

**THE SELF-ENHANCEMENT MOTIVE
IN COLLECTIVISTIC CULTURES**
The Rumors of My Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated

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PLEASE PROVIDE ABSTRACT THAT IS 150 WORDS OR LESS

Keywords: **PLEASE PROVIDE 4-5 KEYWORDS**

In an important series of studies, Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) documented a curious phenomenon: When parties with opposing attitudes look at the same set of conflicting data, each emerges with its convictions strengthened. This biased assimilation effect occurs because people's attitudes color their judgments of evidence quality. Evidence that fits one's prior beliefs seems compelling and convincing, whereas opposing evidence seems flawed and specious.

Reading Heine's commentary reminded me of this study. As one who believes self-enhancement processes are a basic human motivation, I looked at this evidence and concluded that it provides strong support for the claim that people the world over strive to feel good about themselves. In contrast, as one who believes that self-enhancement processes are not universal, Heine looked at the same body of evidence and concluded that the self-enhancement motive is culturally bound and emerges in collectivistic cultures only if certain measurement artifacts artificially inflate its strength.

Rather than discussing point-for-point the concerns Heine raised, I thought I would focus on something he wrote about his own work. Near the end of his commentary, he noted that he and his associates have not argued that East Asians "like themselves any less than North Americans," only that they are more critical about their self-competence. I was very surprised to read this admission. I had assumed that he and his colleagues thought otherwise when they published a paper asking, "Is the need for positive self-regard universal?" (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1998). I didn't realize until now that their answer is "Yes, it is universal, but East Asians don't necessarily tout their competence." I think this position is very reasonable and I suspect few readers will find any reason to quarrel with it. Accordingly, I will simply summarize how the present series of articles supports this conclusion.

MOTIVATION AND MANIFESTATION

Motives do not reveal themselves directly. Instead, we must infer their existence by analyzing behavior and the conditions under which the behavior occurs. With respect to the self-enhancement motive, the behavior we examine is the strength and presence of self-enhancement biases—a tendency to process information in ways that cast the self in a favorable light. Although these biases are less prevalent in East Asian cultures, this does not necessarily mean the motive itself is lacking. Instead, it is possible that cultural factors discourage its expression.

What might these factors be? In Western cultures, three factors have consistently been found to influence the prevalence and strength of self-enhancing biases: self-presentational concerns, the interpersonal context, and psychological well-being. The effects are such that self-enhancing biases are greatly attenuated when people (a) wish to appear modest, (b) compare themselves with loved ones and close friends rather than strangers or associates, and (c) score low rather than high on self-report measures of psychological health (Brown, 1998).

It is instructive to consider the articles in this special section with respect to these three factors. First, they were absent in the one article that found no evidence of self-enhancement on the part of Japanese (Snibbe, Kitayama, Markus, and Suzuki) but present in the six that did. Of these,

- three found that people from collectivistic cultures tended to be as self-enhancing as people from individualistic cultures once self-presentational concerns were minimized (Kobayashi and Greenwald; Kudo and Numazaki; Kurman);
- one found that Japanese students were self-enhancing when competing against an opponent but self-effacing when playing a game with a partner (Takata);
- one found that Japanese were personally self-effacing for a prior success or failure, but expected their family, friends, and loved ones to make self-aggrandizing attributions for them (Muramoto); and
- two found that psychological health (as measured by self-report) was positively related to the strength of self-enhancement biases in collectivistic cultures as well as individualistic ones (Kobayashi and Brown; Kurman).

CONCLUSION

In short, the same situational factors that influence the strength of self-enhancement biases in individualistic cultures influence the strength of self-enhancement biases in collectivistic cultures, and the same personality variables that correlate with the strength of self-enhancement biases in individualistic cultures correlate with the strength of self-enhancement biases in collectivistic ones. These findings point to a simple conclusion: The self-enhancement motive is alive and well in collectivistic cultures, but cultural norms limit its expression.

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