

## **POSITIVE SELF-VIEWS: UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSALS AND VARIABILITY ACROSS CULTURES**

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**Abstract.** Human psychology varies importantly across cultures, however, considerations of this variation is often missing from evolutionary theories about the origins of psychological phenomena. To the extent that a psychological phenomenon is not universal, compelling evolutionary accounts need to be targeted at a level of analysis that is universal. An example of pronounced cultural variation in motivations for positive self-views is considered. Westerners tend to be more concerned about maintaining self-esteem, whereas East Asians tend to be more focused on maintaining face. Implications for understanding underlying motivations and evolutionary origins is discussed.

**Keywords:** culture, evolution, self, self-esteem

Evolutionary psychology has been largely concerned with explicating how various mental modules have emerged as adaptations to problems that were regularly encountered in the ancestral environment. Much compelling research has identified how we can understand a variety of psychological tendencies, such as mating strategies (BUSS 1989), altruism (HAMILTON 1972), and cheater detection (COSMIDES and TOOBY 1992), in terms of how these were selected for in the past. However, the existence of cultural variation in psychological processes renders the task of identifying the selected mechanisms underlying them to be highly challenging. When psychological processes emerge to look highly similar across cultures, explanations in terms of adaptations are readily evident and compelling. For example, that in cultures around the world people prefer sweet and fatty foods (ROZIN 1976), express their happiness by smiling (EKMAN, SORENSON and FRIESEN 1969), and are populated by males who are more violent than females (DALY and WILSON 1988), presents researchers with an excellent opportunity to posit the selective pressures that existed in the ancestral environment and to develop novel, and sometimes counterintuitive, hypotheses which can be tested in the laboratory (GANGESTAD and THORNHILL 1998). However, when a psychological process emerges in a dramatically different form across cultures, the task of identifying the adaptation is not as straightforward. This article will consider the challenge of considering cultural variability in evolutionary theories by exploring a psychological phenomenon that shows a great deal of cultural variation: the self-enhancement motive.

## SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-ENHANCING MOTIVATIONS

Self-enhancement is a motivation that has captured the interest of many psychologists. Defined as the tendency to dwell on and elaborate positive information about the self over negative self-relevant information, self-enhancement has been central to a wide variety of research programs, including prejudice (NOEL, WANN, and BRANSCOMBE 1995), aggression (BAUMEISTER, SMART and BODEN 1996), relationships (MURRAY, HOLMES and GRIFFIN 1996), and cognitive dissonance (STEELE, SPENCER and LYNCH 1993), to name a few. The great deal of interest in this topic is evident in the enormous amount of research that has been conducted on self-esteem and self-enhancement over the past few decades. Indeed, there are few topics in social psychology that have received more attention. However, despite the great deal of interest in the self-enhancement motive, there is little consensus in the field regarding how this motivation originated, or what function it serves (BARKOW 1989; HEINE et al. 1999; LEARY et al. 1995; PYSZCZYNSKI et al., in press).

One likely reason behind the popularity of the self-enhancement motive in psychological research is the sheer magnitude of this motivation, at least within North American populations. The evidence for its magnitude comes from a variety of different sources. Firstly, positive self-views are highly prevalent. For example, BAUMEISTER, TICE and HUTTON (1989) noted that, without a single exception, the means of distributions of self-esteem scores fell above the theoretical midpoint of the scale. HEINE and LEHMAN (2003) also noted that that 93% of European-Canadians in their omnibus sample could be classified as having high self-esteem. Positive self-views are common indeed.

It does not appear that people are reaching these positive self-evaluations through an objective, detached consideration of the evidence. Rather, there is much evidence to suggest that people (again, at least North Americans) have an exaggeratedly positive view of themselves. For instance, people view themselves in unrealistically positive terms when they evaluate themselves, consider their future, make attributions for their performance, attempt to control their world, or remember their past (for reviews see GREENWALD 1980; TAYLOR and BROWN 1988). Moreover, they have similarly positively biased views of the groups to which they belong, viewing their friends, families, schools, countries, and social groups in unrealistically positive terms as well (BROWN, COLLINS and SCHMIDT 1988; HEINE and LEHMAN 1997).

