Across the (Not So) Great Divide: Cultural Similarities in Self-Evaluative Processes

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Abstract

Although it is widely assumed that East Asians and Westerners evaluate themselves differently, there is much support for cultural convergences. In this article, I review evidence showing that in both cultures (and to a largely comparable degree), people (a) experience high feelings of self-regard; (b) view themselves and loved ones in highly positive terms; and (c) exhibit self-serving biases that promote feelings of self-worth. Moreover, in both cultures (and to a largely comparable degree), individual differences in self-esteem predict (d) psychological well-being and (e) emotional regulation in response to negative outcomes. These commonalities suggest that self-love is a universal human motivation.

Readers who have kept abreast of developments in social and personality psychology over the past 10 years have probably noticed that cultural differences in self-evaluative processes (e.g., self-esteem, self-enhancement, self-appraisals) have received a good deal of attention (Brown, 2003; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Most of the attention centers around differences between East Asians (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans), who reside in an interdependent, collectivistic cultural context that emphasizes interpersonal harmony and connectedness with others, and Westerners (e.g., Americans, Canadians, and West Europeans), who reside in an independent, individualistic cultural context that emphasizes originality and self-reliance. Conceivably, these cultural differences could translate into cultural differences in self-evaluative processes.

In this article, I review evidence relevant to this possibility. I begin by discussing the nature of self-esteem and self-enhancement more broadly, before turning to a more specific review of cultural similarities and differences. To foreshadow my conclusion, I believe the evidence shows that whenever cultural differences in self-evaluative processes are found, they represent phenotypic expressions of a common (genotypic) motive: The motive to feel good about ourselves.

Before beginning, it's important to explain why anyone should care whether self-evaluative processes are consistent across cultures. The answer is this: Virtually all theories of human motivation propose that people strive to feel good about themselves (e.g., Becker, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1995; James, 1890; Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1961). For some theories, this need is so vital that effective functioning is possible only after it is first satisfied (Maslow, 1943). Because it sheds light on the universality of positive self-feelings, cross-cultural research on self-evaluative processes bears on these theories.

Self-Evaluative Processes: Conceptual Distinctions

Defining constructs is a starting point for all scientific inquiry. This task is particularly important when it comes to understanding cultural differences in self-evaluative processes,

because different researchers use different terms in different ways. Four terms require attention.

Self-esteem

The first and broadest term is a personality variable: global self-esteem. In my previous work, I have defined self-esteem as an affective construct, akin to self-love (Brown, 1993, 1998, in press; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Marshall, 2001, 2006; Dutton & Brown, 1997). High self-esteem people possess an abiding sense of self-love. They feel a strong sense of self-acceptance and are relaxed and comfortable with themselves. Low self-esteem people experience ambivalent feelings of self-affection (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). Although they rarely show self-loathing, they do not possess strongly positive feelings toward themselves. In my opinion, the feelings of self-affection that characterize self-esteem develop at a very early, preverbal age, in response to biological (temperamental) and interpersonal (e.g., introjected parental love and attachment) factors. For most people, these feelings remain throughout life.

Self-evaluations

The manner in which people appraise their particular qualities is another self-evaluative activity. For example, people believe they are creative, intelligent, impatient, or stubborn. Unlike self-esteem, which is affective and global, self-evaluations are cognitive and narrow. They represent the beliefs people hold about their specific capabilities and particular attributes. These judgments do not emerge early in life, as they require cognitive maturity and interactions with peers to form. This is because self-evaluations are inherently comparative, invoking 'most other people' as a reference. To say 'I am intelligent' is to implicitly say 'I believe I am more intelligent than most other people.' It could not be otherwise. One cannot be intelligent if one is less intelligent than most other people.

   Some qualities (e.g., honesty, generosity) are universally valued, but the importance of other qualities varies across cultures. For example, humility and modesty are prized in East Asian countries, whereas self-reliance and originality are cherished in Western countries. In a later section of this article, we will see that these cultural differences need to be considered when one considers the universality of self-evaluative processes.

