Stressful Life Events, Marital Satisfaction, and Marital Management Skills of Taiwanese Couples

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Stressful Life Events, Marital Satisfaction, and Marital Management Skills of Taiwanese Couples

The association between stressful life events and marital satisfaction for 372 Taiwanese couples was examined, as was the moderating effects of three marital management skills (e.g., tolerance/sacrifice, empathy/consideration, soothing/alleviation) on that association. Multilevel modeling analysis showed that stressful life events reduced husbands’ and wives’ marital satisfaction. Spouses’ marital management skills were associated with an increase in their marital satisfaction (actor effects) except for husbands’ soothing and alleviation skills. Husbands’ tolerance and empathy were also related to an increase in the wife’s marital satisfaction (partner effects) and had significant interactions with the relationship between the wife’s stress and her marital satisfaction. Husbands’ and wives’ soothing skills also had significant interactions with the association between stressful life events and their own satisfaction. These results are discussed in relation to the life course, stress process, coping theories, and Chinese cultural values as well as their clinical implications of working with Chinese population.

In modern societies, stress is a prevalent experience for people as there are more and more life demands. Over the life course, people not only experience multiple life transitions but also encounter unexpected life events. Normal transitions combined with critical life events can be stressful for people due to limited social, psychological, and economic resources and coping skills (Pearlin, 2010). This stress can become detrimental to individuals’ mental and physical health (Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005; Reynolds & Turner, 2008) and marital relationships (Neff & Karney, 2009; Pearlin, 2010). However, research findings about the effects of stressful life events on relationship quality are inconsistent because couples react to major life events with different coping skills (Randall & Bodenmann, 2008). Therefore, one goal of this article is to extend the literature related to the association between major stressful life events and marital satisfaction and examine the interaction effects of coping skills with this relationship.

Most stress research has been performed with Western populations and thus may not be equally generalized to Eastern societies. People in collectivist Eastern cultures have different perspectives of their world and interpersonal relationships and may handle stressful life events and relational distress differently. In this study, we specifically chose Taiwanese samples to study to explore how Chinese cultural values
STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS AND MODERATING ROLE OF CULTURAL MARITAL MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN CHINESE CULTURE

Empirical studies have shown that major stressful life events in different life domains such as work and relationships with spouses’ parents produce stressful situations and are negatively associated with couples’ marital quality (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Pearl, 2010; Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). In addition, internal and major events such as caregiving for ill spouses (Cannuscio et al., 2002) or a child with cancer (Long & Marsland, 2011) could cause stress.

Stress process (Pearlin, 2010) and coping theory (Lazarus, 1993a, 1993b) suggest that people manage meanings of a stressful situation to reduce its detrimental outcomes when they perceive the specific life demands are exceeding their coping resources. What an individual copes with in a stressful situation also depends on the context in which the stressful life event occurs and how it informs people’s meaning-making process (Lazarus, 1993b). To study how Taiwanese couples handle stress, it is important to recognize the Chinese sociocultural context that shapes the way people perceive their marital relationship and maintain marital satisfaction.

In Taiwan, people practice Confucianism embedded in Chinese culture. Unlike China and Hong Kong where people also share Chinese culture but have experienced Westernization much earlier because of social, political, and historical reasons since the earlier twentieth century (Chan, Ho, & Tam, 1997; Whyte, 2005), Taiwanese people still practice Confucianism and generally value the dominance of social interaction and reciprocal interdependence more than the interests of individuals (Chan & Lee, 2004; Li & Chen, 2012). However, Taiwanese couples are increasingly adopting an egalitarian relationship and emphasizing romantic love due to economic development and Westernization (Shen, 2005; Whyte, 2005). In other words, Confucianism still influences Taiwanese people, but Western cultures also are gradually influencing their values.

Taiwanese people grow up in family-oriented environments. The Confucian doctrine of “five cardinal ethics” defines each family member’s interaction (e.g., relative role and power position) for dyadic relationships such as father and son, sovereign and subordinate, husband and wife, older and younger siblings, and friends (Chan & Lee, 2004). Most individuals develop a deep sense of family loyalty, mutual obligation, and reciprocal interdependence to promote the welfare, harmony, and reputation of the others, the family, and the group in daily life (Chan & Lee, 2004). Throughout this process, people perceive themselves as a part of relational and group structure such as families, neighborhoods, and schools.

