

An exchange between Heine and Brown & Kobayashi regarding Brown & Kobayashi (2002)

Self-enhancement in Japan? A reply to Brown & Kobayashi

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Brown and Kobayashi provide some evidence that Japanese enhance themselves and group members in the self–other paradigm, especially for important traits. However, their conclusions are drawn from a highly selective review of the literature. In their paper they raise four distinct hypotheses: Japanese self-enhance, Japanese self-enhance as much as North Americans, Japanese self-enhance more for important traits, and Japanese enhance their groups. An evaluation of each of these four hypotheses with respect to all of the relevant empirical evidence reveals that they are all poorly supported and, in some cases, are directly contradicted.

Introduction

Brown and Kobayashi have conducted a series of studies regarding Japanese self-enhancement. I have few issues with the studies themselves – they appear to have been very competently executed and the results, for the most part, converge with their claims. However, I am concerned that the conclusions that their paper draw are based on a highly selective review of the literature. I am able to glean four distinct hypotheses that are raised in their paper, and I would like to evaluate each of those here with respect to all of the relevant evidence that is available.

Hypothesis 1: Japanese self-enhance

Brown and Kobayashi address a question that is important in understanding the processes of self-enhancement and the role of cultural influences in the self. Do Japanese self-enhance?

The way to most confidently provide an answer to this question is to consider all of the evidence from studies that have investigated it. Clearly, Brown and Kobayashi have found a significant self–other bias among Japanese (although, curiously, in Study 2, their Japanese participants rated themselves as marginally worse than most other Japanese). In addition to

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the findings of Brown and Kobayashi, some other studies have also found significant self–other bias evidence among Japanese (Heine & Lehman, 1997 (men only); Ito, 1999). However, some other studies have found either no evidence for self–other biases in Japanese (Heine & Lehman, 1997 (women only); Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and others have found a significant reverse self–other bias among Japanese (Heine & Lehman, 1999; Endo *et al.*, 2000; Heine *et al.*, 2001a; Matsumoto, 2002). Hence, although Japanese have sometimes been found to show the self–other bias they by no means always do, and sometimes they show the opposite (apparently, Japanese self-enhancement in the self–other paradigm is greatly affected by the framing of the question; see Matsumoto, 2002 for a discussion of this point). North Americans, in contrast, consistently show evidence for self–other biases (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Alicke *et al.*, 1995; Endo *et al.*, 2000).

A second paradigm that reveals significant self-enhancement among Japanese is unrealistic optimism as measured with relative-likelihood estimates (Heine & Lehman, 1995; Chang *et al.*, 2001). However, Japanese have only been shown to demonstrate this bias for negative life events; they show no bias for positive life events (Heine & Lehman, 1995; Chang *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, Japanese show evidence of unrealistic pessimism for absolute likelihood estimates (Heine & Lehman, 1995). In summary, Japanese show unrealistic optimism rather consistently for relative-likelihood estimates of negative future life events, but not for other kinds of measures. In contrast, North Americans have consistently been found to show unrealistic optimism for not only negative events, but also positive ones (Weinstein, 1980; Heine & Lehman, 1995; but see Chang *et al.*, 2001 for a curious exception), and for both relative-likelihood and absolute likelihood estimates (Weinstein, 1980; Heine & Lehman, 1995).

A recent meta-analysis of published cross-cultural studies on self-enhancement revealed that clear evidence of Japanese self-enhancement is largely restricted to these two paradigms (Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). I imagine that future work will identify some additional pockets of Japanese self-enhancement, but at present, the generality of the evidence is limited.

The paradigm-specific evidence for Japanese self-enhancement is not due to lack of trying. There are many other methodologies that have been used to investigate self-enhancement among Japanese that have yielded pronounced evidence for self-criticism. In fact, East Asians have shown evidence for self-criticism in 11 separate methodologies (Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). These studies are problematic for Hypothesis 1.

We can surely claim with confidence that North Americans self-enhance, as Brown and colleagues have so convincingly done before (Taylor & Brown, 1988). A meta-analysis revealed that the average effect size for self-enhancement studies conducted with Westerners was $d=0.85$ (Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). A recommended convention for interpreting effect size is that 0.2 to 0.4 is small, 0.4 to 0.7 is moderate and anything greater than 0.7 is large (Cohen, 1988). Self-enhancement is thus highly pronounced among Westerners and it emerges consistently across different experimental designs.

