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**A Mediator or Moderator? Self-Compassion's Role in the Association Between Emotional Self-Control and Help-Seeking Attitudes Among Asian American College Students**

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### **Abstract**

Given the disparities in professional help-seeking of Asian Americans, continued empirical effort to identify the predictors, mediators, and moderators of help-seeking attitudes are needed.

Although cultural values such as emotional self-control in relation to help-seeking attitudes have received empirical attention, self-compassion in the Asian American help-seeking literature remains unexplored. Thus, we examined the mediating and moderating role of self-compassion on the relationship between the Asian cultural value of emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes in a sample of 257 Asian American college students. An online questionnaire containing the study measures was used to collect data. Emotional self-control was significantly associated with unfavorable help-seeking attitudes. Moreover, self-compassion was a significant mediator of the relation. Specifically, an increase in emotional self-control was associated with a decrease in self-compassion, which in turn was associated with favorable help-seeking attitudes. Self-compassion was a non-significant moderator. We discuss potential explanations for the indirect effect of emotional self-control on help-seeking attitudes through self-compassion, and we address implications of these findings for practice when working with Asian American college students.

*Keywords:* Self-compassion, help-seeking attitudes, Asian values

### **Public Significance Statement**

This study suggests that having compassion on oneself can aid in developing a positive attitude toward professional counseling among Asian American college students. Helping people increase their self-compassion holds much promise for addressing the problem of Asian Americans not seeking professional services because of cultural influences.

### **A Mediator or Moderator? Self-Compassion's Role in the Association Between Emotional Self-Control and Help-Seeking Attitudes Among Asian American College Students**

Cultural factors such as acculturation and enculturation influence attitudes and beliefs (Sun et al., 2016). Although acculturation is one of the most popular psychological processes examined within the Asian American literature (e.g., Le & Raposa, 2019; Miller et al., 2011; Suh et al., 2020), enculturation, as a counterpart to acculturation, is also an important consideration in Asian American lives in the United States; enculturation refers to racial or ethnic minority individual's cultural socialization process into their culture of origin (Berry, 1994; Sun et al., 2016; Yoon et al., 2013). Both acculturation and enculturation for Asian Americans can occur across multiple domains, such as behaviors and values (Miller, 2007). However, the present study intentionally examines value enculturation as a predictor of help-seeking attitudes among Asian Americans since one's cultural values from their Asian heritage could influence one's attitudes toward seeking help.

Value enculturation for Asian Americans is the internalization of cultural values that are salient in the Asian and Asian American context (B. S. K. Kim et al., 1999; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2005). A popular conceptualization of salient Asian cultural values includes the values of collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, filial piety, and humility (B. S. K. Kim et al., 1999; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2005). In particular, meta-analysis findings indicate that value enculturation is associated with less favorable attitudes toward professional help-seeking across Asian American samples (Sun et al., 2016).

Even among the typical Asian cultural values, emotional self-control is a particularly salient cultural value that continues to receive empirical attention in the Asian American help-

seeking literature (e.g., P. Y. Kim et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2016). Prior studies have found that individuals of Asian background might more likely suppress emotions compared to Whites (Soto et al., 2011). Similarly, Butler et al. (2007) found that bicultural (Asian and Western) individuals engaged in emotion suppression more frequently compared to their counterparts who endorsed Western values, providing evidence that cultural socialization plays a critical role in shaping the practice of emotional expression and suppression. Moreover, the cultural emphasis on emotional restraint might be especially pronounced if the situation or context is unfamiliar to the individual. For example, Asians were more likely to report that expression of emotions to casual acquaintances is less appropriate compared to Whites, whereas there was no significant difference between the groups for emotional expression to close friends or family (Matsumoto, 1993); based on this finding, it seems reasonable that an Asian American individual might be hesitant to disclose emotions to a professional counselor, who is not a family or friend, but perhaps someone who is more like a “casual acquaintance.”

Indeed, recent empirical studies revealed that emotional self-control is a prominent predictor of unfavorable help-seeking attitudes among Asian American college students (e.g., P. Y. Kim & Kendall, 2015; P. Y. Kim et al., 2016). These studies are also consistent with the finding that openness to emotions is related to positive help-seeking attitudes among college students (e.g., Komiya et al., 2000). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis showed that emotional self-control is an especially strong predictor of help-seeking attitudes in comparison to the other Asian cultural values (Sun et al., 2016). This particular association between the cultural value of emotional restraint and help-seeking attitudes makes conceptual sense; those who value the restraining of emotions might find professional counseling in the Western context to be less desirable, given that many popular forms of Western psychotherapy prioritize the processing of

emotions (e.g., Beck & Greenberg, 1990; Bergin, 1991; Hill & O'Grady, 1985). In sum, one aim of the present study was to replicate the association between the cultural value of emotional restraint and help-seeking attitudes (P. Y. Kim & Kendall, 2015; P. Y. Kim et al., 2016) among Asian American college students.

