 (*not close at all*) to 6 (*very close*).

At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed following the demographics section.

The same survey was released in the U.S. and mainland China and participants were recruited from respective surveying platforms from each country. An English and a Chinese version were used for the respective countries. This is out of consideration for the possibility that the English language could prime individualist thoughts among people who do not have English as their first language(s) and with non-individualistic backgrounds (Ji et al., 2004). Given the cross-cultural focus of the present study, delivering the surveys in the participants' home language would be most culturally proper.

Results

Cultural differences in willingness of giving critical feedback

To test the hypotheses, we compared the willingness to give critical feedback to a friend regarding their shortcoming between the US and China using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

Willingness to give critical feedback regarding a friend's shortcoming was marginally higher ($F(1, 182) = 3.679$, $p = .056$, see Figure 2) in China ($M = 4.650$, $SD = 1.698$) than in the US ($M = 4.280$, $SD = 2.112$). This provides some evidence to support our hypothesis that the Chinese are more willing to give critical feedback than Americans.

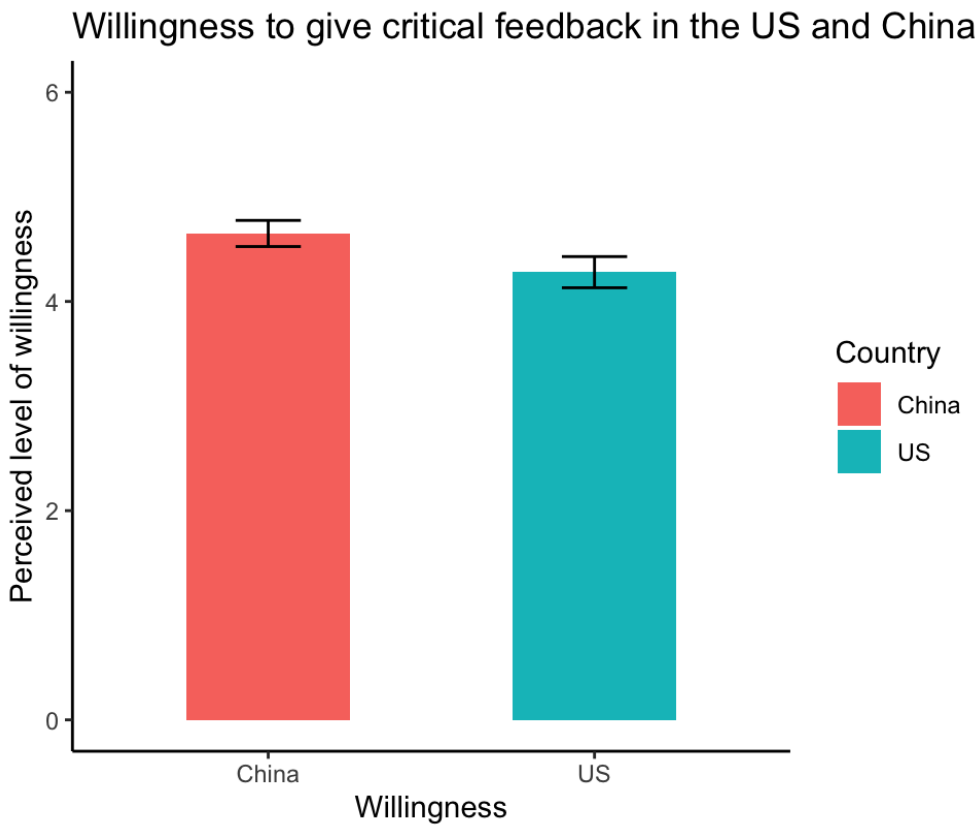

Figure 2. Willingness to Give Critical Feedback Among US and Chinese Participants

Mediators of the relationship between culture and willingness

To test the hypotheses, we compared the five types of perceived consequences of giving critical feedback to a friend regarding their shortcoming between the US and China using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). These perceived consequences are potential mediators of the relationship between culture and willingness to give feedback.