What about the Japanese case? One extreme way of framing the question, which apparently is how Brown and Kobayashi have done, is to ask ‘Do Japanese ever self-enhance?’ However, this question is a strawman as no one, to my knowledge, has ever argued that they don’t. Personally, I am all too aware that Japanese sometimes show self-enhancement. The first study that I ever conducted on this topic found evidence of unrealistic optimism in Japan for relative-likelihood estimates of negative future events (Heine & Lehman, 1995). Brown and Kobayashi provide further evidence of self-enhancement among Japanese with their studies, and a number of others have as well. Clearly, Japanese *can*

self-enhance. This question would be more informative if it would identify the kinds of methodologies or domains in which Japanese self-enhancement is observed.

A more revealing way to ask the question is 'Do Japanese consistently self-enhance?' One way to answer this question would be to consider all of the studies relevant to self-enhancement that have been conducted among Japanese, and average the effect sizes. Such a meta-analysis reveals that the weighted average effect was $d = -0.07$ ($d = -0.02$ if all East Asian samples are considered; Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). That is, across all published cross-cultural studies of self-enhancement, Japanese are not self-enhancing.

However, such a meta-analysis might not provide the best answer of whether Japanese self-enhance, as methodologies that are overrepresented in the literature are given excessive weight in the analysis. Rather, it would seem that if we are to confidently claim that Japanese self-enhance, then we should be able to find evidence that they do so relatively consistently across most methodologies that measure self-enhancement. It is not convincing to maintain the argument that Japanese self-enhance if most methodologies find that they do not, or find that they self-criticize.

As I noted above, aside from some self-other bias paradigms and measures of relative likelihood estimates of negative life events, most methodologies find that Japanese do not self-enhance, or find evidence for the opposite of self-enhancement (Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). The paradigm specific evidence for Japanese enhancement suggests that it is something about those methodologies that is responsible for the apparent self-enhancement. To the extent that a strong case could be made that these paradigms are somehow superior to those in which self-criticism is detected, a convincing argument could be made that Japanese self-enhance. However, I have not come across any compelling arguments for that yet – rather, there are arguments regarding the presence of artifacts in both self-other (Sears, 1983; Alicke *et al.*, 1995; Klar & Giladi, 1997, 1999) and relative-likelihood estimate designs (Heine & Lehman, 1995; Klar *et al.*, 1996). These papers demonstrate that there are cognitive factors that contribute to the magnitude of self-enhancement using these designs. It is problematic to claim that Japanese are motivated to self-enhance if the only studies that demonstrate significant effects are ones in which a cognitive component is implicated.

It is important to note that both Westerners and East Asians show more evidence of self-enhancement using self-other measures and relative-likelihood optimism measures (average $d = 1.43$ and 0.39 for Westerners and East Asians, respectively) than they do in other methodologies (average $d = 0.38$ and -0.30 for Westerners and East Asians, respectively; Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). Overall, the magnitude of enhancement biases follows a remarkably similar pattern across the two cultural groups (the correlation between the Western and East Asian bias is 0.82 ; Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). It appears that Japanese self-enhancing motivations are weak enough that they can only be detected with methodologies that amplify the effect (perhaps via experimental artifacts), such as the two paradigms described above. In contrast, although the magnitude of North American self-enhancement also varies a great deal across different methodologies, the motivations appear to be strong enough that they are almost always measured as greater than zero.

Hypothesis 2: Japanese self-enhance as much as North Americans

A second hypothesis can be derived that is considerably weaker than the first. Do Japanese (and other East Asians) self-enhance as much as North Americans? To the extent that the answer to this question is yes, this would seriously challenge the arguments that we have

offered in Heine *et al.* (1999) and in other papers that culture shapes our motivations to view ourselves positively. There has been much research that has been conducted to evaluate this hypothesis. First, there is research from studies that measure the self–other bias, such as the study of Brown and Kobayashi. Brown and Kobayashi found that Japanese show a smaller self–other bias than European-Americans (the *F*-value only falls short of significance if a Bonferroni reduction is applied. I do not think it is appropriate for the authors to only apply the Bonferroni reduction in this one instance and not for the other analyses in the paper) and Asian-Americans fell in-between. The effect size of their Japanese – Euro-American comparison is 0.54, indicating a moderate cultural difference, replicating that found with many other studies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Heine & Lehman, 1997, 1999; Endo *et al.*, 2000; Heine *et al.*, 2001a). The magnitude of this cultural difference is substantial: the weighted average effect size across cross-cultural studies of self-enhancement is 0.74 for elementary school students, 0.82 for high school students and 0.86 for college students (Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). That the cultural differences become more pronounced with age is further evidence that people are socialized to self-enhance or self-criticize.