More centrally, we set out to address the issue that this direct association between the cultural emphasis placed on emotional restraint and help-seeking attitudes is likely mediated and moderated by various psychological factors. Mediation is a possibility: cultural socialization into emotional self-control might lead to the increase or decrease in certain psychological factors at the individual level such as self-compassion, which in turn might influence help-seeking attitudes. Prior studies that have reported significant association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes have provided modest effect sizes (e.g., P. Y. Kim et al. [2016] reported a  $\Delta R^2$  of .08 when emotional self-control was entered as a predictor of help-seeking attitudes in a regression model, controlling for prior counseling experience), which suggests that there are additional constructs to be considered to adequately explain Asian American help-seeking attitudes. Therefore, our study explored self-compassion as a mediator.

Another possibility is moderation. Although many studies have found that an endorsement of Asian cultural values tends to be associated with more unfavorable help-seeking attitudes (e.g., B. S. K. Kim & Omizo, 2003; Shea & Yeh, 2008), other researchers have reported null findings where Asian values were not related to help-seeking attitudes (e.g., Lei & Pellitteri, 2017) and behaviors (e.g., Gee et al., 2020; Ruzek et al., 2011). These mixed findings suggest that an investigation of factors that moderate the association between Asian values (e.g., emotional self-control) and help-seeking attitudes is a sensible research undertaking. The

investigation of moderating effects can unpack how cultural influences on help-seeking might be offset or exacerbated by individual psychological factors.

Next, we introduce self-compassion as an important construct in help-seeking. After that, we provide the rationale for how self-compassion might mediate the association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes. We then provide the rationale for self-compassion as a moderator in the association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes.

### **Self-Compassion and Help-Seeking Attitudes**

Recently, *self-compassion* as a construct reflecting a positive view of the self has received increasing attention in the psychological literature. Self-compassion includes three key components: the ability to be kind to oneself in the face of shortcomings or pain, the view that one's experiences are shared with the larger human experience, and a balanced perspective of own suffering (Neff 2003a, 2003b). In particular, Neff (2003a, 2003b; also see Neff et al., 2008) has argued that self-compassion has its origins in Asian culture, especially given its reflection of longstanding Buddhist principles such as mindfulness. Furthermore, although we are conceptualizing it as an individual level construct and not a cultural value, self-compassion has connecting points with typical Asian values. For example, interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) is a salient view of self in the Asian context that defines the self in relation to others, and consistent with this notion, the self-compassionate individual deeply recognizes the interwovenness of their experiences with the larger humanity (Neff et al., 2008); similar argument can be made about the Asian value of conformity to social norms (B. S. K. Kim et al., 2005) being partially captured in the idea that the self-compassionate individual appreciates harmony with others and their experiences.

*Self-Compassion as a Mediator*

It is possible that self-compassion is a mediator of the association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes. Based on the logic of mediation, we first considered the association between emotional self-control and self-compassion (i.e., predictor and mediator association), and then the self-compassion and help-seeking attitudes relation (i.e., mediator and outcome association).

We anticipated that endorsement of emotional self-control as a cultural value will be associated with decreased self-compassion. A self-compassionate person does not dismiss emotions, including negative ones, but instead views the connectedness to all emotions as a critical element of being compassionate to oneself (Neff & Tirsch, 2013). As Neff (2003b) wrote: “In many ways, self-compassion can be viewed as a useful emotional regulation strategy, in which painful or distressing feelings are not avoided but are instead held in awareness with kindness, understanding, and a sense of shared humanity” (p. 225). This theoretical assertion is backed up by empirical studies that have reported a significant and positive association between self-compassion and ability to think about and regulate feelings in diverse samples, such as U.S. undergraduate students (Neff (2003b; 21% Asian), professional nurses in New York (Heffernan et al., 2010; 16.42% Asian), and Italian workers (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021). Given these empirical findings, it is reasonable that the endorsement of emotional restraint would be related to decreased self-compassion.

