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Reasoning about modesty among adolescents and adults in China and the U.S.

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Reasoning about modesty was examined among adolescents and young adults in China and the U.S. Participants made moral judgments of story characters who did a good deed and either truthfully accepted credit for it, or falsely denied having done it. The social context in which statements occurred was manipulated, with some made in private and others in front of a class. Chinese participants judged accepting credit for good deeds less favorably and lying in the service of modesty more favorably than did participants from the U.S. In each country, older participants judged modesty-based lies more favorably when they were told in public. Additionally, a high collectivist orientation and low individualistic orientation was associated with higher ratings of modesty-based lying in public, which provides the first direct link between endorsement of these values and moral judgments about lie-telling.

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For adolescents, gaining the regard of others is a major concern (Elkind, 1967). A seemingly obvious strategy is to disclose one's positive accomplishments and personal characteristics. However, doing so can produce undesirable consequences, such as creating an impression of immodesty (Banerjee, 2000; Watling & Banerjee, 2007b). This paper examines how adolescents and young adults in the U.S. and China reason about the appropriateness of either taking credit for one's own accomplishments, or falsely denying them in the service of social norms relating to modesty. In addition, the social context of communication is investigated by comparing how children reason about statements made in public versus private settings.

Cross-cultural differences

Studies comparing individuals in East Asian and North American countries indicate that modesty is emphasized to a substantially greater extent in the East (e.g., Cai, Brown, Deng, & Oakes, 2007). Specifically, in Eastern cultures there is a strong expectation that individuals will downplay their accomplishments (Kim, Chiu, Peng, Cai, & Tov, 2010), whereas in North America there is a greater emphasis on self-confidence and self-esteem (Heine, 2001; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). According to many scholars (e.g., Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982), modesty is a major part of East Asian cultural traditions, and both children and adults are encouraged to be “unsung heroes” by minimizing their personal achievements.

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The greater emphasis on modesty in East Asia has been linked to situations in which individuals falsely deny credit for their prosocial actions (Fu, Lee, Cameron, & Xu, 2001; Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, & Board, 1997; Lee, Xu, Fu, Cameron, & Chen, 2001). Lee et al. (1997) presented children aged 7 to 11 from Canada and China with stories in which a child protagonist performs a good deed. Later, a teacher asks the protagonist whether he or she did the good deed, and the protagonist responds by either truthfully acknowledging it or falsely denying it. Children from Canada rated the truthful acknowledgment more favorably and the false denial less favorably than did their counterparts from China. Lee et al. also found that among the Chinese children there was an age-related increase in the tendency to evaluate modest lies favorably and immodest truths unfavorably. Fu et al. (2001) replicated the cross-cultural differences between Canada and China in an adult sample. Canadian adults typically asserted that the protagonists deserved credit for their good deeds and should truthfully acknowledge them, and Chinese adults typically asserted that the protagonists who lied to conceal their good deeds were demonstrating an appropriate degree of modesty.

In interpreting their findings, Lee et al. (1997) pointed out that modesty is seen as a central virtue in China and is emphasized throughout the socialization process. Although this emphasis on modesty in China is consistent with Communist ideology, it is by no means driven by Communist influences alone. Modesty is also emphasized in Confucian and Taoist traditions, and strong modesty norms are evident in East Asian societies outside of Communist China, including Taiwan (Lee et al., 2001) and Japan (Heyman, Itakura, & Lee, *in press*). Lee and colleagues (Lee et al., 1997) argued that there are close links between the collectivist values that tend to be emphasized in East Asian societies (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002) and the tendency to view a high level of modesty as appropriate. One possible explanation for this link is that modest behavior can help to deflect attention from ways in which individuals stand out from their group, thus promoting harmonious interpersonal relations within collectivist societies (see also Bond et al., 1982).

Social context of communication

The types of statements about the self that are generally considered to be socially appropriate vary as a function of the context in which the communication takes place (Aloise-Young, 1993; Banerjee, 2002; Buhrmester, Goldfarb, & Cantrell, 1992; Juvonen & Murdock, 1995; Watling & Banerjee, 2007a, 2007b). Watling and Banerjee (2007b) found that for participants between the ages of 8 and 11, an immodest response to praise was considered to be less appropriate if made among peers, as compared to adults. Juvonen and Murdock (1995) found that 14-year-old American students expressed less of a desire to portray themselves as hard working when among peers rather than teachers.

The present study focuses on a different aspect of the social context of communication: whether the communication takes place in public or in private. Much of the research concerning self-presentation in public and private contexts has been conducted among adults in Western cultures (Baumeister & Ilko, 1995; Miller & Schlenker, 1985; Schütz, 1997; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007; Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). This research suggests that people tend to behave more modestly in public than they do in private. For example, Miller and Schlenker (1985) found that participants were less likely to take personal credit for group successes in a public versus a private setting.

If modest values are emphasized in East Asian cultures as a means to promote harmonious group relationships (Lee et al., 1997), it seems reasonable to predict that expectations for modesty will be greater in public versus private settings. In addition, weaker expectations of behavioral consistency in East Asian cultures (Heine, 2001) that are associated with a strong emphasis on roles and relations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) may translate into a greater willingness to accept differences in behavior between public and private settings. As is consistent with this possibility, Japanese adults wrote more modest descriptions of themselves when in a public setting rather than in private (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001), but American adults did not provide significantly different descriptions across these contexts.

A small number of developmental studies have examined the public-private distinction in children's reasoning about modesty (Heyman, Itakura, & Lee, *in press*; Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982; Fu et al., 2010). This research has established the importance of the distinction in Japan among children ages 7–11 years. Yoshida et al. (1982) asked Japanese children to identify which of a series of statements they felt described them best. Some of the statements were self-enhancing, such as "I know many kinds of things," and others were self-critical, such as "There are many things that I am worse at than other people." Participants selected more self-enhancing statements when they responded privately on a questionnaire than when they responded orally in the presence of ten classmates. Heyman, Itakura, and Lee (*in press*) also found effects of social context in reasoning about modesty among Japanese children. Children ages 7 to 11 judged the acknowledgment of a good deed more negatively when it was made in front of an audience of classmates rather than in private. This effect of setting increased with age, which may reflect the increased exposure to Japanese modesty norms among the older children. In contrast, there were no such effects of setting in a comparison group of children from the U.S. Fu et al. (2010) replicated this finding with Chinese children under 12 years of age and further found that the collectivist tendencies of the children's parents significantly predicted children's moral judgments about modest-related lies.

The present research

The present research had three main goals. First, we aimed to extend research on cross-cultural differences in modesty to include an adolescent sample. Although adolescence has long been recognized as a stage during which individuals are highly aware of how they are likely to be perceived by others (Harter, 1999; Elkind, 1967), little is known about how they reason about the types of communication about the self that are appropriate, including when modest and immodest responses are

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