For emotional harm, as seen in Figure 1., a significant difference was found in emotional harm ($F(1, 382) = 4.816$, $p = .029$) between the US ($M = 4.690$, $SD = 1.508$) and China ($M = 4.350$, $SD = 1.529$). A significant difference was also found in instrumental value ($F(1, 182) = 29.931$, $p < .001$) between the US ($M = 3.778$, $SD = 1.226$) and China ($M = 4.435$, $SD = 1.116$). This suggests that a higher level of emotional harm done by critical feedback is perceived among

Americans than among the Chinese. However, the Chinese also perceived critical feedback to have greater instrumental value than Americans.

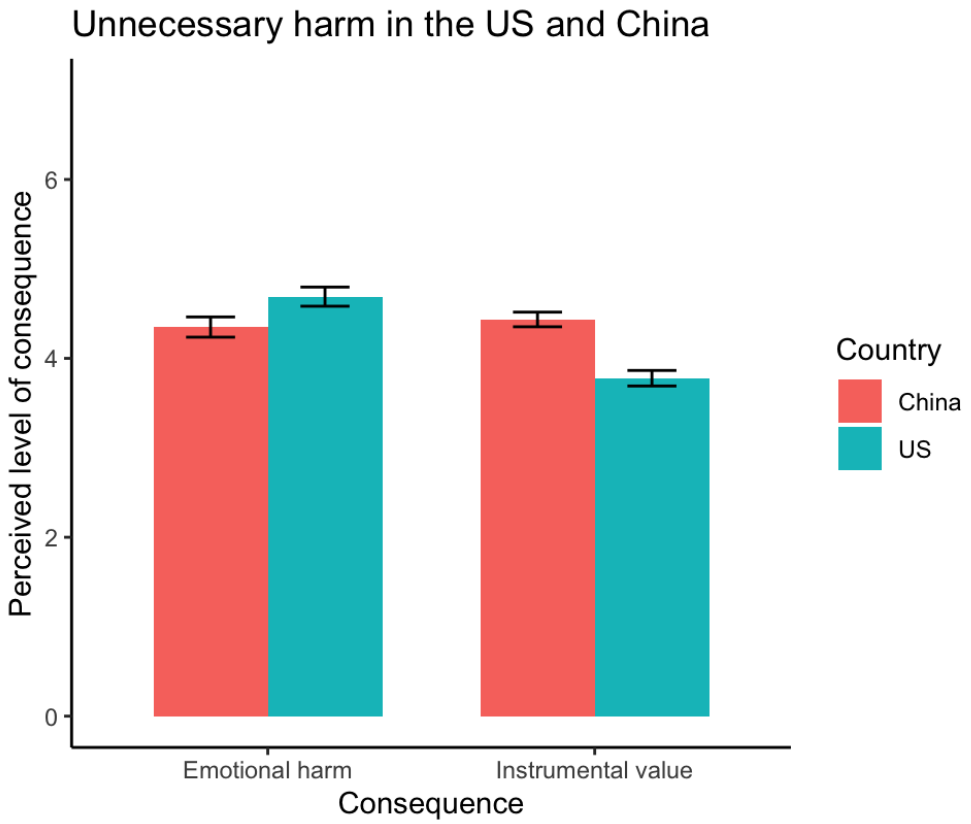

Figure 3. Emotional Harm and Instrumental Value Among US and Chinese Participants

For the perceived reputational harm on the communicators themselves by giving critical feedback to a friend, the perceived harm was significantly higher among participants from the US ($M = 4.448$, $SD = .818$) than participants from China ($M = 4.179$, $SD = .847$; $F(1, 381) = 10.046$, $p = 0.002$, see Figure 3). For the perceived level of relational harm between the communicator and the receiver done by critical feedback, there were no significant differences found between the American ($M = 3.933$, $SD = 1.818$) and Chinese participants ($M = 3.915$, $SD = 1.752$; $F(1,382) = .010$, $P = .919$). This suggests that Americans are more likely to be concerned about harm to their personal reputation when communicating feedback compared to

the Chinese, but the two countries do not differ in their opinions on how much relational harm would be done.