Furthermore, we predicted that self-compassion would be related to more favorable attitudes toward seeking professional help. Self-compassionate individuals are able to prioritize self-care, and this self-prioritization may contribute to being more willing to seek external help for emotional distress. We were not able to find empirical studies examining self-compassion in



relation to help-seeking attitudes of Asian or Asian American samples, but a few studies that have done so with a different sample (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018) or a type of help-seeking attitudes (Holt, 2014) provide some tentative rationale for the inclusion of self-compassion as a facilitative factor in help-seeking. A study with intercollegiate athletic men found that self-compassion was predictive of more favorable attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018). Likewise, Holt (2014) reported a significant correlation between self-compassion and favorable academic help-seeking attitudes in a sample of college students. Although limited, taken together, these studies suggest that self-compassion might lead to more favorable attitudes toward help-seeking. In sum, one possibility is that emotional self-control will be inversely related to self-compassion, which in turn will be related to help-seeking attitudes.

### *Self-Compassion as a Moderator*

We also investigated self-compassion as a moderator in the association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes. Even though prior theorizing has tended to single out interdependence or collectivism as being compatible or interacting with the idea of self-compassion (e.g., Neff et al., 2008), in the present study, we contend that the cultural value placed on emotional restraint might also have a synergic relation with self-compassion to influence psychological outcomes, such as help-seeking attitudes. Specifically, we argue that self-compassionate individuals might be able to better balance their adherence to a cultural emphasis on emotional restraint with the kindness to oneself in the face of psychological suffering. On the flipside, those who emphasize emotional restraint and are less self-compassionate might view psychological help even more unfavorably. Put differently, self-compassion might allow one to effectively balance the importance of emotional control as

expected by those who are from the same culture as the individual, but also the need for kindness to oneself in the face of emotional distress and view seeking psychological help positively. As Neff et al. (2008) wrote, self-compassion reflects “taking a balanced approach to one’s negative emotions so that painful feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated but are instead seen just as they are in the present moment” (p. 268).

Self-compassion might interact with an emphasis on emotional restraint to predict help-seeking attitudes. Heath et al. (2017) reported that in a group of college men, self-compassion moderated the relation between the masculine gender norm of emotional self-control and perceived risk of disclosing personal concerns to a professional counselor, so that self-compassion weakened the deleterious association. More studies have focused on self-compassion’s interaction with stigma of seeking help. Heath et al. (2018) reported that the association between public stigma of seeking psychological help and anticipated self-stigma was significantly moderated by self-compassion, such that public stigma was not as strongly internalized by individuals with a higher level of self-compassion. Similarly, in a sample of university men, Booth et al. (2019) found that self-compassion significantly moderated the association between masculine gender role stress and self-stigma, such that the self-compassion protected against the deleterious association between gender role stress and self-stigma. Although these studies did not examine help-seeking attitudes per se, the pattern of results around similar variables (i.e., stigma of counseling and fear of disclosing to a professional) in relation to self-compassion provides additional rationale for our study. These studies are consistent with parts of Wong et al.’s (2019) theoretical model asserting that self-compassion buffers the negative influence of public stigma on self-stigma; that is, the studies suggest that self-compassion might protect against the influence of a societal (e.g., public stigma of mental

health) or cultural (e.g., gender role stress) contributor to an internal factor related to mental health services (e.g., self-stigma). Extended to our study, self-compassion might temper the influence of a cultural dimension such as the emphasis on emotional restraint on attitudes toward seeking psychological services.

In sum, we contend that the exploration of the relations between Asian culture, self-compassion, and help-seeking attitudes is a valuable empirical effort because it will be valuable to understand how self-compassion might manifest and operate across cultures, especially in synergy with cultural norms such as emotional self-control. In addition, such a research endeavor will provide additional empirical evidence for Neff's (2003a, 2003b; also see Neff et al., 2008) assertion self-compassion reflects elements of Asian culture. So far, the examination of self-compassion in relation to attitudes toward or stigma of mental health services has been limited to samples that are majority White (e.g., Booth et al., 2019; Heath et al., 2018; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018). Empirical studies with Asian American samples have reported that self-compassion can have facilitative benefits for mental health, such as buffering the effect of imposter syndromes on interpersonal shame (Wei et al., 2020). Similarly, self-compassion writing (Wong & Mak, 2016) and compassion meditative programs (Hwang & Chan, 2019) have demonstrated positive mental health outcomes among Asian Americans. The question about self-compassion's role in Asian American help-seeking attitudes remains unanswered, however. Therefore, our study is a preliminary report that adds to this literature on Asian American help-seeking, by (a) replicating the prior literature on the relation between Asian cultural values and help-seeking attitudes, and (b) highlighting self-compassion, a novel variable in the Asian American help-seeking literature, as an important empirical consideration in the association between Asian values and help-seeking attitudes. Specifically, we examined self-compassion as a mediator and moderator to

clarify its role in the association between Asian cultural value of emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes.