Although there is evidence for cognitive biases underlying some of these tendencies for positive self-views (KLAR and GILADI 1997; MILLER and ROSS 1975), we tend to speak of such positive distortions in people's self-evaluations as reflecting a motivational bias because of the findings from a number of different research paradigms that have investigated how people respond when they are deprived of a positive self-view. When North Americans encounter failure, for example, they are like-

ly to seek out a downward social comparison target to create a favorable contrast (WILLS 1981), boost their evaluation in other unrelated domains to compensate for the failure (BAUMEISTER and JONES 1978), or align themselves with positive others in order to bask in their reflected glory (CIALDINI et al. 1976). Much research has underscored a hydraulic model for how people compensate for negative self-evaluations by boosting their self-esteem through some other means (TESSER et al. 2000). These research paradigms reveal that people are motivated to secure a positive self-view.

In sum, there is a great deal of evidence for the existence of strong self-enhancement motivations. A meta-analysis of the magnitude of self-enhancing motivations among North Americans revealed an effect size of .89, an extremely strong tendency (HEINE and HAMAMURA 2004). Moreover, there is evidence that this self-enhancement bias has been getting stronger in recent decades (TWENGE and CAMPBELL 2001). Self-enhancing motivations can, therefore, be very pronounced indeed.

#### QUESTIONING THE ORIGINS OF THE SELF-ENHANCEMENT MOTIVE

The pervasiveness and magnitude of self-enhancement motivations has led some researchers to propose an evolutionary account of this motive. That is, people have come to favor positive information regarding themselves over negative information because these tendencies have been selected in the ancestral environment. A variety of different accounts have been proposed for how the self-enhancement motive may have emerged as an adaptation. BARKOW (1989), for example, posits that self-esteem was selected to serve as a gauge of subtle changes of the individuals' status within dominance hierarchies. LEARY and colleagues (LEARY et al. 1995) propose that self-esteem is an adaptation that functions as an indicator to detect when our social relationships with others were vulnerable. Terror management theory (PYSZCZYNSKI et al., in press) proposes that self-esteem emerged as an adaptation that serves to stave off the debilitating existential anxieties that come from our fears of our own mortality. These divergent theories share a common theme: a motivation as powerful and pervasive as self-enhancement must serve to increase our fitness, especially given the potential costs that individuals must sometimes bear for holding these motivations (e.g., BAUMEISTER et al. 1996; PAULHUS 1998).

However, before constructing a theory about how self-enhancement emerged as an adaptive element of human nature, it is important to be confident that our theories are based on a representative sample of human nature. This point is not typically underscored by evolutionary biologists as issues of sampling are rarely relevant for studying other animal species. For the most part, one blue-footed booby is as good

as any other for documenting the nature of blue-footed boobies. However, a critical issue that concerns many of the social sciences is that human beings differ from other species, in that humans are so dependent on culture (GEERTZ 1973). Although there might be some precursors to cultural learning in some other species, no other species is as fully enculturated as humans (TOMASELLO 1999). Human fitness importantly depends on individuals' ability to learn cultural information and to teach it to their offspring. Humans do not interact with their physical environments directly. Rather, they interact with environments that are, in part, cultural constructions. Within these cultural environments key needs such as safety, procuring food, attracting mates, and fending off rivals, are pursued by engaging in learned behaviors, applying acquired technologies, and following culturally-determined protocols and etiquettes. Human actions, like the actions of all species, have biological significance. However, human actions are distinct in that they are draped in particular cultural meanings.