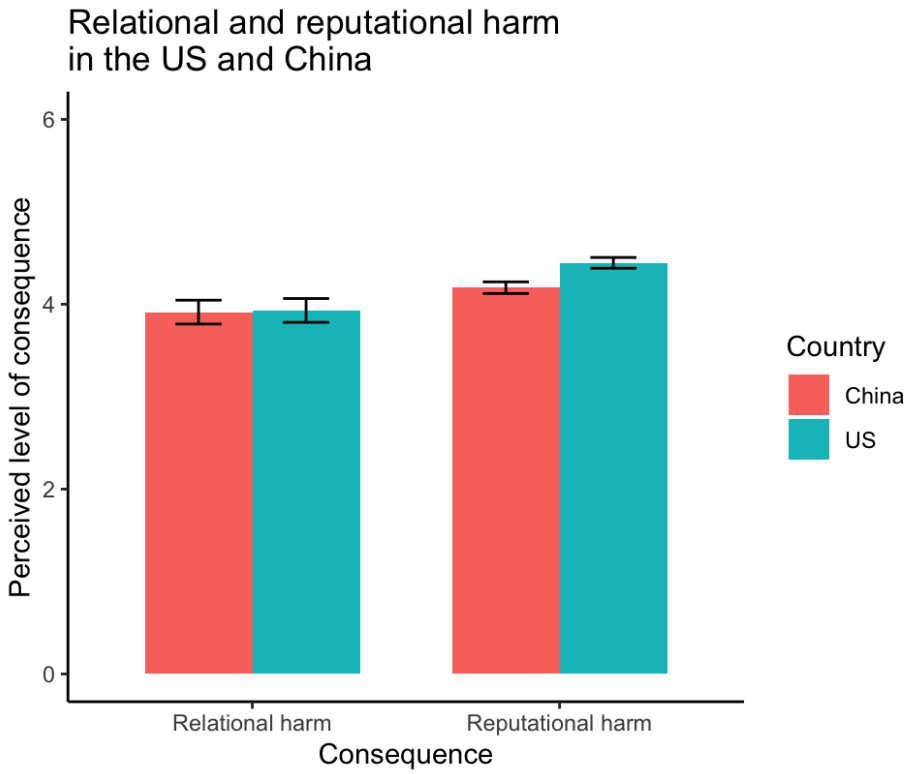

Figure 4. Reputational Harm and Relational Harm Among US and Chinese Participants

For demotivation, no significant differences were found between the US (M = 3.21, SD = 1.548) and China (M = 3.21, SD = 1.548; $F(1, 382) = .003$, $p = .959$). This suggests that participants from the two cultures all slightly disagree that critical feedback would discourage their friends and would lead them to do worse. It is worth noting that although the demotivation effect is perceived similarly in the two cultures, the Chinese do think that critical feedback can make a meaningful change in their friends' shortcomings more than Americans do.