The only study of the self–other bias that I am aware of that has not found that Japanese self-enhance less than North Americans is a recent one by Sedikides *et al.*, in press), which found, overall, no cultural difference. However, it is rather doubtful that the studies in that paper measured self-enhancement at all, in that participants were not evaluating themselves exclusively on positive behaviors and traits (S. J. Heine, unpubl. paper, 2003), an apparent requirement if one is to claim that evaluations indicate positive self-views. Aside from the dubious Sedikides *et al.* finding, there is convergent evidence that Japanese show less of a self–other bias than North Americans.

There are many other ways of assessing self-enhancement in addition to the self–other bias and this has also been explored across cultures. Sixty-nine of the 70 studies included in Heine and Hamamura's (unpubl. data, 2003) meta-analysis found that East Asians show significantly less self-enhancement than Westerners. In consideration of the entire literature on cultural differences in self-enhancement, Hypothesis 2 is not tenable.

The one published study from Heine and Hamamura's (unpubl. data, 2003) meta-analysis that did not reveal a significant difference was from a cross-cultural comparison of implicit self-esteem (Kitayama & Uchida, in press). One possibility is that the implicit self-esteem measures capture the true cultural differences (or lack thereof), whereas the explicit measures yield misleading evidence because East Asians are feigning modesty. This alternative account has been considered a number of times before (Kitayama *et al.*, 1997; Heine *et al.*, 1999).

This alternative explanation is challenged by studies that have investigated self-enhancing tendencies among Japanese with studies using hidden, behavioral measures (Takata, 1987; Heine *et al.*, 2000; Heine *et al.*, 2001b). These studies reveal even more self-criticism among Japanese than those using explicit measures, contradicting a modesty hypothesis (Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). Moreover, a close examination of the questionnaire evidence also challenges the account of East Asian feigned modesty (Heine *et al.*, 1999). Why, then, do cross-cultural comparisons of implicit self-esteem fail to show cultural differences? One explanation is that these measures do not measure self-enhancement at all. Indeed, implicit self-esteem measures do not correlate among themselves, they show weak or null correlations with explicit measures, and they show much smaller correlations with external criteria than explicit measures (Bosson *et al.*, 2000). At this time, it is not at all clear what implicit self-esteem measures are measuring. I suspect that when we have a better idea of what these measures are tapping into, cross-cultural comparisons of implicit self-esteem will stand to greatly inform us about the types of self-enhancement in which Japanese engage.

Hypothesis 3: Japanese self-enhance on what is especially important to them

Brown and Kobayashi consider the hypothesis that Japanese self-enhance for what is especially important to them. In their discussion they sum up their reasoning on page 164 by claiming 'If the culture values diligence, people will claim to be industrious (and more hardworking than others); if the culture values kindness, people will describe themselves as kind (while simultaneously claiming to be kinder than most other people)'. The apparent reason, then, why many other studies have failed to find self-enhancement effects among Japanese is because the researchers have not asked participants to evaluate themselves in domains that they view as sufficiently important. This is a reasonable prediction, but is the evidence in support of it? To the extent that this prediction is accurate, we should find evidence for two things: (i) past studies that find self-criticism among Japanese have focused on traits that they do not view as important; and (ii) Japanese enhance more for domains that they view to be especially important. I consider the evidence for each of these.

Do people view the kinds of domains investigated in self-enhancement studies as important? Apparently, North Americans do, as they consistently self-enhance. That is, if people self-enhance in domains that they view as important, then North Americans' extensive self-enhancement suggests that they must view almost everything that has been investigated in these studies as important. The rather spotty evidence for Japanese self-enhancement would suggest that there are many domains that have been studied that Japanese do not find to be important. However, Brown and Kobayashi's importance data would seem to challenge this hypothesis. As they note, there is a great deal of overlap in what Japanese and Americans view as important ($r=0.60$). Likewise, I have importance ratings in two studies that I have conducted with a large set of traits between Japanese and North Americans and find correlations between the two cultures of 0.20 (Heine & Lehman, 1999) and 0.81 (Heine & Renshaw, 2002). All in all, there appears to be much agreement between Japanese and North Americans about what is important. I don't see any compelling evidence that Japanese value the traits explored in these studies as less important than the North Americans, yet they self-enhance less.

The second question that needs to be considered to evaluate Hypothesis 3 is 'Are self-enhancement and importance positively correlated in Japanese samples?' Brown and Kobayashi clearly find this relation in their three studies of the self-other bias, and Ito (1999) also found it in his study of the self-other bias. There is some evidence in support of this hypothesis.

