

## MAKING SENSE OF EAST ASIAN SELF-ENHANCEMENT

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The question of whether self-enhancing motivations are present or exist in attenuated form in East Asia is important and has recently sparked much research interest, as is evident in the articles in this special issue. Some of the articles contributed to the notion that East Asian self-enhancement is elusive and others made the case that it is present, although various artifacts prevent us from seeing it clearly. The arguments that are raised in the different articles are discussed with respect to how they advance our understanding of East Asian self-enhancement and how they are able to account for findings from past literature.

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**It is extremely exciting** to see a special issue in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* that focuses on a question that I view to be so intriguing: Why do East Asians self-enhance less than Westerners? This is a significant question, as self-enhancement motivations are so central to much theoretical reasoning on the self, and the cultural differences that emerge tend to be pronounced. Each of the articles in this special section addressed the question of why East Asians might show weaker self-enhancing motivations than Westerners, and they each did so using different methodologies. This issue of *JCCP* stands to significantly advance our understanding of this challenging question.

Although all of the articles acknowledged that East Asians appear to have weaker self-enhancing motivations than North Americans, the various authors tried to make sense of these findings in different ways. Snibbe, Kitayama, Markus, and Suzuki took cultural psychology in a new direction by taking it out of the lab and into the field (literally, in this case). Building on the classic American studies by Hastorf and Cantril (1954) and Cialdini et al. (1976), they investigated whether Japanese would show the same kind of intergroup bias while watching their school's football team play against a rival. Their results are striking. Whereas the American students showed the classic pattern of each school thinking their team was better than the other team saw it, the Japanese showed no evidence for an intergroup bias. These results are of great importance: first, for showing clearly that cultural differences generalize to the real world outside of the laboratory, but also for showing that some of our most fundamental motivations to see "us" as better than "them" are culturally grounded.

Muramoto approached the question of Japanese self-criticism in a different way. As she noted, much research across a variety of paradigms reveals a self-critical bias among Japanese. However, although Japanese might tend to view themselves in critical terms, they expect people with whom they have close relationships to view them more positively. I think this is an intriguing set of findings that has important implications. Perhaps Japanese place more value on how their selves are evaluated by significant others than in how they evaluate themselves. To the extent this is true, a self-critical strategy in the light of expected favorable appraisals from others would be beneficial. Indeed, this pattern of results is consistent with the notion that in hierarchical collectivistic societies there is a prioritizing of face as opposed

to self-esteem (e.g., Heine, in press; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). I think that an exploration of people's concerns with their evaluations by others stands to importantly inform our understanding of motivations for self-esteem and face. It would also be interesting to see how Japanese compare with Americans in Muramoto's design. To the extent that Americans show the same pattern as Japanese, then the findings of having close others view you positively would not be as capable of explaining Japanese self-criticism.

The notion that Japanese have self-critical motivations can be first traced back to Takata's (1987) pioneering study. Not only was that study important for revealing a striking, and hitherto unknown, motivation among Japanese, it was also noteworthy for its methodological innovation. As a number of the articles in this special issue have noted—for example, Kobayashi and Greenwald, Kudo and Numazaki, and Kurman—questionnaire research on self-enhancement is challenged by the possibility of self-presentation motivations obscuring individuals' self-enhancing and self-critical motivations. Takata's original study sidestepped this limitation from the beginning by constructing a sophisticated experimental paradigm that afforded the assessment of self-criticism through a hidden behavioral measure. His effects are reliable, as we were able to replicate them in one study (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000), and he has succeeded in replicating them again here.

Takata's present article, however, stands as a significant advancement over his original findings. Although in a control condition Japanese again showed a reliable self-critical pattern, when they were overtly trying to compete with another individual they showed a self-enhancing pattern of results identical to that which has previously been observed with North Americans (Heine et al., 2000). I think these findings reveal an important aspect of self-enhancement. When individuals are motivated to compete with others (*soto*) and aspire to achieve dominance over others, self-enhancing motivations become more functional. In contrast, when individuals are considering how they can maintain relationships with close others (*uchi*), they benefit more by self-criticism. I think these findings not only speak to an important basis of East Asian self-critical motivations, but they also shed light on why North Americans tend to self-enhance. That is, if Japanese can behave like North Americans when they are overtly trying to compete against others for a reward, this suggests that one important aspect of self-enhancing motivations is a desire for individual competitiveness. Perhaps it is the individualistic competitive nature of North American society that renders self-enhancing motivations more functional there. When Japanese are put in a functionally similar environment to the habitual individualistic and competitive environment that North Americans are in, they also benefit from self-enhancement and become motivated to view themselves as better than others.