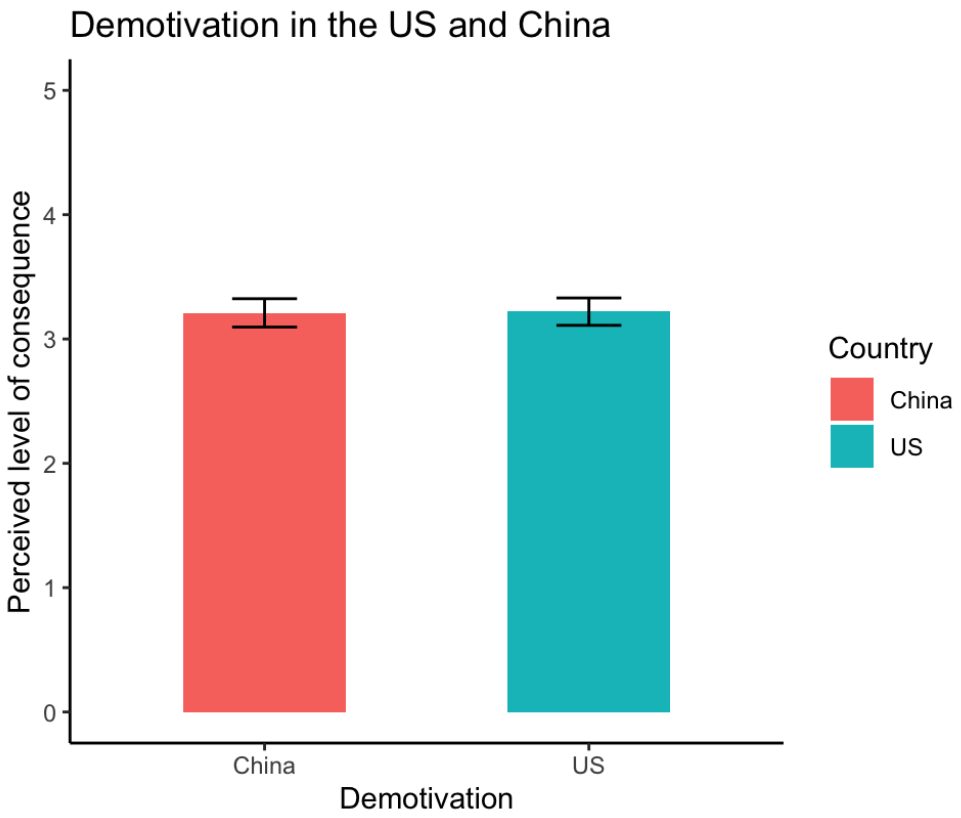

Figure 5. Demotivation Among US and Chinese Participants

To test the mediating effects of different types of perceived consequences on the relationship between cultural differences and willingness to give critical feedback, we used PROCESS MACRO to run mediation models on the respective perceived consequences. Across all models, the dependent variable is the willingness to give critical feedback and the independent variable is culture, where US = 1 and China = 0. The results showed that there was an insignificant total effect between culture and willingness (B = -0.0341, SE = 0.153, p = 0.824).

The first mediator tested was emotional harm. Path a (i.e., culture on emotional harm) (B = 0.344, SE = 0.155, p = 0.0276) was significant and path b (i.e., emotional harm on willingness) (B = -0.0275, SE = 0.083, p = 0.741) were not significant. Finally, the indirect effect of culture on willingness is found to be -0.0095, 95% CI: [-0.0715, 0.0551]. The 95% CI included zero.

The second mediator is instrumental value. Path a (i.e., culture on instrumental value) (B = -0.657, SE = 0.120, $p < .001$) and path b (i.e., instrumental value on willingness) (B = 0.473, SE = 0.067, $p < .001$) were both significant. Finally, the indirect effect of culture on willingness is found to be -0.3105, 95% CI: [-0.4613, -0.1797]. The 95% CI excluded zero. Hence, instrumental value mediates the relationship between culture and willingness.

The third mediator is reputational harm. Path a (i.e., culture on reputational harm) (B = 0.270, SE = 0.085, $p = 0.0016$) was significant and path b (i.e., reputational harm on willingness) (B = -0.0471, SE = 0.110, $p = .670$) was not significant. Finally, the indirect effect of culture on willingness is found to be -0.0127, 95% CI: [-0.0833, 0.0458]. The 95% CI included zero.

The last mediator is relational harm. Path a (i.e., culture on relational harm) (B = 0.026, SE = 0.18, $p = 0.886$) was not significant and path b (i.e., relational harm on willingness) (B = -0.5310, SE = 0.070, $p < .001$) was found significant. Finally, the indirect effect of culture on willingness is found to be -0.0139, 95% CI: [-0.1978, 0.1804]. The 95% CI included zero.