That humans are a cultural species does not mean that human universals do not exist, or that we cannot speak of a biological underpinning to our cultural behaviors. However, to say that humans are cultural beings does mean that we have to be careful about identifying the level of analysis by which we consider human universals. One level of analysis targets the phenomenon as it manifests itself in human behavior. To the extent that this is a behavior that varies importantly across cultures in its manifestation is what anthropologists refer to as an emic phenomenon (PIKE 1967). A second level of analysis targets the phenomenon at a level which is common to all cultures. This is termed an etic phenomenon. Some etic phenomena are incapable of being observed directly because they are instantiated in dramatically different forms in different cultures. For example, marriage is an etic phenomenon, as in all cultures there is some form of institutionalized arrangement for men and women to form a long-term mating relationship that facilitates the caring of offspring (BROWN 1991). However, the various kinds of marriages that we see around the world (e.g., arranged monogamy, voluntary serial monogamy, polygyny, fraternal polyandry), are emic phenomena. The claim that marriage is etic can only be made by abstracting from the commonalities across the diverse array of emic instantiations of marriage. The challenge for deriving evolutionary theories is that it is not immediately clear whether a particular phenomenon, such as fraternal polyandrous marriage, is etic or emic. We can only be confident that we have correctly identified the etic level when we have considered a diverse enough sampling of the world's cultures.

A compelling theory, then, about the evolutionary origins of the self-enhancement motive, cannot rely solely on evidence that is gathered in a single cultural context, such as that of Western industrialized societies. If a theory proposes that self-enhancement has evolved to solve some kind of problem in the ancestral environment, such as status, or belongingness, or quelling existential anxieties, we should

see evidence for this motivation in all cultures, or at least in all cultures where concerns with status, belongingness, and existential despair are as evident as they are in the West. To the extent that the self-enhancement motive is much weaker, or largely absent, in other non-Western cultural contexts would require that these theories be significantly qualified, if not rejected. Thus far, however, theories about the origins of self-enhancement have concerned themselves almost exclusively with data from Western cultures.

### SELF-ENHANCEMENT IN EAST ASIA

Over the past decade there has been a great deal of research on self-enhancing motivations in East Asian cultural contexts. However, in contrast to the research conducted in Western cultural contexts, East Asian research has not revealed clear evidence for the self-enhancement motive. For example, research has shown that whereas Westerners, across a range of contexts, seek downward social comparison partners in an attempt to create a favorable contrast and boost a positive self-evaluation (WILLS 1981), people of East Asian descent prefer to seek out upward comparisons, particularly after experiencing failure (WHITE and LEHMAN 2004). Whereas Americans also tend to evaluate themselves more positively than they are viewed by others, Japanese rate themselves *less* positively than they are viewed by others (HEINE and RENSHAW 2002). In addition, whereas Canadians are more easily convinced that they have done well, rather than poorly on a task, Japanese are more likely to believe that they have performed poorly than well on a task (HEINE, TAKATA and LEHMAN 2000). This pattern of a relative lack of self-enhancement among East Asians is not due to a selective review of the literature. A recent meta-analysis found that in every published cross-cultural study examining self-enhancing biases between East Asians and Westerners, there were significantly greater biases among Westerners (HEINE and HAMAMURA 2004). The average effect size across these 45 studies was large ( $d = .82$ ). Moreover, across all of these studies, East Asians were not showing significant self-enhancement ( $d = .01$ ). In sum, there is scant evidence for self-enhancing motivations among East Asians.

It is possible, however, that the observed cultural differences in self-enhancement are not due to differences in motivations, but rather, that various experimental artifacts have prevented us from detecting strong East Asian self-enhancing motivations. For example, some alternative explanations that have been raised in the literature include: East Asians self-enhance in collectivistic domains (SEDIKIDES, GAERTNER and TOGUCHI 2003); East Asians self-enhance by viewing their groups in unrealistically positive terms (MURAMOTO and YAMAGUCHI 1997); and East Asians are concealing their true self-enhancing motivations by feigning modesty (KURMAN,

2003). However, these alternative explanations are weakened by the fact that the bulk of the experimental evidence appears to directly contradict them (for reviews see HEINE et al. 1999; HEINE 2003; HEINE, in press). Self-enhancing motivations appear to be far weaker, if not largely absent, among East Asians.

