



A longitudinal-experimental test of the panculturality of self-enhancement: Self-enhancement promotes psychological well-being both in the west and the east

Erin M. O'Mara^{a,*}, Lowell Gaertner^b, Constantine Sedikides^c, Xinyue Zhou^{d,1}, Yanping Liu^d

^a Department of Psychology, University of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45469, USA

^b Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee, USA

^c Department of Psychology, University of Southampton, United Kingdom

^d Department of Psychology, Sun Yat-Sen University, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 28 January 2012

Keywords:

Self-enhancement

Self-effacement

Psychological well-being

Culture

Self

ABSTRACT

Intensely debated is whether the self-enhancement motive is culturally relative or universal. The universalist perspective predicts that satisfaction of the motive panculturally promotes psychological well-being. The relativistic perspective predicts that such promotive effects are restricted to Western culture. A longitudinal-randomized-experiment conducted in China and the US tested the competing predictions. Participants completed measures of psychological well-being in an initial session. A week later participants listed a personally important attribute, described (via random assignment) how that attribute is more (*self-enhancement*) or less (*self-effacement*) descriptive of self than others, and again reported their psychological well-being. Consistent with the universalist perspective, self-enhancement significantly increased psychological well-being from baseline in the US and China; self-effacement yielded no change in psychological well-being in either culture.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Whether the need for positive self-regard (i.e., self-enhancement motive) is culturally relative or universal is a topic of intense debate. We address this issue with a longitudinal randomized experiment that tests the causal effect of self-enhancement on psychological well-being in Eastern and Western cultures. Theorists have argued that a defining criterion for a motive is its association with psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Therefore, satisfaction of the enhancement motive should panculturally promote psychological well-being, if self-enhancement is a universal motive.

1.1. The self-enhancement motive: culturally relative or a human universal?

Grounded in social constructionist accounts of selfhood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989), the relativist perspective suggests that the cognitive, emotional, and motivational elements of the self develop and orchestrate in regard to internalized

cultural mandates. The self-enhancement motive develops in Western culture as an ensuing product of the mandate for individualism (i.e., agency, independence), but is absent in Eastern culture because of the motive's incongruence with the mandate for collectivism (i.e., communion, interdependence). Instead, the latter mandate fosters a self-effacement (i.e., self-criticism) motive, which Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, and Norasakkunkit (1997) define as an orientation "in the direction of attending, elaborating, and emphasizing negatively valenced aspects of the self" (p. 1260). Self-effacement serves to promote and maintain social connections among self and others rather than positively distinguish self from others (Heine & Lehman, 1995; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Empirical support for the relativist perspective is provided, in part, by the (a) greater positive skew and mean level of explicit self-esteem in Western than Eastern cultures (Heine et al., 1999) and (b) apparently limited, if not lacking, self-favoring social comparisons among Easterners (Falk, Heine, Yuki, & Takemura, 2009; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007).

Grounded in evolutionary (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000) and existential (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004) accounts, the universalist perspective suggests that self-enhancement is a basic human motive whose expression is sensitive to contextual considerations (Brown, 2010; Gaertner, Sedikides, Cai, & Brown, 2010; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). For example, self-enhancement is not expressed invariantly, even in Western culture, because blatant self-aggrandizement generates

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: eomara1@udayton.edu (E.M. O'Mara).

¹ This research was partly supported by grants from the Key Program and General Program of National Natural Science Foundation of China (91124004 and 31171002), and 985-3 Research Program of Sun Yat-Sen University (90026-3284000) awarded to Xinyue Zhou.

social disdain (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Hoorens, 2011; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007). Instead, self-enhancement is achieved tactically such as by ennobling the self on important, but not on unimportant, attributes (Alicke, 1985; Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Dunning, 1995). Thus, the universalist perspective anticipates cultural variation in the expression of the self-enhancement motive, and a valid test of this perspective requires a nuanced approach capable of tracking the motive's tactical and contextual manifestations.

The latter point warrants elaboration. The distinction between a motive and its outward manifestation entails that an observed cultural difference does not necessarily refute the universalist perspective. For example, a lower mean level of explicit self-esteem in Eastern culture is not inconsistent with the universalist perspective, given the pervasive modesty norm that constrains explicit self-reports (Kurman, 2003). Indeed, cultural differences occur on reports of cognitive, not affective, self-evaluation, and – as the universalist perspective predicts – these differences vanish when modesty is controlled (Cai, Brown, Deng, & Oakes, 2007) or when self-esteem is assessed with implicit measures that circumvent modesty concerns (Yamaguchi et al., 2007).

Similarly, limited evidence of self-enhancing social comparison in Eastern culture is not inconsistent with the universalist perspective, provided that the evidence derives from studies that lack assessment of the tactical expression of the motive (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine et al., 2007). Research sensitive to such tactical expression indicates that Easterners more strongly self-enhance (i.e., rate self as superior to peers) on attributes relevant to collectivism, whereas Westerners more strongly self-enhance on attributes relevant to individualism (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toghuchi, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). Notably, those disparate expressions are produced by the same underlying process of self-enhancing on important attributes (Brown, 2010). As the universalist perspective predicts, both Westerners and Easterners self-enhance to the extent to which the domain of enhancement is personally important (Sedikides et al., 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). Indeed, when evaluating the self on personally important domains Westerners and Easterners alike desire self-enhancing feedback more than either no-feedback or self-effacing feedback (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Cai, in press).