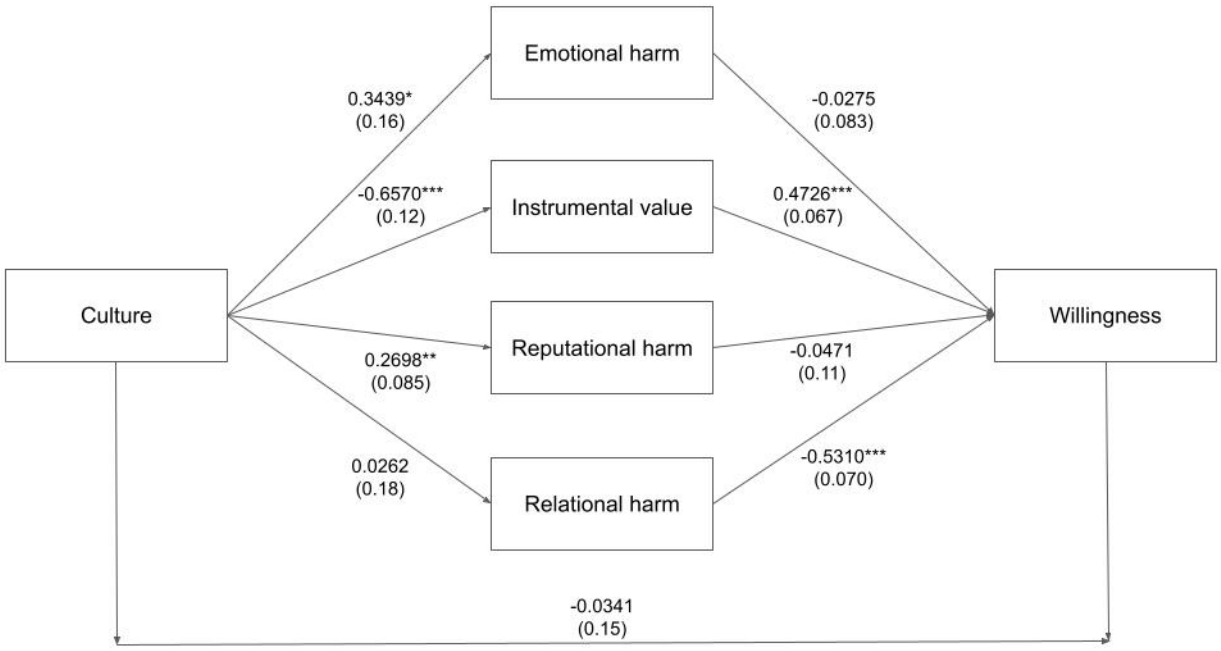

Figure 6. Emotional harm, instrumental value, reputational harm, and relational harm as mediators of the relationship between culture and willingness

Potential mechanisms

With the differences found between US and China in terms of perceived consequences, we conducted exploratory measures on some beliefs and norms that might have been the mechanisms underlying the cultural differences in perceived consequences (results see Table 1).

For the first part of potential mechanisms, communicators' perceived levels of control and intention by receivers together measure the *level of internal or external control* that communicators believe their friends have regarding their shortcomings. There was a significant difference found in the perceived level of receiver's control ($F(1, 382) = 50.928$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the American participants perceive shortcomings as more within the control of receivers than Chinese participants. However, the perceived level of intention of having the shortcoming ($F(1, 382) = .533$, $p = .458$) is not significantly different between the US and China,

suggesting that the participants from both cultures tend to think the shortcomings they are addressing in the study are somewhat unintentional.

The communicators' perceived level of how much receivers know about, accept, and are likely to make a change on their shortcomings together measures the *level of awareness* that communicators believe their friends have regarding their shortcomings. Levels of knowing ($F(1, 382) = .212$, $p = .645$) and the likelihoods of change ($F(1, 382) = .112$, $p = .738$) were not significantly different between the US and China. Receiver's levels of acceptance of their shortcoming ($F(1, 382) = 6.691$, $p = .010$) were perceived differently between the US ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.468$) and China ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.245$). This suggests that Chinese participants perceive shortcomings as more accepted by receivers than American participants.

For descriptive norms on feedback communication, there was a significant difference between the US ($M = 3.303$, $SD = 1.287$) and China ($M = 3.832$, $SD = 1.373$) in the tightness of norms ($F(1, 382) = 15.196$, $p < .001$). This suggests that there are tighter descriptive norms in China and that it is more common for Chinese to give and accept feedback on people's shortcomings than Americans in general.

For prescriptive social norms on the competencies that participants reported about their friends, there were no significant differences between the US and China ($F(1, 381) = .589$, $p = .443$). This suggests that there are similarly clear expectations in the US and China of how people should behave in domains where their friends have shortcomings.