### DO EAST ASIANS SELF-ENHANCE?

In our own past research (e.g., Heine, in press; Heine et al., 1999), we have proposed two forms of an argument that vary in strength regarding cultural differences in self-enhancement. The weaker form of our argument is that East Asians self-enhance less than North Americans. There is much evidence for this argument. In a meta-analysis that we recently conducted on published cross-cultural studies of self-enhancement (including the cross-cultural studies in this volume), we found that East Asians showed significantly weaker self-enhancement than Westerners in 79 out of 81 studies (Heine & Hamamura, 2003). The average effect size was pronounced:  $d = .83$ , and 59% of the studies revealed large cross-cultural differences according to Cohen's (1988) recommendations for interpreting effect sizes. All

of the authors in this special issue acknowledged this cultural difference, and there appears to be a consensus that self-enhancing motivations are indeed weaker among East Asians than Westerners. In contrast, the stronger form of our argument is that, overall, East Asians are not self-enhancing. Evidence for this can be seen in the same meta-analysis that found that whereas Westerners were self-enhancing across all of the studies (average  $d = .89$ ), East Asians were not (average  $d = .01$ ). A number of the articles in the issue clearly were opposed to the stronger form of the argument. This argument was challenged on a few fronts.

One way that the notion of an overall absence of East Asian self-enhancement was challenged was the suggestion that East Asians self-enhance indirectly through their groups. This alternative hypothesis suggests that East Asians are motivated to enhance themselves, but because of the interdependent nature of their selves, the view of self that they are more motivated to enhance is their group self. Muramoto reviews some compelling evidence that she had earlier collected that Japanese make more favorable attributions for their groups than they do for themselves (e.g., Muramoto & Yamaguchi, 1997). This is evidence in support of this alternative hypothesis. However, there is also much evidence that contradicts this. Namely, although East Asians enhance their groups more than their selves, so do Westerners, and Westerners tend to enhance their groups even more than East Asians. Moreover, a number of studies have found no evidence of group enhancement among East Asians (for a review, see Heine, 2003), in addition to the study by Snibbe et al. (in this issue). Hence, although there is some evidence that East Asians enhance their group selves more than their individual selves, a consideration of all the published evidence on this topic is not consistent with this alternative hypothesis. If the relative absence of East Asian self-enhancement is due to their enhancing their groups instead of their individual selves, we still need to explain why Westerners tend to enhance their groups more than East Asians.

A second alternative account of the relative lack of East Asian self-enhancement was offered by Kobayashi and Brown (and was also mentioned by Kurman). This account suggests that East Asians self-enhance more in domains that are of importance to them, which raises the possibility that the cultures do not differ that much in their motivations, just in the domains that their motivations are directed toward. There are a few studies that are consistent with this pattern. However, there are also some that show the exact opposite pattern, that is, some studies find that East Asians self-enhance less for more important traits (for a review, see Heine, 2003). In sum, some of the evidence is consistent with this alternative hypothesis, whereas some directly contradicts it. What are we to make of this conflicting set of findings?

Heine and Hamamura (2003) noted two things in their meta-analysis of cross-cultural studies of self-enhancement. First, although overall East Asians were not self-enhancing, they occasionally showed large self-enhancing biases in two designs: the better-than-average effect (BAE; a.k.a. the self-other bias) and relative likelihood estimates for unrealistic optimism (UO). These two designs resulted in the strongest self-enhancement for Westerners as well. Second, studies of the BAE that have investigated the relation between importance and self-enhancement in East Asia have found positive correlations in support of this second alternative account, such as in Kobayashi and Brown. However, studies that investigated the same relation using different methodologies (namely, the self-peer bias, actual-ideal discrepancies, the influence of success and failure on self-esteem, and manipulations of success and failure) all led to negative correlations between importance and self-enhancement for East Asians (although the Western correlations were positive). In sum, the BAE results in more pronounced self-enhancement biases and more pronounced positive correlations between self-enhancement and importance for members of both cultures than

the other methodologies. One possibility to account for this pattern is that the BAE artificially amplifies self-enhancing tendencies.