Feelings of self-worth

Momentary feelings of self-worth represent a third form of self-evaluation. People may feel proud and pleased with themselves when they have met or surpassed an important standard, and humiliated and ashamed of themselves when they have fallen short of an important standard (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Marshall, 2001; James, 1890; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Unlike global self-esteem, these feelings are (relatively) ephemeral and arise in response to some event, usually involving positive or negative feedback.

Self-enhancement motivation

Self-enhancement is the final term in need of clarification. Following William James (1890), I define self-enhancement as the desire to enhance one's feelings of self-worth (Brown, 1998, 2009, in press; Brown & Kobayashi, 2003; Brown & Marshall, 2001, 2006). Simply put, people are motivated to feel proud of themselves rather than ashamed

of themselves. The manner in which they satisfy this need varies from culture to culture, but the need itself is presumed to be universal. In every culture, a person who says 'I strive to humiliate and abase myself whenever I can' would be considered aberrant.

Not everyone defines self-enhancement in affective terms, however. For example, Kurt and Paulhus (2008) defined self-enhancement as the 'tendency to hold overly positive self-evaluations' (p. 840), and Heine and Hamamura (2007) defined self-enhancement as a tendency 'to dwell on and elaborate positive information about the self relative to nega-tive information' (p. 4). These definitions switch the focus from an affective one (feeling good about oneself) to a cognitive one (the processing of positive and negative personal information). Much confusion has resulted from this redefinition (Brown & Marshall, 2006), and much of the controversy and debate regarding cultural differences in self-enhancement dissolves once these definitional inconsistencies are taken into account. As we will see, when feelings are emphasized, the evidence favors the proposition that peo-ple throughout the world prefer to feel good about themselves rather than bad about themselves.

Defining self-enhancement in affective terms raises an additional point. The term 'self' is broad and refers to anything or anyone a person calls my or mine (James, 1890). Con-sequently, if, people believe their ancestors, family, friends, and relationship partners are especially meritorious, they could be said to be exhibiting an indirect form of self-enhancement that leads them to feel proud of their associations with others (Brown, Col-lins, & Schmidt, 1988).

Self-Evaluative Processes: Research Findings

Having distinguished various self-evaluative processes, I now review literature relevant to the cross–cultural generality (or specificity) of these processes.

Cultural differences in global self-esteem

I begin with global self-esteem, as it is the broadest self-evaluative construct. Numerous studies have shown that self-esteem scores are higher in Western cultures than in East Asian ones (for reviews, see Cai, Wu, & Brown, 2009; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Average differences vary depending on the cultures examined, but East Asians generally score two or three points lower on the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale than do European Americans, Canadians, or Western Europeans. In some cases, East Asians score below the scale midpoint, suggesting that their self-esteem is more negative than positive (Heine et al., 1999); in other cases, both cultural groups (i.e., Westerners and East Asians) score above the scale midpoint, suggesting that self-esteem is universally high rather than low (Cai et al., 2009).

Although cultural differences in global self-esteem are well established, their interpreta-tion is subject to interpretation. Self-esteem scales assess two conceptually distinct, but related aspects of self-worth: cognitively-based self-evaluations and affectively-based feel-ings of self-regard (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Whereas cognitively-based self-evaluations tap judgments about one's competencies, talents, and character (e.g., I am intelligent, cre-ative, and, generous), feelings of self-regard assess how people feel about themselves (e.g., I feel good about myself or I feel bad about myself).

Cai, Brown, Deng, and Oakes (2007) examined which of these factors underlies cul-tural differences in self-esteem scores. In one study, European American and Chinese col-lege students completed three scales: The Rosenberg self-esteem scale; a self-evaluation

questionnaire (e.g., 'How attractive competent, unintelligent, and unkind are you?'); and a measure of affective self-regard ('To what extent do you generally feel ashamed, humiliated, proud, and pleased with yourself?'). The American students scored higher than the Chinese students on the self-esteem and self-evaluation scales, but there were no cultural differences for affective self-regard. Moreover, cultural differences in global self-esteem disappeared once cognitive self-evaluations were statistically controlled. These findings suggest that East Asians and Westerners feel equally good about themselves, but East Asians evaluate aspects of themselves less positively than do Westerners, leading to cultural differences in mean levels of self-esteem (see also, Tafarodi & Swann, 1996).