However, we also need to evaluate this hypothesis with respect to all of the available evidence. There are other studies that have investigated the role of importance in Japanese self-enhancement that need to be considered here. Heine and Renshaw (2002) found that Japanese became more self-critical for more important and desirable traits in a self-peer paradigm, whereas Americans showed the opposite pattern. Heine *et al.* (2001b) manipulated success and failure on a task and subsequently asked participants to rate how important that task was. Whereas Americans viewed the task as more important if they had succeeded than if they had failed, Japanese viewed the task to be more important if they had failed than if they had succeeded. Kitayama *et al.* (1997) had participants indicate whether situations were seen to be more likely to cause participants' self-esteem to increase or decrease. They found that the situations that were most relevant to Japanese were more likely to cause their self-esteem to decrease than were the situations less relevant to them. The opposite pattern was found for Americans. Heine and Lehman (1999) measured actual-ideal discrepancies as well

as participants' importance ratings. Whereas Canadians showed significantly smaller actual-ideal discrepancies for traits that they viewed to be important compared with those they viewed as unimportant, Japanese showed marginally larger actual-ideal discrepancies for the important traits compared with the unimportant ones. These studies all find evidence of negative correlations between Japanese self-enhancement and importance, and they all find evidence of positive correlations between North American self-enhancement and importance. This evidence is in direct contradiction to Hypothesis 3.

How do we evaluate whether there is a positive relation between importance and self-enhancement among Japanese? Brown and Kobayashi and Ito (1999) demonstrate such a relation with the self–other bias paradigm. Other researchers find the opposite relation with a range of other methodologies (and a broader array of traits and situations). One possibility for the discrepant pattern of results is that the self–other paradigm artificially amplifies people's level of self-enhancement (Klar & Giladi, 1997, 1999).

Hypothesis 4: Japanese self-enhance indirectly by exaggerating the positivity of members of their group

A final hypothesis that Brown and Kobayashi offer is that Japanese demonstrate indirect self-enhancement by exaggerating the positivity of their extended self; that is, the groups to which they belong. This hypothesis has been raised before (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Muramoto & Yamaguchi, 1997; Heine *et al.*, 1999). One possibility, suggested by Brown and Kobayashi, is that self-enhancing tendencies vary in kind across cultures. Because of the greater importance of social relationships within East Asia (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) the authors suggest that group-enhancement 'may be particularly prominent in Eastern cultures' (p. 147). That is, it might not be the case that there are differences in the degree of self-enhancing motivations across cultures, as we have proposed elsewhere (Heine *et al.*, 1999), but that people enhance the view of self most meaningful to them, and that in East Asia this is the group self. This reasoning suggests that East Asians should show more group-enhancement than North Americans. Although the assumption inherent in this formulation is that East Asians do not care much about their individual selves (and, hence, are not motivated to enhance them), and this remains to be theoretically and empirically demonstrated, it is a conceivable alternative explanation.

Do East Asians view their groups in unrealistically positive terms? Brown and Kobayashi found that people evaluate their best friends and family members more positively than most other people. Heine and Lehman (1997) also found that Japanese rate their family members as better than most others. Muramoto and Yamaguchi (1997) found that Japanese were willing to view their group in especially positive terms, even though they maintained critical views about themselves. Endo *et al.* (2000) found that Japanese viewed the quality of their relationships with their romantic partners, best friends and family members as better than other people's relationships. This evidence suggests that East Asians enhance their group selves.

Some evidence, however, suggests the opposite. Brown and Kobayashi found that people rate students from their university as significantly worse than most other Japanese. Similarly, Heine and Lehman (1997) found that Japanese students rated their universities worse than how they were rated by students from rival universities. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) found that East Asian mothers were especially critical of their own children's performance. Kitayama *et al.* (unpubl. data, 1996) found that Japanese believed their city was more at risk

to be hit by an earthquake than other cities. Hewstone and Ward (1985) found evidence of group-effacing attributional biases among Chinese in reference to their ethnic group. This evidence is all consistent with East Asian group-effacement. All in all, the evidence regarding Hypothesis 4 appears mixed; however, it seems that there is a general tendency for East Asians in the self-other paradigm to view people especially close to them in overly positive terms. It would be informative to see whether East Asians show group-enhancement consistently in methodologies other than the self–other bias, given the problems that have been identified with this methodology (Klar & Giladi, 1997, 1999).