### Face maintenance motivations

That East Asians have little motivation to view themselves positively does not mean that they do not have other important self-relevant motivations that can inform investigations into the origins of self-enhancement motivations. Much has been written about a motivation for "face" that appears to be especially prominent in East Asian contexts (TING-TOOMEY 1994). Face has been defined as "the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position" (HO 1976, p. 883). Face shares some features with self-enhancement, in that both are concerned with positive evaluations about an individual. There are, however, important differences in the psychological processes that are associated with the two. Considered below are a number of psychological processes that vary depending on whether one is trying to self-enhance and maintain self-esteem, or whether one is trying to self-improve and maintain face.

*Promotion vs. Prevention Focus.* First, as evident in HO's definition, face is received when one functions at an adequate level for their role. Although face is lost when one performs at a level that fails to meet the minimum standards, performing at a level that surpasses the minimum standards is not met with a calibrated increase in face. As a Cantonese expression puts it, "Face is for others to give and yourself to lose". This inherent asymmetry in the concept of face suggests that face is a currency that requires individuals to be more vigilant to opportunities for loss than to opportunities for gain.

In contrast, because self-enhancement is associated with identifying positive features about the self, and downplaying potentially negative features, there is an asymmetry in the opposite direction to that of face. Self-enhancing individuals tend to dwell on, elaborate, and exaggerate positive information about their selves, whereas negative information tends to be downplayed, rationalized, or forgotten (see TAYLOR and BROWN 1988 for a review). Self-esteem is thus a currency that is more easily gained than lost.

People respond differently when they are considering resources that vary in their ease of accumulation or loss. When focusing on how one can attain positive outcomes, people are more likely to adopt a promotion focus, in which they dwell on

issues such as advancements, accomplishments, and aspirations (HIGGINS 1999). In contrast, when concerned with how to avoid negative outcomes, people adopt a prevention focus, and elaborate upon issues regarding their safety and security. Because of the asymmetries inherent in face-maintenance and self-enhancement, we would expect that there would be corresponding cultural differences in regulatory focus – that is, East Asians should be relatively more prevention focused whereas North Americans should be more promotion focused.

Several recent studies have been conducted that provide evidence in support of this idea. For example, LEE, AAKER and GARDNER (2000) found that East Asians viewed tennis games framed as opportunities to avoid a loss as more important than North Americans. In contrast, North Americans viewed these same games as more important than East Asians when they were framed as opportunities to secure a win. ELLIOT et al. (2001) also contrasted the personal goals of Koreans and Americans and found that avoidance personal goals were more commonly identified among Koreans than Americans. Moreover, whereas the presence of avoidance personal goals was associated with lower subjective well-being among Americans, this relationship did not hold for Koreans (see also IP and CHIU 2002). In addition, HEINE et al. (2001) have shown that North Americans tend to persist longer after successes than failures, whereas Japanese exert greater effort after failures than successes (see also HOSHINO-BROWNE and SPENCER 2000; OISHI and DIENER 2003). Taken together, these results demonstrate that regulatory focus varies importantly across cultures.

*Internal vs. External Frame of Reference.* Perhaps the most obvious and important way in which self-esteem and face differ is with respect to who is doing the evaluating. High self-esteem can only be achieved if individuals view themselves positively. To be sure, people's own evaluations of themselves are importantly influenced by what they think others are thinking of them. Self-evaluations reflect perceptions of how others are viewing one (LEARY et al. 1995). However, achieving high self-esteem requires that the individual internalize their thoughts on the standards by which others are evaluating them. When individuals feel that they are meeting these internalized standards of success, they will feel good about themselves and their self-esteem will increase. In contrast, face is secured only when others view the individual positively. To secure face, people need to be concerned about how others are viewing them, and as such, must consider how they are measuring up to the standards of others. Feeling that one is doing well does not boost one's face; face is only maintained when others are willing to grant it. Hence, if an individual is primarily concerned with face, he or she will be more concerned with the perspective of an audience. These different frames of reference are important components of self-esteem and face, and require distinct strategies to secure them.