Understanding cultural differences in cognitive self-evaluations

Having established that cultural differences in cognitive self-evaluations underlie cultural differences in self-esteem, I turn now to a consideration of why cultures differ in their self-evaluations. Four variables have been shown to be influential.

Modesty

It is widely accepted that modesty (both public and private) is more important in collectivistic, East Asian cultures than in individualistic, Western ones. In China, for example, the Confucian tradition emphasizes deference and self-effacement, and children are discouraged from bragging about themselves, especially at the expense of others. To determine whether norms of modesty underlie cultural differences in self-evaluations, Cai et al. (2007, Study 2) had European American and Chinese college students evaluate themselves and complete a modesty scale developed by Whetsone, Okun, and Cialdini (1992). Sample items include 'I believe it is impolite to talk excessively about one's achievements, even if they are outstanding.' and 'It's difficult for me to talk about my strengths to others even when I know I possess them.' As predicted, European American students evaluated themselves more positively than did Chinese students, but Chinese students reported being more modest than European American students. Moreover, cultural differences in self-evaluations disappeared once modesty was statistically controlled. These findings suggest that cultural norms of modesty underlie cultural differences in self-evaluations (see also, Kurman, 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002).

Research using implicit measures of self-evaluation provides additional evidence that cultural norms of modesty influence self-appraisals. Implicit self-evaluation measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), minimize self-presentational concerns by measuring the speed with which participants associate themselves and others with positive and negative stimuli. Cultural differences rarely emerge when such measures are used, suggesting that the differences that are found when explicit forms of self-evaluations are assessed are inflated because of self-presentational concerns (Yamaguchi et al., 2007).

Targets of comparison

Cultural differences in self-evaluations can also stem from different standards of comparison (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002). To illustrate, suppose participants are asked to assess their competence. If Americans use the average person as a standard of comparison but East Asians use the most competent person they know, differences in targets of comparison could explain cultural differences in self-evaluations.

The clearest way to examine this issue is to specify a clear reference point when having participants evaluate themselves. Although several reference points could be used, the most informative is to have participants compare themselves with most other people. Not only would these ratings provide information about scale tendencies, they would also indicate whether East Asians view themselves more positively than they view most other people. This issue is important because a wealth of evidence from Western samples shows that most people do, in fact, view themselves as 'better' than most other people (i.e., the so-called 'better than average' effect, Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994a,b).

Brown and Kobayashi (2002) conducted three studies to examine whether East Asians view themselves as 'better' than others. In Study 1, European American, Asian American, and Japanese college students indicated to what extent eight attributes (e.g., competent, friendly, modest, persistent) described (a) themselves, (b) most students at their university, and (c) their best friend. Figure 1 shows that although Japanese college students evaluated themselves less positively than did European American and Asian American college students, they also evaluated most other people less positively. Consequently, the tendency to view oneself as 'better' than others was comparable across cultures. Additional analyses found that all three cultural groups regarded their best friends in highly favorable terms, indicating a form of indirect self-enhancement (Brown et al., 1988). Taken together, these findings provide scant evidence that Japanese evaluate themselves negatively. As do Americans, they still regard themselves and their best friends as 'better' than most other people.

Two follow-up studies replicated and extended these results, finding that Japanese adults show the same tendencies when comparing themselves and their family members with most other people of the same sex and age. Insofar as not everyone can be better than 'most other people,' these data show that, just like Westerners, Japanese evaluate themselves in unrealistically positive terms (Brown, 1986; Marshall & Brown, 2007; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994a,b).
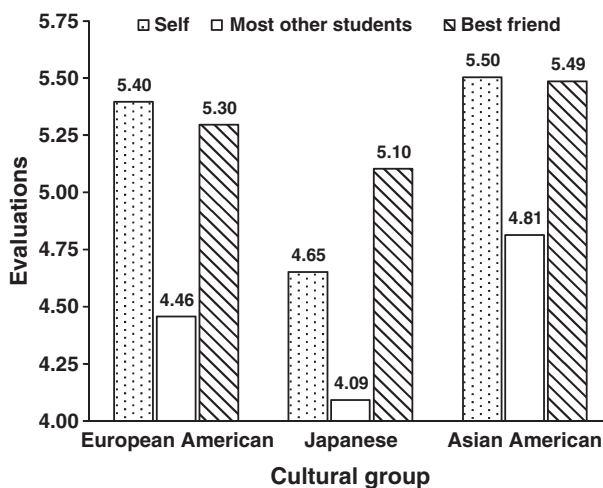
Figure 1 Evaluations of self, most other students, and one's best friend as a function of cultural group. (Adapted from Brown & Kobayashi, 2002, Study 1).