The ideas of tolerance and sacrifice are particularly important cultural values in Chinese societies. Based on Lee and Yang’s (1998) interpretation of “tolerance” from the Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist perspectives, Li (2005) defined the concept and concluded that there are two types of “tolerance” in marital context: self-reserved tolerance and forgiving tolerance. Self-reserved tolerance emphasizes individuals’ moral practices in self-regulating, tolerating, and soothing his or her own reactive behaviors, thoughts, and emotions to alleviate an immediate relational confrontation. Forgiving tolerance highlights a spouse’s selfless sacrifice for tolerating and enduring his and her partner’s behaviors and emotions, and willingness to prioritize the needs of the partner to achieve a long-term harmony in marriage.

Furthermore, Buddhist teaching in Chinese culture emphasizes loving kindness and compassionately benefiting others. Loving kindness is “the heart-felt aspiration for the happiness of beings” and compassion is “the aspiration that beings be free from suffering” (Harvey, 2002, p. 209). In this regard, Taiwanese people are suggested to practice “kindly actions” of being compassionate for others’ suffering and generously taking care of others’ needs (Harvey, 2002), and they become interdependent within a relationship to define their own role, emotions, and behaviors (Li, 2009). Empathy and soothing skills are considered as kindly actions by Buddhism to alleviate one’s own and others’ suffering in daily life, producing mutual wellfares and enrichment in the relationship.

Tolerance/sacrifice, consideration/empathy for others, and soothing/alleviation skills are interrelated concepts and reflect collectivist cultures in Taiwan where people are considerate...
of others and make efforts to maintain relational harmony. We argue that in the marital context these cultural values will help Taiwanese couples avoid conflicts between husbands and wives, particularly when they experience stressful life circumstances. Research shows that these skills help to decrease negative conflicts and reinforce marital stability (Li, 2005). Therefore, we assume that these Chinese cultural doctrines might provide moderating effects on the association between stressful life events and Taiwanese couples’ marital satisfaction.

**LINKED LIVES: INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN HUSBANDS AND WIVES**

In line with the “linked lives” tenet of the life course perspective (Elder, 2000), one unique facet of being a couple is that each partner is not independent of the other, but they are interdependent and their lives are linked together. Because of this unique characteristic in relationships, one partner’s beliefs, actions, and emotions become intertwined with the other partner’s through constant interactions. This unique nature in couple relationship also resonates with collectivism and Buddhism in Chinese culture. Taiwanese couples are instructed to provide reciprocal support and to be compassionate and considerate for each other because “the benefits of self and others are intertwined, so that concern to lessen one’s own suffering goes hand-in-hand with lessening that of others” (Harvey, 2002, p. 197).

THE CURRENT STUDY

Based on the life course, stress process perspectives, coping theory, and Chinese cultural values in marital management, in this study we investigated the relations between stressful life events, marital satisfaction, and six marital management skills. We hypothesized that Taiwanese couples who reported more stressful life events were likely to have a lower level of marital satisfaction (actor effect). In addition, one’s stress would be associated with the spouse’s marital satisfaction (partner effect). We expected that Chinese cultural values in marital management were not only positively related to one’s marital satisfaction (actor effect), but also to the spouse’s marital satisfaction (partner effect). We expected the marital management skills would also interact with the relationships between stressful life events and one’s marital satisfaction (actor effect) as well as the spouse’s marital satisfaction (partner effect).

In the study, the tolerance and sacrifice skills were operationalized on the basis of participants’ reports that they tolerated their spouse’s attitudes or behaviors and did not give any negative response, and that they were willing to prioritize their spouse’s needs and decisions over their own. Being considerate and empathetic for the other was operationalized by participants’ reporting that they tried to understand their spouse’s thoughts and feelings, and listened to his or her opinions. Soothing and alleviating skills were operationalized by participants’ reports of behavioral strategies (e.g., physical comfort) and verbal statements (e.g., telling a joke) used to alleviate the partner’s suffering and relational tensions.