## Method

### Recruitment and Participant Characteristics

Data collection was conducted in two phases. In Phase 1 ( $n = 130$ ), Asian American undergraduate students were recruited from two higher education institutions located in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Participants were invited through a written blurb that contained a hyperlink to the study materials, including an informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and the study measures. At Institution 1, the invitation was distributed through the Registrar's Office to self-identified Asian American participants and through social media advertising. At Institution 2, the invitation was distributed through the first author's professional contacts (an instructor in the American Ethnic Studies department, a former campus organization leader with a wide network of Asian American college students at the institution). Participants were entered into a drawing for a \$100 gift card to an online store.

In Phase 2 of data collection ( $n = 127$ ), we utilized the online service, Prolific.co, to recruit additional participants. Prolific.co's custom prescreening tool was utilized to make the survey available to only Asian American college students. Participants were offered \$2.38 which translated to \$9.52/hour based on the estimation of 15 minutes to complete the survey.

In total, participants were 257 self-identified Asian American undergraduate students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.46$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ; 140 women, 113 men, and 2 non-binary, 1 transgender man, 1 person did not specify). School years represented were first ( $n = 71$ ), second ( $n = 45$ ), third ( $n = 69$ ), fourth ( $n = 66$ ), and "other" ( $n = 6$ ). Participants had the option to choose more than one Asian ethnicity, and ethnicities represented were Chinese ( $n = 109$ ), Vietnamese ( $n = 39$ ), Filipino ( $n =$

36), Japanese ( $n = 34$ ), Korean ( $n = 31$ ), Indian ( $n = 24$ ), Taiwanese ( $n = 15$ ), Thai ( $n = 2$ ), Cambodian ( $n = 4$ ), and other ( $n = 6$ ). Most ( $n = 213$ ) participants reported the U.S. as their place of birth and had lived 18.19 years ( $SD = 4.63$ ) in the United States. Ninety participants reported having received professional counseling before.

## Measures

### *Predictor: The Asian American Values Scale-Multidimensional*

The Asian American Values Scale-Multidimensional (AAVS-M; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2005) is a 42-item scale designed to measure socialization into Asian values. Although the AAVS-M includes 5 subscales (Collectivism, Conformity to Norms, Emotional Self-Control, Family Recognition Through Achievement, and Humility), we chose to utilize the Emotional Self-Control subscale (7<sup>1</sup> items) for our study, which assesses the cultural value placed upon emotional restraint. The AAVS-M was created and validated for use with Asian Americans, and the developers reported validity information such as expected correlation with an older version of the measure (Asian Value Scale; B. S. K. Kim et al., 1999) and other cultural constructs like loss of face (B. S. K. Kim et al., 2005). B. S. K. Kim et al. (2005) reported good internal consistencies for the emotional self-control subscale, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .80 to .89. Prior studies have utilized the AAVS-M with Asian American samples (e.g., Alamilla et al., 2017; Chen & Zhou, 2019), including studies focused on help-seeking attitudes (e.g., P. Y. Kim & Kendall, 2015). Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7 strongly agree), with a higher score indicating a stronger endorsement of emotional self-control. The

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<sup>1</sup>Although the original subscale includes 8 items (see B. S. K. Kim et al, 2005), because of a human error on our online survey that listed the response option of "mildly disagree" twice for the item "It is better to show emotions than to suffer quietly," we decided to remove this item from our composite score calculation.

Cronbach's alpha for emotional self-control in our study was .68. We used the mean score for analysis.

### ***Outcome: Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help***

The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help-Shortened Form (ATSPPH-SF; Fischer & Farina, 1995) is a 10-item unidimensional scale designed to measure an individual's view about seeking professional psychological help. Each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = disagree; 3 = agree), in which a higher score indicates more favorable views of help-seeking. Fischer and Farina (1995) developed the ATSPPH-SF using college samples, and they reported its significant correlation with previous counseling experience and gender as evidence of validity. The developers of the measure reported good internal consistency,  $\alpha = .84$ . The ATSPPH-SF (Fischer & Farina, 1995) is a widely used measure of professional help-seeking attitudes in the Asian American literature (e.g., Choi & Miller, 2014; B. S. K. Kim, 2007; Miller et al., 2011). In our study, the Cronbach's alpha for the ATSPPH-SF was .84. We used the mean score for analysis.