Attribute importance

Cultural differences in self-evaluations can also be affected by attribute importance. Clearly, different attributes are valued in different cultures. To return to a previous example, modesty and humility are more valued traits in East Asian cultures than in Western ones. Just the opposite tends to be true for other qualities, such as originality and self-reliance. One way to control for these differences is to directly assess perceptions of attribute importance when measuring self-evaluations. Brown and Kobayashi (2002) followed this strategy and found that, among Japanese and American participants, the more important an attribute was judged to be, the more participants believed they possessed the quality more than their peers.

Sedikides et al. (2003) provided additional evidence that attribute importance influences cultural differences in self-evaluations (see also, Kurman, 2001; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005). These investigators began by showing that communal traits (e.g., agreeable, loyal, respectful, sincere) are more important than agentic traits (e.g., capable, independent, original, unique) in collectivistic, East Asian cultures than in individualistic, Western ones, but that agentic traits are more important than communal traits in Western than East Asian cultures. Sedikides et al. then predicted that Japanese students would evaluate themselves more positively than Americans on communal traits, but that American students would evaluate themselves more positively than Japanese students on agentic traits. This proved to be the case, underscoring that attribute importance affects cultural differences in self-evaluations, with each cultural group evaluating themselves in especially positive terms on culturally valued traits and abilities.

Individual differences in self-esteem

In Western samples, high self-esteem participants evaluate themselves in highly favorable terms on just about every positively-valued attribute and dimension (Brown, 1986, 1993; Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001; Brown & Gallagher, 1992). Kobayashi and Brown (2003) tested whether this tendency also occurs in Japan. They found clear evidence that it does. Among Japanese and American college students, the tendency to rate oneself more positively than one appraises most other people was more characteristic of high self-esteem participants than of low self-esteem participants.

A more recent study by Brown and Cai (2009a) extended these findings. These investigators had Chinese and European American college students complete the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and evaluate themselves relative to their peers (1 = bottom 10%, 5 = middle 50%, 9 = top 10%) on traits that assessed competence and warmth. Figure 2
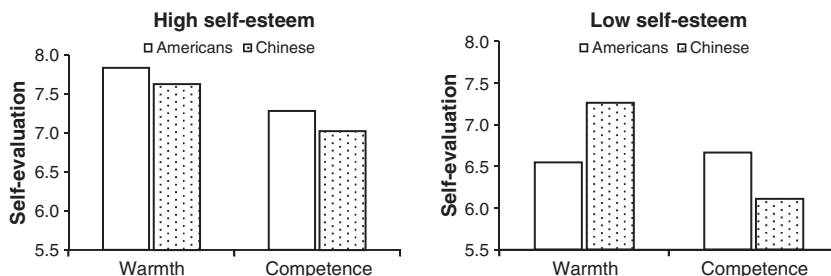
Figure 2 Comparative self-evaluations in America and China as a function of self-esteem and attribute type. (Adapted from Brown & Cai, 2009a, Study 2).

shows that cultural differences were absent among high self–esteem participants, who described themselves in uniformly positive terms across both attribute types. In contrast, among low self–esteem participants, Americans described themselves more positively than Chinese for items assessing competence, but Chinese described themselves more positively than Americans for items assessing warmth.

