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Steven J. Heine

Award for Distinguished Scientific Early Career Contributions to Psychology

Citation

“For original and compelling research on how cultural contexts shape psychological functioning. Using ingenious methods ranging from the careful observation of local social worlds to laboratory studies with elegant experimental designs, Steven J. Heine’s research has illuminated the structure and processes of the self in Japanese settings. In so doing, he has revealed that many psychological processes previously regarded as universal, including self-esteem, achievement motivation, dissonance, and optimism,

are most likely to be fostered in the context of North America. This bold and insightful work has encouraged psychologists to take a closer look at the knot of culture-specific assumptions that are built into all observations, analyses, and interpretations and has opened a door to understanding the ways in which the individual is fundamentally social and constituted in ongoing transaction with cultural meanings and practices.”

Biography

Steven J. Heine was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 1966, the second of two children, to Dorothy and Jerry Heine (a former pro football player turned watercolor artist). Heine enrolled in the University of Alberta, but being the first in his family to attend university, he was not sure what to do once he got there. His original thought was to study something practical, so he started out aiming for a degree in commerce. However, after a couple of years, he realized that although things business bored him dreadfully, he found the popular books on psychology that he was reading fascinating. Heine decided to switch his major to psychology, but this new major required him to take a second language in order to graduate. Having just read some books on Zen, he thought he might understand them better if he studied Japanese. The Japanese language courses were tremendously interesting, and Heine decided to make Japanese his minor.

As his graduation loomed, Heine realized he did not know what he wanted to do with his career. He liked his psychology courses and he liked traveling, and he thought it would be nice to find a way to do both. He heard about a field called cross-cultural psychology and figured that was the answer. But before applying to graduate school, Heine thought it would be fun to take an adventurous break, so he applied to the Japan Exchange of Teachers (JET) program to become an English teacher in Japan. The JET application permitted applicants to request a particular kind of placement, and Heine had stated that any placement would be fine as long as it was in a big city. The JET program responded by assigning him to an isolated town in Nagasaki prefecture called Obama, which was so tiny that it did not even have a train station. Heine had the distinction of being the first foreigner ever to live in Obama, and although there were many times that the isolation drove him to his wit’s end, he came to appreciate what an excellent opportunity he had to participate in such a traditional enclave of Japanese culture. Although his jobs as junior high school teacher and town mascot were not particularly inspiring, he did start to notice many aspects of his colleagues’ and students’ behaviors that seemed strikingly at odds with the views of human nature that he had learned from his psychology classes. In particular, he was struck by how the other Japanese teachers kept urging him

to stop praising the students so much because it would lead them to stop trying.

After two years in Obama, Heine applied to graduate school. He had always wanted to live in Vancouver and quickly jumped at the opportunity when the University of British Columbia (UBC) accepted his application. His future advisor, Darrin Lehman, mailed him a copy of an in-press *Psychological Review* article by Markus and Kitayama (1991, Vol. 98, pp. 224–253) on cultural psychology. He read it at the junior high school one day and had an epiphany. All of the loose and contradictory scraps of ideas that Heine had been entertaining about cultural differences between Japanese and Westerners now had a theoretical framework that integrated them all. He moved to UBC in 1991 with a number of ideas that he could not wait to test.

Heine had a terrific time at graduate school. He loved the freedom to develop and test his own ideas, and he really responded to Lehman's friendship and mentorship, which he continues to benefit from to this day. Lehman has an uncanny knack for recognizing good ideas, and he helped focus Heine's efforts in the right directions. Together they collaborated on a number of cross-cultural projects. While at UBC, Heine met and fell in love with his future wife, Nariko Takayanagi. Takayanagi was in the graduate program in sociology and was also studying cross-cultural differences between Japan and the West. Heine's research surely would not have been nearly as successful if he had not had Takayanagi's insightful and critical feedback at every step along the way. Access to an insider's perspective is crucial to good cultural research, and Heine learned how fortunate he was to have that insider's perspective right inside his own house. While at UBC, Heine started to work on a project with Shinobu Kitayama, and he received a generous dissertation fellowship from the Japan Foundation to go to Kyoto to work with him. Heine learned an enormous amount from Kitayama, and he decided to stay at Kyoto University a second year as a post-doctoral student. Heine's time in Kyoto was especially engaging and productive, and he benefited immensely from the relationships that he developed there with Yumi Endo, Taka Masuda, Hisaya Matsumoto, Beth Morling, Oto Okugawa, Toshitake Takata, and the many excellent undergraduate students with whom he worked.

In 1997, Heine received a job offer from the University of Pennsylvania and excitedly began his career there. The students and faculty at Penn were extremely stimulating, and Heine was greatly impressed with the deep respect that people there had for ideas. Heine felt that his time at Penn made him a much more careful thinker, and he was pleasantly surprised to find out that he could learn so much after he had already received his doctoral degree. He especially benefited from the mentorship of Rob Derubeis, Paul Rozin, and John Sabini there.

Three years later, UBC offered Heine a position in a department that was building a program in cultural psychology. The combination of excellent colleagues and students, a student body that was a living cross-cultural experiment, and Vancouver's ski hills and beaches made this an offer that he could not refuse. Heine especially appreciates the stimulating discussions with the other faculty in the cultural area at UBC, including Darrin Lehman, Ara Norenzayan, and Mark Schaller. After a year at UBC, Heine's cross-cultural son Seiji was born, and Heine's life was very full.

Heine's research has focused largely on the role that culture plays in people's motivations to view themselves positively. Although the idea that people have a need for self-esteem is a fundamental assumption of psychology, Heine was struck by how little evidence for this need he saw in his experiences in Japan. He began a program of research that consistently revealed that motivations to focus on positive aspects of the self were significantly attenuated among Japanese and in many cases were not evident at all. The cultural differences were pronounced and emerged across a host of different experimental designs, and they suggested something that was potentially profound: One of the most basic motivations, a need for self-esteem, might better be understood as a strategy for achieving successful outcomes in some cultural environments but not in others. Moreover, these cultural differences have been resistant to a number of alternative explanations that Heine has explored: for example, that Japanese are more concerned with their group-self esteem, that Japanese are motivated to view themselves positively in different domains from Westerners, that Japanese are motivated to have self-esteem but that cultural norms for self-presentation prevent them from expressing these in questionnaires, or that such cultural differences are due to inherited dispositions rather than to learned strategies. Some other researchers continue to disagree about these points, and Heine has found himself engaging in a number of debates with them at various conferences and in a number of journals. The Japanese side of Heine's self appreciates these opportunities for self-improvement.

Heine and his colleagues have proposed that rather than prioritizing motivations to enhance the self, Japanese tend to emphasize motivations to improve themselves. Heine reasoned that Westerners, striving to feel good about themselves, would devote their energies to tasks at which they were especially good, whereas Japanese, trying to correct their shortcomings, would work especially hard on tasks at which they were poor. This theorizing led to a line of research, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, that revealed this intriguing pattern of results. One consequence of this motivational difference, it seems, is that self-enhancing Westerners should increasingly become specialists, whereas self-improving Japanese should tend to

become generalists. Heine continues to explore self-improvement motivations across cultures, particularly in the context of face-maintenance strategies. He is also interested in pursuing the more general question of which aspects of our psychology are universal and which ones vary across cultures.

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