Self-esteem maintenance thus involves a rather straightforward goal. Individuals need to convince themselves that they are good, and these efforts are fostered by

self-deception. However, a critical feature of self-deception is that the self is very cooperative when being misled to think of itself in overly positive terms. Others, in contrast, are not so easily deceived. An audience does not share the same motivation to form a positive evaluation of the individual. As such, audiences tend to evaluate performers in rather objective terms at best, and are likely in many situations to derogate the performer in order to satisfy their own self-deceptive desire to find downward social comparison targets (WILLS 1981).

Individuals are in a very vulnerable position when the key source of evaluation moves from the easily deceived self, to the potentially critical perspective of an audience. It would seem that when individuals are concerned about face maintenance and living up to the standards of an audience, the best strategy would be to adopt a perspective that is at least as critical as that of the audience. By identifying behavior that might potentially fall short of others' standards, and by working towards correcting and eliminating these vulnerabilities, the individual is best able to protect their face.

The differential emphasis placed on face and self-esteem in different cultures predicts comparable cultural differences in frames of reference. Indeed, recent evidence indicates that East Asians are more likely than North Americans to maintain an external frame of reference. For example, COHEN and GUNZ (2002) found that Asian-Canadians are more likely to experience third-person than first-person memories for situations in which they were the center of attention. That is, their recall of their past experiences included much imagery of how they appeared at the time to others – imagery which was never accessible to them directly. Their heightened sensitivity of an audience leaked into their memories of themselves. In contrast, Euro-Canadians' memories for themselves at the center of attention showed significantly less of this third-person imagery. Euro-Canadians' memories of situations in which they were at the center of attention entailed more imagery that was consistent with how they originally saw the event.

Cross-cultural research on self-awareness also identifies cultural differences in frames of reference. When individuals are aware of how they appear to others they are said to be in the state of objective self-awareness (DUVALL and WICKLUND 1972). That is, they are aware of how they appear as an object, a "me," in contrast to the experience of being a subject, an "I". It would seem that to the extent that East Asians are aware of an audience, and are adjusting their behaviors to that audience, they should be more likely to be in a habitual state of objective self-awareness than North Americans. If this is the case then stimuli that serve to enhance objective self-awareness (for example, seeing oneself in front of a mirror) should have little effect on East Asians. More specifically, even in the absence of a mirror, East Asians should be considering themselves in terms of how they appear to others. A recent cross-cultural study provides evidence to corroborate this hypothesis. HEINE et al.



(2004) found that whereas Canadians and Americans showed a decrease in self-esteem, and an increase in self-discrepancies when they saw their reflection in a mirror, Japanese self-evaluations were unaffected by the presence of a mirror. Moreover, although North Americans' self-evaluations were vastly more positive than those of the Japanese in the absence of the mirror, their self-evaluations were at relatively similar levels to Japanese self-evaluations when they were in front of the mirror. One reason that self-evaluations made by North Americans tend to be more positive may be that North Americans are less likely than their Japanese counterparts to consider how they appear to others. Objectivity constrains the ability to maintain a positive self-view.

*Independent vs. Interdependent Views of Self.* A final process implicated in maintaining self-esteem and face is with regard to how people view themselves. One way of considering the self is to see it as a relatively autonomous, self-sustaining collection of attributes that is largely independent from others. This independent view of self has been the working model for many of the theories of self that have been developed by a Western-dominated social psychology. In contrast, a second way of construing the self is to see it as being fundamentally interconnected, situationally-variable, and grounded in roles and relationships with significant ingroup others. This interdependent view of self has recently become a focus of research, particularly in non-Western cultures, and has been linked to a wide array of distinct phenomena (for reviews see HEINE 2001; MARKUS and KITAYAMA 1991; TRIANDIS 1989).