### ***Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form***

The Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF; Raes et al, 2011) is a 12-item scale designed to measure self-compassion, including components of self-kindness ("When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need"), self-judgement (reverse scored; "I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like"), common humanity ("When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people."), isolation ("reverse scored; When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure"), mindfulness ("When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation"), and over-

identification (reverse scored; “When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong”). The SCS-SF was developed as an alternative to the longer Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a), and based on results from Dutch and American samples, Raes et al. (2011) reported evidence of validity (e.g., high correlation with SCS); a U.S. sample in Raes et al. (2011) yielded a high internal consistency for the SCS-SF total score,  $\alpha = .86$ . We found one study (Wei et al., 2020) that has used the SCS-SF with an Asian American sample, and it reported good internal consistency,  $\alpha = .83$ . The SCS-SF is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never; 5 = almost always), with a higher score indicating a higher level of self-compassion. In our study, the Cronbach’s alpha for the SCS-SF was .81. We used the mean score for analysis.

## Results

### Data Cleaning and Preliminary Analyses

Two hundred eighty-one people initially completed our survey. We deleted 9 cases that failed to identify as Asian American and 2 participants who were no longer college students. Next, we deleted 13 cases with one or more measure missing, resulting in the final  $N$  of 257. Out of the 257 cases, on our three study measures, most ( $n = 251$ ) had no missing data, 5 cases had 1 missing item, and 1 case had 2 missing items.

Table 1 displays the correlations,  $M$ s,  $SD$ s, and Cronbach’s Alphas among the study variables. Prior counseling experience and self-compassion were significantly and positively correlated with help-seeking attitudes, and emotional self-control was significantly and inversely correlated with help-seeking attitudes. Emotional self-control and self-compassion were significantly and inversely correlated with each other. Given prior counseling experience’s

significant association with help-seeking attitudes, we decided to enter it as a covariate in our analyses.

## **Main Analyses**

### ***Test of Mediation***

We utilized the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017) in SPSS v. 27 to test the mediating effect of self-compassion in the relation between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes, controlling for prior counseling experience. Based on 10,000 bootstrapped samples, the indirect effect of emotional self-control on help-seeking attitudes through self-compassion was statistically significant (bootstrapped indirect effect estimate = -0.03, bootstrapped  $SE = 0.01$ , bootstrapped CI of -0.06 to -0.01). Table 3 displays the regression results for the specific paths (predictor to mediator; mediator to outcome) involved in the mediation analysis, and Figure 1 displays the regression coefficients and their standard errors for a visualization of these associations. As shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, emotional self-control was inversely related to self-compassion ( $b = -0.18$ ,  $t = -4.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which in turn was positively related to help-seeking attitudes ( $b = 0.16$ ,  $t = 3.39$ ,  $p = .001$ ). As displayed in Figure 1, the effect of emotional self-control on help-seeking attitudes (total effect:  $b = -0.20$ ,  $t = -5.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ) remained statistically significant even after the inclusion of self-compassion as a mediator (direct effect:  $b = -0.17$ ,  $t = -4.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and therefore there was partial mediation. In sum, the results provided evidence for the mediating role of self-compassion on the association between emotion self-control and help-seeking attitudes.

### ***Test of Moderation***

We again utilized the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017) in SPSS v. 27 to test the moderating effect of self-compassion on help-seeking attitudes, controlling for prior counseling



experience. We decided to include prior counseling experience as a covariate given its significant relation with help-seeking attitudes (e.g., Fischer & Farina, 1995; B. S. K. Kim, 2007; Vogel et al., 2006). We used 10,000 bootstrapped samples and mean centered the predictor and moderator prior to the computation of the interaction term. Table 2 summarizes the regression results.

Although emotional self-control ( $b = -0.16, t = -4.58, p < .001$ ) and self-compassion ( $b = 0.16, t = 3.41, p = .001$ ) were significant predictors of help-seeking attitudes as expected, the interaction term (emotional self-control x self-compassion;  $b = 0.03, t = .61, p = .54$ ) was not. Therefore, we did not find evidence for moderation of self-compassion in the association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes and did not proceed to probing the interaction effect.