It is important to appreciate the significance of these findings. Much has been made of the fact that East Asians are less likely to tout their competence than are Westerners (see for example, Heine, 2003, p. 606). Yet, these differences occur only among people with low self–esteem. Even then, the opposite pattern is found when it comes to a different attribute – warmth (i.e., low self–esteem Westerners are more self–effacing than are low self–esteem East Asians). It is questionable whether such a narrow finding can be used to support the claim that cultural differences in self–evaluations are pervasive and pronounced.

Self-enhancement

Earlier I defined self–enhancement as the desire to maximize positive feelings of self–worth and minimize negative feelings of self–worth. Less formally, the self–enhancement motive calls attention to the fact that people prefer to feel proud of themselves rather than ashamed of themselves. Presumably, this is a universal imperative, present in all cultures.

We have already seen that there are no cultural differences when the intensity of these feelings is examined (Cai et al., 2007), but how are they maintained? Insofar as positive and negative experiences normally provoke these feelings, we can examine how different cultural groups respond to positive and negative outcomes. A number of responses could be examined (e.g., recall for positive and negative feedback), but self–serving attributions are arguably the most basic. The tendency for individuals to make asymmetric attributions for positive and negative outcomes is one of the most well–documented findings in all of psychology over the past 40 years (for reviews, see Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; Zuckerman, 1979). Positive outcomes are attributed to stable, central aspects of the self (e.g., 'I received a high test grade because I am smart'), but negative outcomes are either attributed to external factors (e.g., 'I received a low test grade because the test was unclear') or less central aspects of the self (e.g., 'I received a low test grade because I studied the wrong material or was under a lot of stress'). Importantly, this asymmetric pattern promotes feelings of self–worth: People feel good about themselves when they attribute positive outcomes to enduring personal strengths, and avoid feeling bad about themselves when they deny that negative outcomes are due to important, personal failings (Brown, 1991, 1998; Brown & Rogers, 1991; Brown & Weiner, 1984; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Brown and Cai (2009b) examined the cross–cultural generality of these attribution–emotion linkages. American and Chinese college students received (false) feedback regarding their performance on either an intellectual task or a test of social sensitivity. Afterward, they were asked (a) 'To what extent is your performance because of your ability?' and (b) 'How proud, pleased with yourself, humiliated, and ashamed of yourself do you feel?'). Across test types, the self–serving bias was observed in both cultures (i.e., both cultural groups judged ability to be a more important cause of success than of failure) and, in both cultures, self–serving attributions predicted positive feelings of self–worth

(i.e., feelings of self-worth were highest when ability was viewed as a likely cause of success and an unlikely cause of failure).

Correlates and consequences of self-esteem

In Western samples, high self-esteem is a valuable personal resource, predicting high levels of happiness and subjective well-being and low levels of depression and anxiety (Brown, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In a meta-analysis of 50 samples with more than 20,000 participants, Cai et al. (2009) found that these associations also occur in China, suggesting that self-esteem is experienced similarly across cultures (see also, Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, 2008).

   Self-esteem also appears to function similarly across cultures. Drawing on evidence from Western samples, my colleagues and I have argued that self-esteem plays its most important role when people confront negative feedback (Brown, 1993, 1998, in press–a; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Marshall, 2001, 2006; Dutton & Brown, 1997). Negative feedback leads low self-esteem people to feel bad about themselves (i.e., it negatively affects their momentary feelings of self-worth). This is much less true of high self-esteem people. Although high self-esteem people feel sad or disappointed when they fail, they do not feel humiliated or ashamed of themselves. In my view, this is the primary advantage of having high self-esteem: It allows you to fail without feeling bad about yourself.