	Culture	*N*	*Mean*	*Standard Deviation*	*F Value*	*Significance*
Control	China	184	4.02	1.601	50.928	< .001***
	US	200	5.13	1.457		
Intention	China	184	3.26	1.451	0.553	0.458
	US	200	3.38	1.548		
Know	China	184	5.03	1.517	0.212	0.645
	US	200	5.1	1.576		
Accept	China	184	5.14	1.245	6.691	.010***
	US	200	4.78	1.468		
Change	China	184	3.74	1.618	0.112	0.738
	US	200	3.8	1.629		
Prescriptive Norms	China	184	5.052	1.0812	0.589	0.443
	US	200	5.143	1.2159		
Descriptive Norms	China	184	3.832	1.3726	15.196	< .001***
	US	200	3.303	1.2867		

Table 1. Main Effects of Exploratory Measures

From the correlation table (Table 2.), all types of perceived harm are negatively correlated with willingness, while instrumental value is positively correlated with willingness. This suggests the more harm and the less value being perceived, the less willing communicators are to deliver critical feedback to their friends. For the exploratory measures, communicators' perceptions of whether their friends have control over or accept their shortcomings are not significantly correlated with willingness. However, their perceptions of whether their friends know about their shortcomings are positively correlated with willingness, meaning that the more they think their friends already know about their incompetencies, the more willing they are to directly communicate with them about it. Communicators' perceptions of whether their friends are likely to change their behaviors are negatively correlated with willingness, meaning that the more they think their friends want to change, the less willing they are to communicate with them about their shortcomings.

Variable	Emotional Harm	Instrumental Value	Demotivation	Relational Harm	Reputational Harm	Willingness	Control	Intention	Know	Accept	Change	Prescriptive norms	Descriptive norms
Emotional Harm	—												
Instrumental Value	-.367**	—											
Demotivation	.564**	-.327**	—										
Relational Harm	.799**	-.377**	.588**	—									
Reputational Harm	.608**	-.285**	.395**	.568**	—								
Willingness	-.536**	.499**	-.341**	-.632**	-.398**	—							
Control	.115*	-0.065	0.007	.110*	0.085	-0.074	—						
Intention	0.064	-0.014	0.067	0.088	.104*	0.063	.305**	—					
Know	-.285**	0.006	-0.081	-.320**	-.138**	.226**	-0.036	.130*	—				
Accept	-.256**	0.02	-.153**	-.214**	-0.092	0.098	-0.055	0.059	.281**	—			
Change	.320**	-.422**	.174**	.374**	.218**	-.390**	.128*	.182**	-.276**	-0.006	—		
Prescriptive norms	.126*	0.039	-0.015	.129*	.107*	.101*	.133**	.211**	-0.08	-0.008	-0.017	—	
Descriptive norms	-.341**	.393**	-.191**	-.281**	-.199**	.442**	-.168**	.113*	0.087	0.067	-.286**	0.057	—

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Correlation Table with Consequences, Willingness, and Exploratory Measures

Discussion

Giving critical feedback is a crucial part of communication in many contexts, but people are not always willing to do so. In this study, we looked at the relationship between culture, the perceived consequences of giving critical feedback, and willingness to give such feedback, by collecting survey responses from participants who were born and raised in both the United States and China. The results show that, same as our hypothesis, in general, Chinese are more willing to deliver critical feedback to their friends regarding certain shortcomings of their friends than Americans. As we hypothesized, Chinese perceive critical feedback as having greater instrumental value for the feedback recipients more than Americans do. In contrast, Americans perceive critical feedback as generating more emotional harm for the recipients and more reputational harm for the communicators than the Chinese do.

One of the goals of this study was to understand whether there is a meaningful difference in how willing Americans and Chinese are to give their friends critical feedback on shortcomings in certain competencies. Similar to what was predicted, the Chinese were marginally more willing to give critical feedback than Americans. While the pattern of willingness has been predicted in different directions, the findings from this study corroborate with the responsibilism theory (Talhelm, 2019). One explanation for this pattern is that people from the American and Chinese cultures tend to think differently about the unnecessary harm that constructive criticism causes. The unnecessary harm model suggests that when there is high emotional harm and low instrumental value within a piece of information, people perceive delivering this information to be causing unnecessary harm (Levine, 2021). This model was developed based on research findings from the US, and the results of this study on emotional harm and instrumental value also show that American participants tend to view constructive criticism as having more unnecessary