### Discussion

The present study was an empirical examination of the association between the Asian cultural value of emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes, and the mediating and moderating role of self-compassion, in a sample of Asian American college students. Consistent with prior findings (e.g., P. Y. Kim & Kendall, 2015; Sun et al., 2016), emotional self-control was associated with unfavorable help-seeking attitudes, indicating that individuals who express high emotional regulation are less likely to view professional psychological help as beneficial and are therefore less likely to consider help-seeking as a viable option. More importantly, our findings revealed that self-compassion was a statistically significant mediator. Specifically, emotional self-control was associated with decreased self-compassion, which in turn was related to more favorable attitudes toward help-seeking.

Results support the negative association between emotional self-control and self-compassion. We begin with a person who values emotional self-control to illustrate. Due to socialization of holding and not expressing emotions, a person who endorses the cultural value of

emotional self-control may view emotions as less important. Among people who value restraining emotions, the cultural norm is to behave appropriately by not acting on one's emotions. This cultural and emotional perspective is contrary to the critical elements of self-compassion. Whereas people avoid their emotions if they value emotional self-control, self-compassionate people approach emotions. Moreover, self-compassionate people hold their feelings in awareness and even view painful and distressing emotions with kindness and understanding. If self-compassion can be a useful emotional regulation strategy by engaging with one's emotions, emotional self-control may foster emotional suppression as an emotion regulation strategy instead. As such, those who value emotional self-control may not be as self-compassionate.

Moreover, the results of this study are the first to support the positive association between self-compassion and favorable help-seeking attitudes among Asian American college students. These findings converge with previous studies of self-compassion and seeking help among intercollegiate athletic men (Wasyliw & Clairo, 2018) and a sample of predominantly White college students (e.g., 70% White compared to 11% Asian/Asian American; Holt, 2014). Bearing in mind that self-compassion promotes people to recognize that their experiences are shared in the human experience (Neff 2003a, 2003b), self-compassionate people may recognize the growing acceptance of psychological help. If people have a high level of self-compassion, they can be kind to themselves in the face of emotional pain or suffering. It follows that a self-compassionate person will hold favorable attitudes to seek mental health services, even if experiencing negative and distressing emotions. Such an understanding may help a person not be judgmental nor critical of their distress as due to personal shortcomings, but instead overcome

self-stigma of seeking help (Booth et al., 2019; Heath et al., 2018). In other words, self-compassionate people may see seeking professional mental health help as a viable option.

Briefly, we also comment on self-compassion's nonsignificant moderating effect. One possibility is that the strength of the association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes overrode any amplifying or reducing effect associated with self-compassion. We are cautious, however, of interpreting a null finding, and we encourage future researchers to continue replicating and extending the possibility of self-compassion as a relevant moderator in Asian American help-seeking.

Altogether, this study provides empirical evidence on the mediating role of self-compassion in the association between emotional self-control and help-seeking attitudes. We believe that valuing emotional self-control is associated with less self-compassion since a compassionate response to oneself requires an openness to one's emotions, especially the painful and distressing feelings. As a result, Asian American college students who value restraining their emotions may hold unfavorable attitudes toward mental health help-seeking partially due to an absence of self-compassion. To our knowledge, no prior studies have examined self-compassion in relation to help-seeking attitudes among Asian Americans. Thus, our findings add to the literature that demonstrates the wide-ranging benefits of self-compassion, including on the mental health and well-being of Asian Americans (Hwang & Chan, 2019; Wong & Mak, 2016).

### **Implications**

These findings have some implications for the Asian American help-seeking literature. First, our findings suggest self-compassion as another individual-level facilitator of help-seeking processes among Asian American college students. This is in addition to values acculturation (Miller et al., 2011) and etiology beliefs of mental health problems (P. Y. Kim & Kendall, 2015).

By exploring both facilitators of and barriers to seeking help (P. Y. Kim & Kendall, 2015), researchers may clarify how to tailor outreach and prevention initiatives that are universally helpful, culturally appropriate, and personally relevant (Hall et al., 2021). Second, our findings propose that building up psychological resilience (Heath et al., 2018), in addition to breaking down barriers, may help increase utilization of professional psychological services. For instance, even though an Asian American student values emotional self-control (e.g., “It is improper to show my feelings”), they could be open to seeking help and to their feelings when in distress if self-compassionate as well (e.g., “But, everyone goes through hardship and needs help”). We encourage researchers to continue studying methods of enhancing psychological resilience for addressing mental health disparities, rather than solely dismantling barriers that have been explored in the literature.