   Brown, Cai, Oakes, & Deng (2009) tested whether the affect-regulating function of self-esteem occurs in East Asian countries as well as in Western ones. After completing a self-esteem scale, European American and Chinese college students received (bogus) success or failure feedback on an (alleged) test of their intellectual ability. Afterward, they rated their feelings of self-worth. Although self-esteem scores were lower among Chinese participants than among American participants, Figure 3 shows that, for both cultural groups, feedback had a greater impact on low self-esteem participants than on high self-esteem participants. Moreover, in both countries, self-esteem mattered more following failure than following success. These cross-cultural similarities in self-esteem functioning are particularly impressive given the mean level differences between cultures. Although East Asians score lower on self-esteem scales than Westerners, a high self-esteem East Asian is comparable to a high self-esteem Westerner (at least when it comes to responding to valenced feedback).
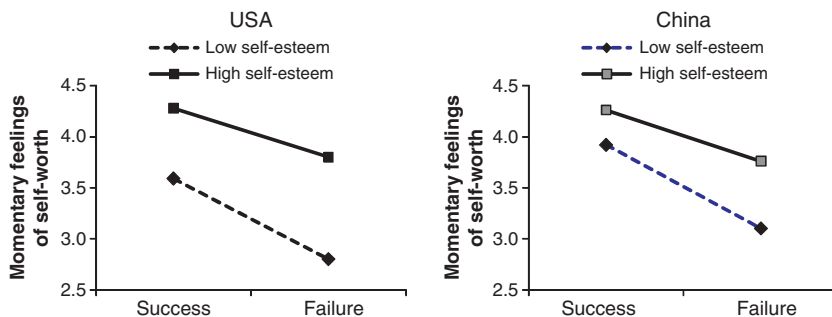
Figure 3 Emotional reactions to success and failure as a function of self-esteem and culture. (Adapted from Brown et al., 2009, Study 2).

Concluding Remarks

> "If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and looks like a duck, it must be a duck." – Anonymous proverb

In this article, I have reviewed research on culture and self-evaluative processes, focusing on comparisons between East Asians (Chinese and Japanese) and Americans. The research shows that, in both cultures, people (a) experience high feelings of self-regard (Cai et al., 2007, 2009; Yamaguchi et al., 2007); (b) evaluate themselves (and their intimates) as 'better' than others on culturally valued attributes (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Kobayashi & Brown, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2003); and (c) exhibit self-serving biases that promote feelings of self-worth (Brown & Cai, 2009b). Moreover, in both cultures, individual differences in self-esteem predict (d) psychological well-being (Cai et al., 2009) and (e) emotional regulation in response to negative outcomes (Brown et al., 2009). In short, the two cultures are remarkably similar when it comes to their self-evaluative activities and outcomes. This convergence seems all the more striking when one considers the vast differences in traditions, norms, and living conditions that distinguish East from West (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998).

Many readers may find these similarities surprising. Heine and associates have published quite a few papers that seemingly show widespread cultural differences in self-evaluative processes (e.g., Heine, 2003, 2005; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine et al., 1999). Closer inspection of these articles shows that Heine's position has much in common with my own. As do I, Heine believes that East Asians 'like themselves [as much as] North Americans' (Heine, 2003; p. 606), and that 'people universally have a desire to be viewed as appropriate, good, and significant in their own culture' (Heine & Hamamura, 2007, p. 5). Thus, there is complete agreement that people the world over experience a strong desire to feel good about themselves and that this desire is satisfied in culturally prescribed ways.

Given this agreement, why does it seem as if there are large and important cultural differences in self-esteem and self-enhancement? One factor is the divergent manner in which the term 'self-enhancement' has been defined. Following the lead of some of psychology's most eminent theorists (e.g., Becker, James, McDougall, Maslow, and Rogers), I have defined the self-enhancement motivation in affective terms, arguing that people the world over strive to feel good about themselves. Departing from this venerable tradition with its emphasis on affective processes, Heine et al. have defined the self-enhancement motive as a tendency to 'dwell on and elaborate positive information about the self' (Heine & Hamamura, 2007, p. 4). Insofar as East Asian cultures actively discourage people from engaging in these activities, it is questionable whether dwelling on and elaborating positive information about oneself would make East Asians feel good about themselves. Put differently, only if East Asians did not 'dwell on and elaborate positive information about themselves' even though their culture encouraged them to do so, would we have evidence that self-enhancement processes are absent in East Asia.