However, as Brown and Kobayashi note on page 147, there is much evidence that North Americans enhance their groups, and this is found across a broad range of different groups that have been studied. If one is to argue that the reason East Asians self-enhance less than North Americans is because they are directing their self-enhancing motivations at the group self, rather than at the individual, we should see stronger group-enhancement among East Asians than among North Americans. Are East Asians' group-serving tendencies more prominent than those of North Americans?

There are a variety of sources of evidence to consider in evaluating this question. First, Brown and Kobayashi found no difference in the degree of group-enhancement in evaluations of best friends compared to most other students between Japanese & Americans. Likewise, Endo *et al.* (2000) find that Japanese and Canadians view their relationships with their families and friends in equally positive terms. These studies provide evidence that group-serving tendencies are equally strong across cultures. However, this pattern has not been observed in other studies that compare East Asian and North Americans' perceptions of their groups. Heine and Lehman (1997) found that Canadians viewed their family members, universities, and 'social groups' in more positive terms than did Japanese. Snibbe *et al.* (unpubl. data, 2002) found significantly less in-group favoritism among Japanese football fans compared with their American counterparts. Crocker *et al.* (1994) found that Americans of European descent had higher collective self-esteem than Americans of East Asian descent. Bond *et al.* (1985) found that American students displayed a more pronounced group-serving bias for sex-typed behaviors than did the Chinese. Kitayama *et al.* (unpubl. data, 1996) and Stevenson and Stigler (1992) found that in contrast to the group-effacing tendencies identified among East Asians, Americans were group-enhancing. Cross-national studies of national pride found that Americans have more positive views of their country than do Japanese (Rose, 1985). Endo *et al.* (2000) found that Canadians viewed their romantic relationships more positively than did the Japanese. In summary, I know of no studies that find that East Asians enhance their group self more than North Americans, whereas there are several studies that find significantly weaker group-serving tendencies among East Asians than North Americans. A consideration of the cross-cultural studies on this topic finds that, overall, group-enhancing tendencies are stronger among North Americans than among East Asians. The question that one needs to consider, then, is 'Why do North Americans enhance their group selves more than East Asians?' A parsimonious answer to this question is that self-enhancement motivations are stronger among North Americans than among East Asians.

Conclusion

In summary, I think Brown and Kobayashi have made a significant contribution to the field by providing some evidence to show that in the self–other paradigm, the Japanese can be shown to enhance their selves and groups, and that they do so especially for important traits.

However, I think their conclusions regarding Japanese self-enhancement motivations are untenable as they fail to consider the wealth of data that contradicts them. An evaluation of Japanese self-enhancement requires us to consider all of the evidence on this topic – not just the minority of evidence that is consistent with the authors' hypotheses. The evidence for weaker self-enhancement motivations among East Asians converges from a wide variety of sources (Heine & Hamamura, unpubl. data, 2003). A serious challenge to claims of cultural variability in self-enhancement motivations will require more than the evidence garnered from one experimental paradigm.

In their final paragraph, Brown and Kobayashi argue that 'feelings of self-worth may very well be promoted by thinking of oneself as ordinary or average, or even worse than others' (p. 164). I was happy to find a point in the discussion in which we appear to be in agreement. Indeed, this is what we have been arguing in our papers (Heine *et al.*, 1999, 2001b; Heine, in press (a), in press (b)). Traditionally, psychologists have conflated the idea of promoting self-worth with maintaining a positive self-evaluation. Although this relation appears to be fairly robust in North America, this relation does not necessarily hold elsewhere. Promoting self-worth in Japan is likely more closely tied with maintaining face (Heine *et al.*, 1999), and face-maintenance will benefit precisely from the kind of self-critical orientation that is found so often in studies of Japanese self-evaluation (Heine, in press (b)).

Clearly, there are many important psychological processes that are universal. The differences identified by cross-cultural research challenge us to identify at what levels those universals operate. Whereas we used to assume that tendencies to exaggerate the positivity of one's self were found universally, many studies conducted with East Asians have challenged this, suggesting that the universals lie at a higher level of abstraction. Perhaps the 'master sentiment' that McDougall (1923) identifies can be seen as universal when we consider self-worth as pursuing the kinds of self-views associated with a favorable return within the individual's cultural context (Heine *et al.*, 1999). In East Asia, selves are benefited the most when they maintain face, whereas North American selves are benefited more by maintaining self-esteem (Heine, in press (a), in press (b)). The underlying goal of self-worth would seem to be universal, but the ways that worth is realized, and the strategies that are taken to enhance it, vary importantly.

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