**METHOD**

**Data and Sample**

The data was provided by the Office of Survey Research (OSR) under the Survey Research Data Archive (SRDA) at Academia Sinica in Taiwan. A total of 372 pairs of heterosexual couples living in a metropolitan area of Taiwan were recruited through snowball and purposive sampling. Research assistants recruited couples that were legally married and in which both spouses were willing to fill out the questionnaires. Questionnaires were distributed and collected at one time. The spouses filled out the questionnaires independently. The couples had been married for an average of 14.67 years ($SD = 10.27$), with an average of 1.77 children ($SD = 1.06$). In this sample, 98.7% of the males and 97.3% of the females were married for the first time. Husbands’ age ranged from 25 to 73 ($M = 43.75, SD = 9.57$) and wives’ age ranged from 20 to 65 ($M = 41.30, SD = 9.10$). As for education, 37.2% of the males and 42.2% of the females had completed high school; 20.2% of the males and 25.5% of the females had obtained a bachelor’s degree; 42.5% of the males and 32.3% of the females had earned a postgraduate degree. Most of the women (75.9%) and men (93.2%) were employed. The annual income (in U.S. dollars) reported by the participants was as
follows: less than $20,000 (48.4% of the males, 79.2% of the females); $20,001 to $40,000 (43.6% of the males, 19.7% of the females); and $40,001 or more (8.1% of the males, 1.1% of the females).

Measures

Stressful life events measurement. To assess couples’ stressful life events, participants filled out the Stressful Life Event measure, developed by Lorenz, Elder, Bao, and Wickrama (2000) and translated into Chinese. Each spouse reported any change in the following six life domains during the past year: job disruptions, financial problems, nuclear-family events, extended-family events, friend events, and personal events. There were a total of 49 items across the six life domains. Of the six domains in the measure, only those items representative of stressful life events were summed into the final score, with a higher score indicating a couple having more stressful life events. Ratings of stress in the marriage (four items) were excluded to avoid confounded effects on the dependent variable, marital satisfaction. Mean level of stressful life events for husbands was 2.84 ($SD = 3.26$), and for wives was 3.21 ($SD = 3.44$). Reliability analyses revealed Cronbach’s alphas of .77 for husbands and .79 for wives.

Marital satisfaction. To measure couples’ marital satisfaction, participants answered three questions from a modified version of the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986): (1) In general, how satisfied you are with your spouse? (2) In general, how satisfied you are with your marriage? (3) In general, how satisfied you are with your role as a spouse? Responses ranged from 1 (very satisfied) to 7 (very dissatisfied). We reversely coded the ratings of three questions, and they were summed into the final score, so higher scores indicate higher marital satisfaction. Mean level of marital satisfaction for husbands was 17.41 ($SD = 2.68$), and for wives was 16.55 ($SD = 3.07$). Reliability analyses gave Cronbach’s alphas of .81 for husbands and .83 for wives.

Cultural marital management. Li (2005) developed 19 items to measure marital management skills that Taiwanese couples use in handling marital conflicts. The measure was established based on Chinese cultural concepts such as “tolerance,” “sacrifice,” and “consideration for the other” (Lee & Yang, 1998), and alleviation strategies found on qualitative interviews with seven Taiwanese couples and five wives in the first phase of Li’s study. A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to identify three factors based on the scree plot method and the eigenvalues greater than 1.39. Factor 1, Tolerance and Sacrifice (eigenvalue = 8.02), accounted for 20.97% of the variance and included nine items. Factor 2, Empathy and Consideration (eigenvalue = 2.16), accounted for 19.78% of the variance and included seven items. Each factor was treated as a subscale in the measurement. Sample items from each subscale included, “I will tolerate my spouse’s behaviors and do not respond to him negatively” and “I will give up my own decision and conform to my spouse’s decision” (tolerance and sacrifice); “I will put myself into my spouse’s shoes” and “I will try to understand my spouse’s feelings” (empathy and consideration); and “I will tell a joke to alleviate tension” and “I will physically comfort my spouse” (soothing and alleviation). Ratings were on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always). Responses were summed into the final scores, with higher scores indicating more positive marital management skills. Reliability analyses showed that the internal consistency of the tolerance and sacrifice subscale had Cronbach’s alphas of .89 for husbands and .85 for wives; the internal consistency of the empathy and consideration for the spouse subscale had Cronbach’s alphas of .91 for husbands and .90 for wives; and the internal consistency of the soothing and alleviation subscale had Cronbach’s alphas of .88 for husbands and .87 for wives.