Skeptics of the universalist perspective argue that much of the supporting evidence has accrued with the better-than-average paradigm (Hamamura, Heine, & Takemoto, 2007). The argument is that a cognitive (rather than motivational) process underlies the tendency for Easterners (and Westerners) to judge themselves as superior to others. The argument is derived from work by Klar and colleagues (Giladi & Klar, 2002; Klar, 2002; Klar & Giladi, 1997) suggesting that greater emphasis is placed on consideration of the singular target (e.g., self) than the generalized comparative target (e.g., average peer), which yields a more extreme judgment of the singular target. However, two points are in order. *First*, support for the universalist perspective is also provided by paradigms unrelated to the above-average-effect, such as with self ratings of academic performance controlled against actual performance (Kurman, 2003; Kurman & Siram, 1997), self-serving attributions (Anderson, 1999), implicit processes (Hoorens, Nuttin, Erdelyi-Herman, & Pavakanun, 1990; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Yamaguchi et al., 2007), and self-evaluative feedback preferences (Gaertner et al., in press). *Second*, a substantial body of research, which cannot be explained by a cognitive account, attests to the motivational underpinning of the above average effect (for detailed reviews see Guenther & Alicke, 2010; Sedikides & Alicke, 2011). For example, the above average effect (a) persists when self is judged in contrast to another singular target (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001; Brown, 2011, Study 2) and (b) remains under conditions that

minimize cognitive influences (e.g., cognitive load; Alicke et al., 1995, Study 7). Furthermore, as is expected of a motivated effect, the magnitude of the above average effect (a) varies with motivationally relevant factors such as the valence (Alicke, 1985), importance (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Dunning, 1995), and verifiability (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989) of the comparison dimension, (b) is stronger under conditions that amplify self-enhancement concerns (e.g., threats to self; Brown, 2011, Study 4) and (c) is weaker under conditions that assuage self-enhancement concerns (e.g., self-affirmation; Guenther, 2011).

The current research advances the debate using a paradigm that is immune to existing criticism. Rather than measuring self-enhancement as an outcome, we manipulate it to assess whether self-enhancement has the same (or disparate) functional effect on the psychological well-being of members of Western and Eastern cultures. As we subsequently elaborate, the relativist and universalist perspectives offer competing predictions.

1.2. Psychological well-being: distinguishing the relativist and universalist perspectives

In their challenge of the longstanding view of mental health, Taylor and Brown (1988) proposed that self-enhancement is a component of normal human functioning that promotes psychological well-being. Research that assesses subjective feeling-states, such as depression and satisfaction with life, is consistent with this promotive effect of self-enhancement in Western culture (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). Although much of the research is limited inferentially due to correlational and cross-sectional designs, longitudinal studies suggest that self-enhancement promotes subsequent psychological well-being (Zuckerman & O'Loughlin, 2006). Indeed, only one study reports a negative association between self-enhancement and subjective feeling-states in Western culture (Robins & Beer, 2001, Study 2). That study, however, employed a questionable assessment of self-enhancement: it measured exaggeration of academic ability using an aggregate of self-reported estimates of ongoing performance (e.g., "Compared to the average UC Berkeley student, how would you rate your academic ability?") and past performance (e.g., "Compared to the average student in your high school, how would you rate your academic ability?") relative to actual past performance (i.e., high school grade point average and Scholastic Achievement Test score). Unlike exaggeration of ongoing performance, which reflects motivated self-enhancement, exaggeration of past performance reflects self-presentational tendencies and, thus, would not necessarily be expected to promote well-being (Gramzow & Willard, 2006).

Of course, we do not suggest that self-enhancement invariably yields positive consequences. As mentioned previously, self-enhancement entails a social cost in the eyes of others such that the self-enhancer may be perceived as arrogant or narcissistic (Leary et al., 1997). Likewise, favorably distorting life-problems through rose colored lenses can prove harmful (Dunning, 2005). In terms of subjective feeling-states, however, the literature indicates that self-enhancement functionally promotes psychological well-being.

The relativist and universalist perspectives offer competing hypotheses regarding the effect of self-enhancement on psychological well-being in Eastern and Western cultures. The universalist perspective predicts that satisfaction of the self-enhancement motive promotes psychological well-being regardless of culture. That is, self-enhancement will decrease experiences such as depression and will increase experiences such as satisfaction with life. The relativist perspective, in contrast, predicts that the promotive effect of self-enhancement will be limited to Western culture in which self-enhancement is a relevant motive. Because the self-system that develops in Eastern culture is not orchestrated to pursue positive

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/951673>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/951673>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)