We believe there are implications for counselors as well. First, Asian American students may positively view seeking professional psychological help through affordable and accessible self-compassion exercises, such as repeating phrases of self-compassion to oneself (Neff & Germer, 2013), expressive writing (Wong & Mak, 2016), or guided meditations (Hwang & Chan, 2019). Moreover, self-compassion interventions may help address clients’ unilateral termination, though counselors hold a significant role in this process as well (e.g., Owen et al., 2012). For instance, as Asian American students begin to address emotional problems during counseling (e.g., test anxiety for their final exam after receiving their first “C” on their midterm), they could begin to harshly criticize themselves and over-identify with their shortcomings that have contributed to seeking help. They also feel isolated from their peers and family, even their counselor, for having such difficulties and feel ashamed for seeking help since others seem to better conceal their troubles. In the end, they could terminate the counseling unilaterally to work

on their problems alone. If a counselor assesses high emotional self-control, clients may benefit from greater self-compassion earlier during treatment. In turn, a self-compassionate person could view approaching feelings and seeking help as appropriate in some contexts especially when in distress, without losing face nor abandoning one's values. A balanced perspective of emotional problems acknowledges strengths and areas of growth. With this perspective, a self-compassionate student feels a belonging with other peers who have similar problems and harmony with others since suffering and shortcomings are common to all. Overall, counselors may tailor self-compassion interventions depending on the personally relevant Asian values of the students that seem to work against their treatment.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The present study has several shortcomings that future studies can address. First, given our sample size, we were not able to examine differences among specific Asian ethnicities represented in our sample. Asian Americans share in some experiences, but at the same time, there might be important within-group differences in their help-seeking processes that also need to be captured. Second, ours was an attitudinal study, and thus we are unable to make a behavioral conclusion based on our findings. We encourage future researchers to examine how self-compassion might impact outcomes such as help-seeking behaviors. Third, our study was cross-sectional in nature, and thus the association between culture, self-compassion, and help-seeking should be unpacked using longitudinal methods. Fourth, our sample consisted of college students, and they might have a certain level of understanding regarding constructs such as self-compassion and help-seeking attitudes. For example, we wonder if a non-collegiate sample might have a different level and associations with self-compassion, a construct that might not be as familiar in a setting for those who are not as psychologically minded. Similarly, even for a

college sample, the current sample might be more open to the idea of psychological services, as evidenced by about 35% of our study sample reported having experience in seeing a professional counselor; this seems higher than some of the numbers from prior studies involving Asian American sample (e.g., 30.20% for Choi & Miller, 2014). Although our study's focus was not on help-seeking rates and controlled for this variable in our analyses, we also understand that the generalizability from our sample to other college and non-college samples should be done cautiously, given the relatively high percentage of individuals who had experience seeking professional services. We encourage future researchers to replicate the findings with non-collegiate samples and additional college samples to answer these questions. Fifth, although we are reasonably confident that our modified measure adequately captured the specific Asian value of emotional control and its relation to the other study variables, we also acknowledge that future studies should replicate and extend our findings with the full measure of emotional self-control (B. S. K. Kim et al., 2005). In those replication and extension efforts, we encourage researchers to think about also including other salient Asian cultural values as competing research questions in relation to self-compassion and help-seeking.

### **Conclusion**

We found that self-compassion acted as a significant mediator of the relation between cultural value of emotional restraint and professional help-seeking attitudes among Asian American students. We hope that researchers will continue to build upon this initial finding to contribute to the larger effort of eradicating mental health disparities affecting Asian Americans.

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**Table 1***Bivariate Correlations, Means, SDs, Cronbach's Alphas, and Response Options for the Study**Variables*

	1	2	3	4	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	Scale
1. Prior counseling experience <sup>a</sup>	-							0-1
2. Emotional self-control	-.06	-			3.63	0.92	.68	1-7
3. Self-compassion	-.08	-.26*	-		2.78	0.66	.81	1-5
4. Help-seeking attitudes	.44*	-.35*	.22*	-	1.71	0.60	.84	0-3

\*  $p < .001$ .<sup>a</sup> Prior counseling experience 0 = no, 1 = yes.