Control variables. Information was collected on marital duration and marital status. Marital duration was assessed by spouses’ reports of the length of the marriage. Marital status was dichotomized as married for the first time and remarried.
**Analytic Techniques**

To address the interdependence effects among Taiwanese couples in terms of the study variables, we apply the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) within the multilevel modeling framework (Kashy, Jellison, & Kenny, 2004; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) to analyze couple data. This model recommends that researchers use dyads as the unit of analysis; it can study dyadic members that have distinguishable characteristics (e.g., heterosexual couples, and the parent and child’s relationship) or nondistinguishable characteristics (e.g., same-sex roommates) (Kenny et al., 2006). It suggests that, for a given set of variables, an individual’s independent variables affect that person’s dependent variable (actor effect) and the partner’s dependent variable (partner effect). It also examines actor and partner effects simultaneously while taking the shared couple-level phenomenon into account.

We conducted a series of the multilevel modeling (MLM) analyses with the Proc Mixed procedure in SAS 9.2 to examine actor and partner effects of study variables and marital satisfaction. We treated husband–wife dyads as the unit of analysis and created a “two-intercept model” (Kenny et al., 2006, p. 176) for husbands and wives. Two dummy variables were created. One was called Male (Male = 1 if the person was male, 0 otherwise). The other was called Female (Female = 1 if the person is female, 0 otherwise). Husbands’ and wives’ stressful life events and three cultural marital management skills were considered as mixed predictor variables, which varied within and between dyads (Kenny et al., 2006). We also examined the interaction between each marital management skill and stressful life events to test whether the relationship between stressful life events and predictions for marital satisfaction differed depending on the level of each marital management skill. Fit indexes such as Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) further helped us to assess the model fit with the data while adding variables. The influences of marital duration and marital status were controlled in all analyses. The combined equation of the model we examined is as follows:

\[
\text{Marital Satisfaction} = \text{Male} + \text{Female} + \beta_1 \text{(ACTOR\_Stress)}(\text{Male/Female}) + \beta_2 \text{(PARTNER\_Stress)}(\text{Male/Female}) + \beta_3 \text{(ACTOR\_Marital Management skills)}(\text{Male/Female}) + \beta_4 \text{(PARTNER\_Marital Management skills)}(\text{Male/Female}) + \beta_5 \text{(Stress \times Marital Management Skills)}(\text{Male/Female}) + \text{Residuals}.\
\]

**RESULTS**

**Descriptive Statistics**

The correlations among the studied variables are shown in Table 1. Husbands’ and wives’ stressful life events were negatively associated with each spouse’s marital satisfaction \( (p \leq .01) \). Husbands’ and wives’ marital management skills were positively associated with both one’s own and the spouse’s marital satisfaction \( (p \leq .01) \). One’s own marital management skills were also positively associated with the spouse’s respective marital management skills \( (p \leq .01) \), confirming that the data was interdependent.

Paired-sample \( t \) tests were then conducted to examine whether mean levels of stressful life events, the three marital management skills, and marital satisfaction were different for husbands and wives. Table 1 presents the sample means and standard deviations for study variables. There were statistically significant differences across these three variables. Wives reported more stressful life events than husbands, \( t(370) = -2.14, p < .05 \). In addition, wives had a lower marital satisfaction than husbands, \( t(369) = 5.17, p < .001 \). In terms of the marital management skills, husbands self-reported more tolerance and sacrifice skills than wives, \( t(368) = 4.96, p < .001 \). Husbands also reported more soothing/alleviation skills than wives, \( t(368) = 2.44, p < .05 \). There was not a significant difference between husbands and wives in terms of their reports of empathy and consideration skills, \( t(368) = .57, p = .57 \).