A number of researchers have argued that the BAE and UO methodologies magnify the appearance of self-enhancing tendencies because of a cognitive artifact (Klar & Giladi, 1997; Klar, Medding, & Sarel, 1996; Sears, 1983). Namely, both of these designs have people compare themselves to an abstract, generalized target such as the average student or most other students. The problem with this methodology is that in making a comparative judgment between a singular target (themselves) and a generalized target (the average other), people fail to adequately consider the qualities of the more abstract, generalized target (Klar & Giladi, 1997). As such, people's comparative evaluations reflect their absolute evaluations of the singular target, which is themselves in the BAE and UO designs. A number of studies have shown that people not only believe that they are better than average—they also believe that a randomly chosen other is better than average (e.g., Klar et al., 1996; Sears, 1983). Interestingly, even, a randomly chosen soap fragrance is perceived as better than average (Giladi & Klar, 2002)! This intriguing pattern of results has been labeled the “everyone is better than their group's average” effect (EBTA) (Klar & Giladi, 1997). Rating a random other as better than average is not evidence for self-enhancement.

Heine and Hamamura (2003) asked Japanese and Canadian students to evaluate themselves and most other students in a BAE study using a list of traits from Brown and Kobayashi's (2002) study. Like Brown and Kobayashi, they found that members of both cultures self-enhanced (they rated themselves as better than average), and this tendency was significantly more pronounced for important traits for Canadians and Japanese. However, replicating the design of Klar and Giladi (1997), Heine and Hamamura also asked people to evaluate a specific, random person. The only information that participants were provided about this person was her age and the fact that she was a student from their school. They controlled for the EBTA effect by contrasting people's self-evaluations with that of this random student. Their results revealed that Canadians still self-enhanced in that they viewed themselves more positively than they did the random student. Moreover, this gap became more pronounced for the more important traits. In contrast, Japanese were significantly self-critical in that they viewed themselves less positively than they did the random student. Additionally, there was no correlation for Japanese between trait importance and self-enhancement when controlling for the EBTA effect. The same effect emerged when UO estimates were contrasted with a specific random other rather than a generalized average other. Heine and Hamamura proposed that the contradictory results regarding whether East Asians self-enhance, and whether they do so more for important traits, can be explained in that overall East Asians are self-critical and their apparent self-enhancement in studies of the BAE and UO are due to the EBTA effect. We can think of no other explanation why East Asians do not tend to self-enhance in other designs and show a negative correlation between importance and self-enhancement in those other designs but show the opposite effect in BAE studies.

A third alternative explanation to account for the weaker self-enhancing motivations is raised in the articles by Kurman, Kobayashi and Greenwald, and Kudo and Numazaki. Each of these articles raises the possibility that the relative lack of self-enhancement among East Asians is due to them being reluctant to make explicit self-enhancing statements. This reasoning suggests that norms for modesty render self-enhancing statements unappealing, and this conceals East Asian's true self-enhancing motivations. I see this as the most challenging alternative explanation to the notion that East Asians are not motivated to self-enhance, as it questions the validity of survey research. If we are unable to believe what participants tell us

in anonymous questionnaires, we are quite limited in the kinds of research that we can conduct and the conclusions that we can draw. This would also seem to be a critical issue for research outside the area of self-enhancement as well.

I find Kobayashi and Greenwald's work on implicit self-esteem to be extremely interesting. I think it is an important finding that East Asians and North Americans look the same on implicit measures of self-esteem but not on explicit measures. I think this finding will be even more important once we have a better idea of what implicit self-esteem is. As Bosson, Pennebaker, and Swann's (2000) investigation of the validity of measures of implicit self-esteem revealed, the implicit measures do not correlate with each other, they do not correlate with the explicit measures of self-esteem, and they do not correlate well with external criteria. As Kobayashi and Brown noted, self-esteem tends to correlate with measures of self-enhancement. Given that the implicit measures are not correlating with self-esteem, this raises the possibility that they are not measuring self-enhancement. Perhaps it is the case that the implicit measures capture feelings of self-liking rather than feelings that the self is competent (Kitayama & Uchida, *in press*). Indeed, theorizing on self-criticism in East Asia has explored how East Asians are critical about their self-competence, but these theories have not proposed that East Asians like themselves any less than North Americans (e.g., Heine et al., 1999).