harm. On the other hand, it seems like the Chinese population tends to have a different perception of the consequences of critical feedback. They think that giving critical feedback leads to high instrumental value and less emotional harm, resulting in low levels of perceived unnecessary harm for the feedback recipient. The results from descriptive norms also provide some support for the pattern of Chinese being more willing to communicate critical feedback than Americans. There are stronger descriptive norms to both give and accept feedback from others on one's shortcomings in China than in the US. Thus, within their respective cultures, Chinese should be more willing to give feedback.

Results from this study also suggest that previous predictions based on the Chinese collectivistic culture's communication style might not accurately explain the perceptions and willingness to be critical in the context of feedback-giving. The traditional understanding of Chinese collectivistic culture suggests that Chinese value group harmony and warmth in social relationships and thus they are less likely to be threatened by the influence on individual reputation, but much more inclined to avoid relational damage (Brew & Cairns, 2004; Chen, 2002; Dibble & Levine, 2013; Triandis, 1993). The results of this study support this point of view partly, as there are, indeed, differences in levels of perceived reputational consequences between China and the US, where the Chinese perceive significantly lower reputational harm. However, the basis of the traditional understanding of Chinese collectivism, maintaining good relationships, does not seem to play an essential role in influencing whether to give critical feedback. Chinese and Americans do not differ in perceived relational harm. In addition, relational harm was also not a mediator of the relationship between culture and willingness, meaning that it is not a significant factor explaining Americans' or Chinese's willingness to give critical feedback. Previous predictions regarding willingness to give critical feedback in China

could only be made by drawing from the established theory on conflict avoidance and the value of harmony. However, results from this study address the gaps in the previous theory. The results provide a closer understanding of other perceived consequences that Chinese also considered during this process, especially instrumental value. This study also provides empirical evidence for the theory of responsibilism in explaining how collectivistic Chinese actually reason about giving critical feedback (Talhelm, 2019).

The willingness of giving feedback is only found to be marginally different between the US and China. However, based on the results of perceived consequences, the presence of unnecessary harm and reputation thinking in the US and the absence of difference in relational harm between China and the US all suggest that willingness in the US should be lower than that in China. The significance of willingness being only marginal may be because of the smaller sample size in China than in the US.

Another limitation may be that the questions on social norms were asked after the recall paradigm and responses to key variables. Participants have gone over the process of giving that feedback so they might already be in the mindset where both giving and receiving feedback is a common thing to do. This may have encouraged them to rate descriptive norms as tighter.

It is also interesting to note that demotivation did not completely show the opposite results from instrumental value. There are some potential reasons for this observation. It is possible that participants truly do not think there are negative instrumental effects. That is, they believe giving critical feedback may have either no effect or positive effects in helping their friends make a meaningful change regarding their shortcomings. It may also be an issue in measurements. Using reverse-worded Likert scale items effectively decreases acquiescence and

increases attention from the respondents. However, it also tends to create internal inconsistencies (Barnette, 2000).

In conclusion, the current study established patterns and differences in feedback-giving between US and China samples. A potential next step in this line of research is to focus on feedback-receiving, and later, both giving and receiving, for a few reasons. First, this will test whether there is any gap in these perceptions between the feedback giver and receiver. Some work has shown that, in an American context, there is an overestimation of harm and an underestimation of value from the feedback communicator (Abi-Esber, 2022). It would be useful to replicate this and to compare it with the patterns in China. To better understand the dynamic process of feedback communication, a future study could be in the form of a lab experiment, where two people conduct real-time conversations where one gives and the other receives feedback, accompanied by a survey measuring perceptions of consequences. Furthermore, future research could investigate the underlying mechanisms that influenced differences in perceived consequences and willingness to give critical feedback. A potential direction is the cultural differences in the mindsets of facing shortcomings. Heine et al. (2001) suggests that East Asians have a stronger self-improving orientation than Americans, which could influence the perception of consequences. Besides psychological factors, the broader social factors, such as norms in education, could also be further explored.

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