**Multilevel Modeling Analyses**

Stressful life events on marital satisfaction. The simplest model was first examined by only adding actor and partner effects of the stressful life event variable in the equation. The result showed that participants who reported more stressful life events were also more likely to report less marital satisfaction (actor effects, see Table 2, Model 1). Husbands’ stressful life events were negatively related to his own marital satisfaction \( (\beta = -.08, SE = .04, p < .05) \). Wives’ stressful life events were also negatively
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<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>17.41</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.11**</td>
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<td>2. Stress</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
<td>-.07*</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<td>3. Tolerance/sacrifice</td>
<td>31.78</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.11**</td>
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<td>4. Empathy/consideration</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>.18**</td>
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<td>5. Soothing/alleviation</td>
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<td>.16**</td>
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<td>6. Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>16.55</td>
<td>3.07</td>
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<td>-.21**</td>
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<td>7. Stress</td>
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<td>8. Tolerance/sacrifice</td>
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<td>9. Empathy/consideration</td>
<td>24.69</td>
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*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01.
Stressful Life Events and Marital Satisfaction

Table 2. Multilevel Models Predicting Taiwanese Couples’ Marital Satisfaction with Stressful Life Events and Marital Management Skills (Standardized Results)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Model 1</th>
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<th>Model 3</th>
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<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>17.43***</td>
<td>17.53***</td>
<td>17.78***</td>
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<td>(SE = .18)</td>
<td>(SE = .17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>16.86***</td>
<td>16.85***</td>
<td>16.83***</td>
<td>17.19***</td>
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<td>(SE = .22)</td>
<td>(SE = .22)</td>
<td>(SE = .21)</td>
<td>(SE = .20)</td>
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<td>–.07†</td>
<td>–0.07†</td>
<td>–.13***</td>
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<td>(SE = .04)</td>
<td>(SE = .04)</td>
<td>(SE = .04)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>–.11*</td>
<td>–0.11*</td>
<td>–0.12**</td>
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<td>(SE = .04)</td>
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<td>Marital management skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Husband manage (actor effect)</td>
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<td>(SE = .03)</td>
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<td>Interaction effects</td>
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<td>Stress × Husband manage (actor effect)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress × Husband manage (partner effect)</td>
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<td>–.02*</td>
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Note: Nonsignificant coefficients and interactions were not included in final models.

†p ≤ .10. *p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001. ****p ≤ .0001.

associated with her own marital satisfaction (β = –.11, SE = .04, p < .05). However, one’s own stressful life events were not associated with the spouse’s marital satisfaction (partner effects). This finding was consistent throughout the other models (see Table 2, Model 2, 3, 4).

Stressful life events with tolerance and sacrifice model. Actor and partner effects of each marital management skill were then added to the equation. Husbands’ and wives’ tolerance and sacrifice skills were positively associated with each own marital satisfaction (β = .12, SE = .02, p < .0001; β = .08, SE = .03, p < .001, respectively). Participants who reported using more tolerance and sacrifice skills were also likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction (actor effects). In addition, husbands’ tolerance and sacrifice skills were also positively associated with the wife’s marital satisfaction (β = .11, SE = .03, p < .001). Participants whose husband reported using more tolerance and sacrifice skills were also likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction (partner effects).

In terms of interaction effects, only husbands’ tolerance and sacrifice skills appeared to significantly and negatively moderate the association between the wives’ stressful life events and marital satisfaction (β = –.02, SE = .01, p < .05). Follow-up analyses demonstrated that a wife’s stress was negatively related to her marital satisfaction for the husband’s low
tolerance and sacrifice group (median-split), $\gamma = -.17, SE = .06, t = -2.19, p < .05$, as well as for the husband’s high tolerance and sacrifice group, $\gamma = -.25, SE = .07, t = -3.62, p < .001$. From Figure 1, the high husband tolerance and sacrifice skills only buffered the association between wife stress and wife marital satisfaction when wife stress level was fewer than 5. When wife stress level was more than 5, the high husband tolerance and sacrifice skills did not appear to be helpful in buffering the association between wife stress and her marital satisfaction.