Kudo and Numazaki also consider the issue that Japanese do not self-enhance because of social pressures to appear self-critical and not because of genuine self-critical motivations. They note that in a study where anonymity was guaranteed, Japanese showed some evidence of self-enhancement in an attribution paradigm. This is potentially interesting, as many other studies have found a lack of a self-enhancing attribution bias among Japanese (for a review, see Kitayama, Takagi, & Matsumoto, 1995). I think that Kudo and Numazaki's argument that anonymity leads to greater self-enhancement among Japanese would be more compelling if they had included a condition without guaranteed anonymity and found that participants self-enhanced significantly less. Also, I think it is relevant to note that experimental studies of self-enhancement in Japan are usually conducted anonymously, although evidence of self-enhancement is rarely found in them (for a review, see Heine & Hamamura, 2003).

Kurman also considered whether modesty was the driving force behind East Asian self-criticism. She found negative correlations between how modest people reported themselves to be in an explicit measure and how self-enhancing they were in their evaluations, and modesty proved to be a significant mediator of self-enhancement. It is interesting that people who report that they are concerned about how they appear to others (i.e., those who score high on the modesty scale) are also less likely to self-enhance in anonymous questionnaires. This finding is consistent with the alternative account that East Asian self-enhancement is a self-presentation strategy. However, the correlation between self-reported modesty and self-enhancement could also be driven by a third variable, such as a concern for the social costs in thinking positive thoughts about oneself and in expressing them. Indeed, one argument that has been offered elsewhere is that a significant cost of self-enhancement and self-promotion is that they lead others to not like you as much (e.g., Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Paulhus, 1998; for an opposing view, see Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). Perhaps the reason that East Asians self-enhance less than North Americans is that social exclusion is more costly for them.

The articles in this issue that investigated these three alternative explanations all make significant contributions to our understanding of cultural differences in self-enhancement. One concern that I have in evaluating the above alternative explanations, however, is that

there is much published evidence that challenges each of them that is reviewed in Heine et al. (1999). The present articles that discuss these alternative accounts all refer to that article, although none of them refers to the evidence from that article (and subsequent articles that have further explored these issues) that directly challenges their hypotheses. I think that for these alternative explanations to be viewed as compelling we must also consider these hypotheses in the light of the evidence that challenges them (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1997; Heine et al., 2001; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Takata, 1987).

The last alternative account that is offered is one that has not been discussed in past cross-cultural research on self-enhancement. Kobayashi and Brown make the argument that the self-enhancement motive must be universal because the same pattern of correlations between self-esteem and self-enhancement emerge for Japanese and Americans. Their reasoning for this seems to be that self-enhancement leads to the same affective benefits across cultures, namely higher self-esteem. I was not persuaded by this argument, however, in that it is based on a correlation between how positively people evaluate themselves in a measure of self-esteem, and how positively they evaluate themselves in terms of how much they thought a set of desirable traits were characteristic of themselves. Looking at Figure 1 in Kobayashi and Brown's article, it appears that there was not much difference between how people of low and high self-esteem evaluated others. It appears that the relation between self-esteem and the BAE seems to be largely driven by the differences in self-ratings across the two self-esteem groups. In contrast to Kobayashi and Brown's contention that the correlation between self-esteem and positive self-evaluations is due to positive self-evaluations causing the benefits of high self-esteem, I view the correlation to reflect the tautological relationship between these two constructs. That is, self-esteem and self-evaluations assess how positively people view themselves or, in other words, both are measures of self-enhancing motivations. It is hard to imagine how it would be possible for someone from any culture, or in any situation, to view themselves positively with respect to the items in the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem scale and not view themselves positively in evaluating how well the list of traits described themselves; they are both measures of positive attitudes toward oneself. It is also noteworthy that for both measures in Kobayashi and Brown's study, the Americans scored higher than Japanese ( $d = .54$  and  $.63$  for cultural differences in self-esteem and the BAE, respectively), suggesting cultural variability in the magnitude of these motivations. I fail to see how the positive correlations between self-esteem and the BAE inform the question of whether self-enhancement is a universal motivation.

In sum, overall I am very excited to see the new directions that people are pursuing with regard to the question of the nature of East Asian self-enhancement. It is challenging for us to understand how a motivation that appears to be so pronounced in the West emerges so rarely among East Asians. Although I am pleased with how much we have learned from the articles in this special issue, I am also encouraged by the number of questions that future research must continue to grapple with to advance our understanding on this important topic.

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