Heine et al. have also cast a wide net when discussing cultural differences in the strength of the self-enhancement motive. For example, in their meta-analysis of self-enhancement biases, Heine and Hamamura (2007) cited the following findings as evidence that East Asians are less motivated than Westerners to enhance their feelings of self-worth: Unlike Westerners, East Asians (a) believe negative feedback would affect their feelings of self-worth more than positive feedback; (b) spend less time scrutinizing negative feedback before deciding they have failed a task; (c) do not show better memory

for positive feedback than for negative feedback; and (d) persist longer on a second task after initially failing a previous task than after initially succeeding on a previous task. As the authors correctly noted, the relevance of these behaviors to feelings of self-worth (and thus the self-enhancement motive) is unclear (e.g., perhaps East Asians spend little time scrutinizing negative feedback because they do not enjoy feeling bad about themselves). In broader terms, before we accept any finding as evidence for self-enhancement, researchers should show (a) that the behavior in question promotes feelings of self-worth in both cultures, and (b) Westerners exhibit the behavior but East Asians do not.

Even if we accept that 'dwelling on and elaborating positive information about the self' is a valid index of self-enhancement, there is much evidence for cultural similarities. For the most part, cultural differences in self-evaluations evaporate once self-presentational pressures are minimized or cultural norms of modesty are taken into account (Cai et al., 2007; Kurman, 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002; Yamaguchi et al., 2007). Moreover, self-serving attributions are found across cultures (Brown & Cai, 2009b), and both cultural groups evaluate themselves in more favorable terms than they evaluate their peers on culturally valued attributes (Brown & Cai, 2009a; Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Kobayashi & Brown, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2003).

This latter finding would seem to be most damaging to the 'self-enhancement biases are absent in East Asia' argument. It is hard to think of a more direct way of showing that people hold themselves in unusually high regard than to note that they believe they are 'better' than their peers across a range of culturally valued traits. Yet, ignoring evidence that these judgments predict feelings of self-worth (Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Brown et al., 1988), Heine et al. have dismissed them as artifactual and uninformative, citing a variety of cognitive factors that influence comparative judgments (Hamamura, Heine, & Takemoto, 2007; Heine & Hamamura, 2007). Readers should be aware that all of the criticisms Heine and associates have leveled at these studies apply only when ratings of self and others are gathered using a single scale (i.e., when people are asked to directly compare themselves with another entity). When separate ratings are made (e.g., participants make separate ratings of themselves, most other people, and their best friends), the judgments are not tainted by the cognitive biases that can contaminate comparative judgments (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Windschitl, Conybeare, & Krizan, 2008). Insofar as Brown and Kobayashi (2002; Kobayashi & Brown, 2003) used separate evaluations of self, best friends, and others, the criticisms Heine has leveled do not compromise the obvious point these findings make: Just like Westerners, East Asians believe they are 'better than others' on qualities their culture values.

By emphasizing cultural similarities, I am not arguing that cultures do not affect some self-evaluative processes. Cultures differ in so many ways that it would be foolish to dismiss all of the evidence that points to cultural dissimilarities. Instead, my point is simply this: Amid all of the cultural diversity, a need for positive self-feelings emerges as a basic human motivation that expresses itself in similar ways across dissimilar cultures.

In light of these considerable cross-cultural convergences, it is appropriate to consider why people have a universal need to feel good about themselves. The most likely explanation is that self-love is adaptive (Brown, 2010; Campbell & Foster, 2006; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000). Having a secure base of self-love allows people to fail without feeling bad about themselves, enabling them to set higher goals for themselves, try different things, and persist longer at the things they do try. These behaviors are prized in every culture.

Ultimately, self-love may even bestow a reproductive advantage. As any parent will attest, raising children to reproductive age requires a tremendous investment of tangible

resources and personal sacrifice. Parents who have strong affectional bonds for themselves and view their children as self-extensions may well be more likely to make these investments and sacrifices than those who are ambivalent about themselves or do not view their children as self-extensions. In this manner, self-love could confer a reproductive benefit, explaining why it is commonly experienced across the world.

Short Biography

Jonathon D. Brown is a social psychologist at the University of Washington. Since receiving his Ph.D. from UCLA in 1986, he has written two books and published numerous articles on self-esteem, self-enhancement, and self-evaluations.

Endnote

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