Stressful life events with empathy and consideration model. The results demonstrated in Table 2, Model 3 showed that husbands’ and wives’ empathy and consideration skills were positively associated with each own marital satisfaction ($\beta = .19, SE = .03, p < .0001; \beta = .15, SE = .03, p < .0001$, respectively). Participants who reported exercising more empathy and consideration skills were also likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction (actor effects). In addition, husbands’ empathy and consideration skills were also positively associated with the wife’s marital satisfaction ($\beta = .16, SE = .04, p < .0001$). Participants whose husband reported exercising more empathy and consideration skills were likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction (partner effects).

In terms of interaction effects, only husbands’ empathy and consideration skills appeared to significantly and negatively moderate the association between wives’ stressful life events and wives’ marital satisfaction ($\beta = -.02, SE = .01, p < .05$). Follow-up analyses demonstrated that a wife’s stress was negatively related to her marital satisfaction for the husbands’ high empathy and consideration group, $\gamma = -.28, SE = .07, t = -3.79, p < .001$, but not related to the husbands’ low empathy and consideration group, $\gamma = -.13, SE = .06, t = -1.77, p = .08$. From Figure 2, the high husband empathy and consideration skills only buffered the association between wife stress and wife marital satisfaction when wife stress level was fewer than 10. When wife stress level was over 10, the high husband empathy and consideration skills did not appear to be helpful in buffering the association between wife stress and her marital satisfaction.

Stressful life events with soothing and alleviation model. As evident in Table 2, Model 4, only wives’ soothing and alleviation skills were positively associated with her own marital satisfaction ($\beta = .15, SE = .03, p < .0001$). Wives who reported using more soothing and alleviation skills in handling marital conflicts were also likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction (actor effects).

Husbands’ and wives’ soothing and alleviation skills significantly and positively moderated the association between each spouse’s stressful life events and marital satisfaction ($\beta = .001, SE$...
Stressful Life Events and Marital Satisfaction

**FIGURE 3. INTERACTION OF HUSBAND SOOTHING AND HUSBAND STRESS IN PREDICTING HUSBAND MARITAL SATISFACTION.**

Follow-up analyses demonstrated that husband stress was negatively related to his marital satisfaction for the husbands’ low soothing and alleviation group, $\gamma = -0.21, SE = 0.06, t = -3.24, p < .01$, as well as for the husbands’ high soothing and alleviation group, $\gamma = -0.17, SE = 0.05, t = -1.96, p < .05$. As can be seen in Figure 3, the high husband soothing and alleviation skill group overall had better buffering effects on the association between husband stress and his marital satisfaction than the lower group. The higher the husband stress level was, the better the buffering effects existed.

**FIGURE 4. INTERACTION OF WIFE SOOTHING AND WIFE STRESS IN PREDICTING WIFE MARITAL SATISFACTION.**

Wife stress was also negatively related to her marital satisfaction for the wives’ low soothing and alleviation group, $\gamma = -0.16, SE = 0.07, t = -2.42, p < .05$, as well as for the wives’ high soothing and alleviation group, $\gamma = -0.35, SE = 0.05, t = -4.61, p < .01$. From Figure 4, the high wife soothing and alleviation skill group overall had better buffering effects on the association between wife stress and her marital satisfaction than the lower group. The lower the wife stress level was, the better the buffering effects existed.

### DISCUSSION

The main goal of this study was to examine the association between stressful life events and Taiwanese couples’ marital satisfaction, as well as the interaction effects of Chinese cultural factors with that association. Overall, the results supported our study hypotheses.

**Stressful Life Events and Marital Satisfaction**

Taiwanese husbands and wives who reported more stressful life events were also more likely to feel less satisfied with their marriages. This finding was consistent with our hypotheses and corresponded with previous findings that couples experiencing more stressful life events tended to report more negative evaluations of their relationship and to have a perceived lower marital quality (Neff & Karney, 2009; Pearlin, 2010). Contrary to the “linked lives” perspective (Elder, 2000; Randall & Bodenmann, 2008), Taiwanese husbands’ and wives’ stressful life events did not appear to spill over to the partner’s marital satisfaction. Unique Chinese cultural values in managing meanings of difficult situations seemed to moderate the association between stressful life events and the couples’ marital satisfaction.