One way that independence would seem to be linked with self-esteem is that to the extent that the feelings of identity of an individual with an independent view of self are based on herself and herself alone, it would seem especially important for that individual to view herself positively. It would be difficult for an individual to feel autonomous and self-sufficient if she did not view herself as competent and talented. As such, it would seem that being able to feel as though one is self-reliant and capable requires that one embrace a relatively positive self-view. In contrast, feelings of identity for individuals with interdependent views of self importantly hinge on their relations with others (MARKUS and KITAYAMA 1991). Elaborating on what is positive about oneself will not serve to increase one's belongingness with others (and indeed, might have the opposite effect; see PAULHUS 1998). Rather, belongingness will be enhanced when one is viewed as desirable by significant others, and is seen to be contributing satisfactorily towards the goals of the ingroup. As such, maintaining one's face should be associated with the maintenance of belongingness.

This reasoning suggests that values related to the independent self theoretically should be intimately related with self-enhancement, whereas those related to the interdependent self should be largely unrelated, or even negatively related, to self-enhancement. A variety of studies have measured the correlations between trait independence and interdependence and self-esteem or self-enhancement. These studies

have consistently found a clear positive relationship between independence and positive self-views, regardless of culture, and a negative (albeit weaker) relationship between interdependence and positive self-views (HEINE et al. 1999; HEINE and RENSHAW 2002; OYSERMAN, COON and KEMMELMEIER 2002; SINGELIS et al. 1999). Self-enhancement is related to independence and is opposed to interdependence.

### ORIGINS OF MOTIVES AND LEVELS OF ANALYSES

The existence of pronounced cultural variation in the self-enhancement motive makes it problematic to explain origins for that motive in terms of the benefit positive self-views would have served in the ancestral environment. East Asians and Westerners share the same ancestors, at least up to about 30,000 years ago (CAVALLI-SFORZA and CAVALLI-SFORZA 1995), so we would expect that the same adaptations would be present in both cultural groups. It is theoretically possible that self-enhancement had more adaptive benefits in Western cultural environments, and that these motivations were selected in the 30,000 years since East Asians and Westerners have been separated. However, because East Asians who have acculturated to Western culture appear to share the same motivations as Westerners, this last account loses much plausibility (HEINE and LEHMAN 2003). This leaves us with the challenging findings that Westerners are especially concerned with self-esteem, and engage in a variety of psychological processes that facilitate positive self-views, whereas East Asians are more concerned with face-maintenance, and engage in the thought processes that facilitate a positive reputation, which often requires elaborating on negative information about the self. How can we consider evolutionary origins for such culturally divergent processes?

Cultural variation brings the question of whether we have considered the appropriate level of analysis to the forefront. For example, that East Asians do not display the tendency to favor positive information about the self over negative information means that self-enhancement that is operationalized in this way is not a universal motivation, and is not the appropriate level of analysis for understanding human motivations. Theories that hinge on the selective value of seeking positive information about the self over negative information in the ancestral value are far less compelling when we observe that such tendencies are not evident among East Asians. This cultural variation necessarily leads us to consider a different level of analysis.

As reviewed above, face maintenance and self-esteem enhancement are motivations that differ in terms of many of the psychological mechanisms that are implicated. However, they are similar in the sense that face and self-esteem are both resources that are seen as important for becoming the kind of person valued in East Asian and North American cultural contexts, respectively. In collectivistic cultures

the way to secure status, and the accompanying fitness that is associated with it, is to maintain face. In highly individualistic cultures the way to succeed is to live up to the cultural standards of self-contained individualism, autonomy, and self-sufficiency, and having high self-esteem facilitates this. While the goal to be a good person is the same, pursuing this goal entails identifying the standards and affordances by which our cultures define what a good person is (HEINE et al. 1999; cf., PYSZCZYNSKI et al., in press). This article proposes that the motivation to be a good person is the level at which we can speak of a universal motivation, and the challenge for psychologists is to consider the diverse ways by which people go about pursuing this goal.

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