

How Asian American 'tiger mothers' motivate their children

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An article titled "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior," published in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2011, has continued to provoke a cultural debate among parents after self-proclaimed 'tiger mother' Amy Chua asserted that Asian American parenting methods produce more successful children. Researchers at Stanford University delved deeper into Chua's 'tiger mother' approach, and their research sheds light on key fundamental differences in parenting methods between Asian Americans and European Americans.

To reveal the cultural differences in parenting, the researchers compare how Asian American and European American high school students describe their relationship with their mothers, and how [pressure](#) by their mothers influences their relationship. They also examine whether mothers help to motivate their [children](#) during a challenging academic task. The study is published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin (PSPB)*.

Lead researcher Alyssa Fu explains that their study focuses on maternal relationships because in Asian American families "mothers tend to be more directly involved in their children's academic achievement." According to Fu, "Asian American parents encourage their children to see themselves as part of an enduring relationship with them." In other words, Asian American children are encouraged to be interdependent.

European American children, on the other hand, are encouraged to be independent. Parents encourage their children to see themselves as

separate individuals from them and to explore their unique thoughts and experiences. This key difference between Asian American and European American parenting models has a direct effect on the ability of mothers to motivate their child in an academic setting.

Fu and Markus designed four studies to investigate these differences. In the first study, students answered open ended questions about their mothers. Asian American children were more likely to mention their mother's relationship with them (e.g. she pushes me to succeed), while European American children were more likely to describe their mothers as a separate person from them; they focused on her attributes and her appearance (e.g., she has blue eyes and likes to read). Both groups of children were likely to describe their mothers positively, and as a source of support.

In the second study, students were asked to rate how connected they felt with their mothers, and how much they experienced pressure from their mothers. As predicted, Asian American students experience greater interdependence with their mothers. They also experience greater pressure by their mothers, but did not report feeling any less supported by their mothers because of that pressure. That is, Asian American children can still feel supported by their mothers regardless of increased pressure placed on them.

European American children report that they experience pressure from their mothers as negative, and the more pressure they feel the less they feel supported by their mothers. European American children are also more likely to feel their mothers don't understand them. As a reaction to that perceived pressure, European American children are then more likely to assert their independence. In the third and fourth studies, students were presented with a challenging academic task designed to induce a failure experience. When thinking about their mothers, Asian American children were more motivated to complete the task after

experiencing failure than European American children. European American children were more motivated when prompted to think about themselves.

Notably, Asian American children were not only motivated by thinking about their mothers, but they can also be motivated when they remember a time when their mothers put pressure on them—when she nagged them. Specifically, when Asian Americans were reminded of their mother's interdependence with them, they were more motivated by her pressure than if they were not reminded of her interdependence with them. In other words, when Asian Americans feel connected with their mothers, they are able to use her pressure to be more motivated.

Together the four studies underscore fundamental differences in parenting methods across cultures. 'Tiger mothers' are motivating for Asian American children because interdependence allows their children to draw on their connectedness with their mother to maintain their motivation on a difficult task. European American children, on the other hand, see themselves as independent from their mothers, and are not motivated by their mother's pressure. In European American contexts, overcoming failure is a personal project not a group project.

These results have implications beyond the home as well, and may extend to dynamics between students and teachers. "For example, just as Asian Americans are tuned into their mothers' expectations, they are also tuned into hierarchy, and pay more attention to the authority of a teacher than European American students," Fu explained.

Chua's original article sparked a culture clash about 'tiger mothers.' This study illustrates that both sides in the debate deserve points. European American mothers are correct in their assumption that too much maternal involvement can quash motivation, because they instill in their children a strong feeling of independence. In contrast Asian American

'tiger [mothers](#)' who are able to leverage the interdependence they have with their children are equally right that their material pressure is beneficial, in fact, essential for their child's motivation.

More information: Fu, A. S., & Markus, H. R. (2014). My Mother and Me: Why Tiger Mothers Motivate Asian Americans But Not European Americans. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(6), 739-749. [dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167214524992](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214524992)

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