**Roles of Three Marital Management Skills**

Chinese cultural values with Confucian, Buddhist, and collectivistic emphases still affect Taiwanese couples’ ways of managing marital distress. These values were often associated with the couples’ marital satisfaction.
Actor effects. All three marital management skills (tolerance/sacrifice, empathy/consideration, and soothing/alleviation) were significantly associated with one’s own marital satisfaction, except for husbands’ soothing and alleviation skills. These collectivist ideas of “self-reserved tolerance,” “forgiving-sacrifice,” and “consideration and empathy for others” involve low concern for the self and high concern for others (Lee & Yang, 1998; Li, 2005). When Taiwanese spouses successfully handled marital distress and conflicts by using these culturally valued skills, they fulfilled social and cultural expectations of maintaining appropriate interpersonal behaviors (e.g., promoting harmony) within one type of Confucius’s five relations doctrine to be a good husband and wife (Chan & Lee, 2004). Therefore, pursuing relational harmony through the marital relationship was positively associated with Taiwanese people’s marital satisfaction (Cheng, 2010).

Only wives’ soothing skills were significantly associated with her marital satisfaction, but husbands’ soothing skills were not associated with his marital satisfaction. The soothing and alleviation skills involve more active performances (e.g., expressing comforting words to alleviate the partner’s suffering, giving physical comfort to the spouse) to enhance relational harmony. It is considered as a problem-solving function coping, meaning that people take actions to change the troubled person–environment relationship to relieve their psychological distress (Lazarus, 1993a, 1993b). Cheng (2010) proposed that Taiwanese men are socialized and educated differently from women, who tend to be more relationally oriented and use more emotional expression. Congruent with social norms of women’s relational involvement in Taiwan, the wives in this study who were more able to use this problem-solving soothing skill to handle marital distress tended to report higher levels of marital satisfaction.

Partner effects. Taiwanese husbands’ ability to tolerate and sacrifice and to show empathy for the spouse’s needs was associated with an increase in the wife’s marital satisfaction. This finding corresponds to Gottman’s (1999) research in which the males’ abilities to manage marital distress contributed to a positive marital outcome. Sastry’s (1999) “broad and narrow” theory of socialization also explains gender differences in the association between these two cultural marital management skills and Taiwanese couples’ marital satisfaction. He proposed that the couple has greater marital satisfaction if a husband has more egalitarian values than his wife, who has relatively traditional values. Therefore, when a husband can practice more egalitarian gender roles (e.g., willingness to sacrifice his needs, not insisting on his own power and opinions) in a changing hierarchical but still quite patriarchal society such as Taiwan, the wife would feel much more satisfied with the husband’s efforts in marriage; this relationship is in line with previous Taiwanese findings (Chen & Li, 2012; Wu et al., 2010) and American studies (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 1992).

Sastry’s (1999) “broad and narrow” theory may also explain why Taiwanese wives’ tolerance and sacrifice, empathy and consideration, and soothing and alleviation skills were not associated with their husband’s marital satisfaction in our study. Taiwanese husbands might underestimate the wife’s efforts in marriage and take them for granted because of social norms for females to do so. Therefore, Taiwanese wives’ three marital management skills were not associated with the husband’s perception of marital satisfaction.

Interaction (moderating) effects. Husbands’ tolerance/sacrifice and empathy/consideration skills had significant interactions with the relationship between the wife’s stressful life events and her marital satisfaction. However, both skills had buffering effects only when the wife’s stress was lower. These two skills can be perceived as emotion-focused coping, to “change only the way we attend to or interpret what is happening” (Lazarus, 1993b, p. 8), and relate to each spouse’s internal regulation and interpretation process of marital distress. Even though changing one’s interpretation of what is happening may be helpful in coping with stress, the effectiveness of coping is also determined contextually, meaning that what works in one context might become counterproductive in another (Lazarus, 1993a, 1993b). The findings suggested that these two marital management skills were not as useful when the wife had compounded stressful life events. According to the social structure perspective (Christen & Heavey, 1990), women with less power tend to pursue change in the relationship. Taiwanese wives with less power in a patriarchal society might project their desire for change onto the
husband, desiring him to use more problem-solving skills, and were not satisfied with these passive and emotion-focused typed coping strategies for handling compounded stress.