**Table 2**

*Results of the Moderating Effect of Self-Compassion on the Relationship Between Emotional Self-Control and Help-Seeking Attitudes, Controlling for Prior Counseling Experience*

Variables	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	1.53	0.04	39.67	< .001	[1.46, 1.61]
Previous counseling experience	0.54	0.07	8.33	<. 001	[0.42, 0.67]
Emotional self-control	-0.16	0.04	-4.58	<.001	[-0.23, -0.09]
Self-compassion	0.16	0.05	3.41	.001	[0.07, 0.26]
Emotional self-control x self-compassion	0.03	0.04	0.61	.54	[-0.06, 0.11]

*Note.*  $R^2 = 0.32$ . CI = confidence interval based on 10,000 bootstrapped estimates.



**Table 3**

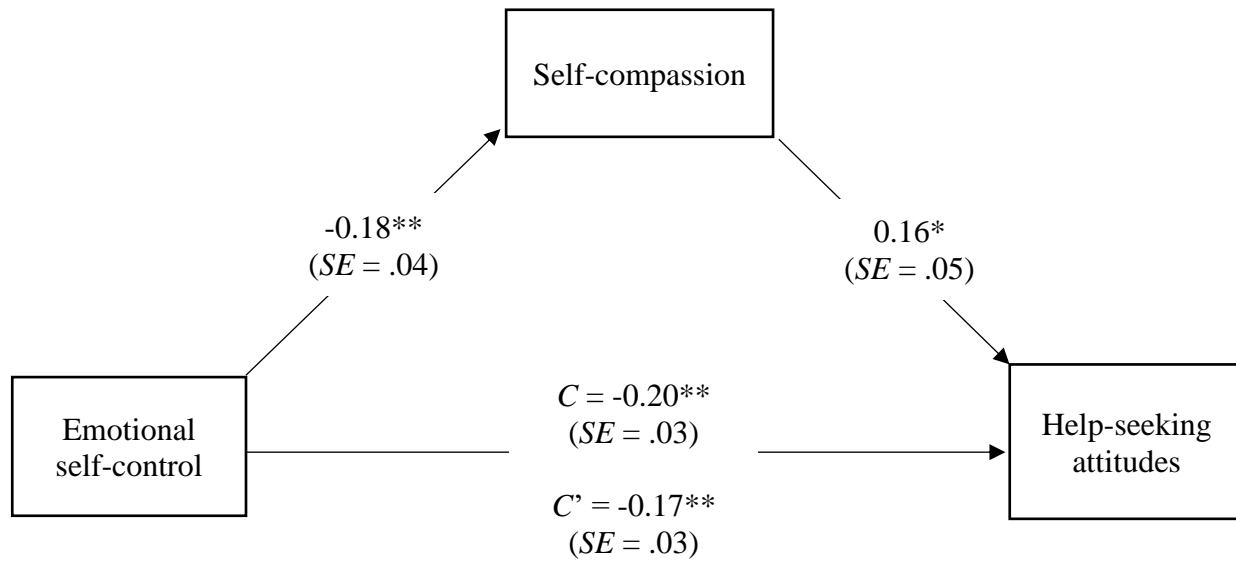
*Indirect Effects of Emotional Self-Control on Help-Seeking Attitudes through Self-Compassion, Controlling for Prior Counseling Experience*

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	95% CI
Predictor to mediator (emotional self-control to self-compassion; $R^2 = .07$ )					
Constant	3.50	0.17	20.76	< .001	[3.16, 3.83]
Counseling experience	-0.13	0.08	-1.51	.13	[-0.29, 0.04]
<b>Emotional self-control</b>	<b>-0.18</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>-4.18</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>	<b>[-0.27, -0.10]</b>
Mediator to outcome (self-compassion → help-seeking attitudes; $R^2 = .32$ )					
Constant	1.69	0.21	7.95	< .001	[1.27, 2.11]
Counseling experience	0.54	0.06	8.32	< .001	[0.41, 0.67]
Emotional self-control	-0.17	0.03	-4.86	< .001	[-0.24, -0.10]
<b>Self-compassion</b>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>3.39</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>[0.07, 0.26]</b>

*Note.* Significant regression results involved in the indirect effect (predictor to mediator, mediator to outcome) are bolded.

**Figure 1**

*Unstandardized Regression Coefficients from the Mediation Model Testing the Effect of Emotional Self-Control on Help-Seeking Attitudes through Self-Compassion, Controlling for Prior Counseling Experience*



\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$ .

$C$  = total effect of emotional self-control on help-seeking attitudes, controlling for prior help-seeking experience;  $C'$  = direct effect of emotional self-control on help-seeking attitudes, controlling for prior help-seeking experience