There was another significant interaction between the soothing/alleviation skills and the association between stressful life events and each spouse’s marital satisfaction. In addition, there was a gender difference in using the skills for coping with different levels of stress. The skills caused more beneficial effects on marital satisfaction when Taiwanese husbands had more stress, whereas they were more beneficial for Taiwanese wives when they had lower stress. It is possible that Taiwanese husbands experience greater benefits from exerting the soothing and alleviation skills with higher stress because they are not expected to do so in a patriarchal society (Cheng, 2010). When they are able to soothe the spouse and alleviate marital tension, especially in a high-stress context, they personally feel more competent in managing stressful life events and marital stress, leading to higher marital satisfaction. Taiwanese wives may be sufficiently involved in using the alleviation and soothing skills in the earlier stage of stress because they have been educated and expected to be more relationally oriented and emotionally expressive (Cheng, 2010).

SUMMARY
The findings for Taiwanese couples are consistent with the stress process, life course perspectives (Elder, 2000; Pearlin, 2010), and coping theory (Lazarus, 1993a, 1993b). Stressful life events are associated with lower marital satisfaction, but the management of meanings of difficult situations can moderate that association. Marital management skills informed by the Confucianism and Buddhism embedded in Chinese culture specifically have beneficial effects associated with Taiwanese couples’ marital satisfaction in different stress level contexts, as well as gender differences in using those skills to deal with stress.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies
There are a few limitations in this study. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits causal inferences among study variables. Second, the snowball sampling method used in the study may have introduced some bias and the generalizability of results is therefore limited. Additionally, Taiwanese couples might overestimate their marital satisfaction because maintaining relational harmony is valued in Confucianism and they might not report how they really feel about their spouse.

Future research could include longitudinal designs to study the association between stressful life events and the couples’ marital satisfaction to capture the nature of change over the life course. Gender-role perceptions and expectations are constantly changing in Taiwan as it gradually becomes a more developed country and receives more Western cultural influences. Significant findings in our study imply that traditional Chinese cultural values (e.g., Confucianism) still influence Taiwanese couples. Taiwanese couples might face unique challenges in balancing different types of gender-role expectations and practicing different kinds of gender role behaviors that are informed either by Chinese and collectivistic or Western and individualistic cultures. Future research might explore those factors and their dynamic associations with Taiwanese couples’ marital satisfaction. Third, to strengthen the study’s conclusion, it is beneficial to examine whether couples from Western cultures who use similar management skills would also report greater marital satisfaction. A cross-cultural comparison study could also be helpful to see how Western and Eastern couples practice similar or different marital management skills in handling stress.

Practical Implications
This study’s findings have several implications for mental health practitioners. To help couples handling stress, mental health practitioners must not only actively listen to couples’ life stories but also explore and manage their meaning-making process of stressful life events. When working with couples with Chinese cultural influences, the practitioners are especially encouraged to recognize how Chinese values such as tolerance, sacrifice, empathy, consideration for others, and soothing concepts shape couples’ perceptions of managing marital stress and external stressful life events. By doing so, the practitioners develop a culturally-responsive intervention that adapts to couples’ cultural beliefs. We noted especially that Taiwanese husbands’ abilities of managing stress helped increase their own and the spouse’s marital
satisfaction. Practitioners can emphasize the benefits of Taiwanese husbands’ involvement in managing stressful life events by inviting the husband’s participation in couple therapy. Wives in a changing patriarchal society would particularly benefit from relational types of intervention when the husband is willing to practice skills such as considering and expressing their empathy for the spouse’s needs, leading to a more egalitarian relationship.

Practitioners also need to assess the severity of stress while developing appropriate managing skills that tailor to couples’ needs. Management skills for coping with lower stress might not be as beneficial for handling compounded stress. Practitioners need to facilitate couples in exploring, discussing, and developing different management skills that effectively cope with different types and severities of stressful life events. Taiwanese couple might prefer active and behavioral types of management skills (e.g., soothing the other, problem-solving skills) when dealing with more severe and compounded stressful life events to ease the immediately unfavorable effects. Practitioners are also encouraged to clarify couples’ gender difference in choosing management skills to cope with stress. They should guide couples to discover and understand one’s rationale of choosing a coping strategy, communicate each preference and expectation, and negotiate and generate new skills that fit both parties’ needs.

REFERENCES


