

Explaining East-West Differences in the Likelihood of Making Favorable Self-Evaluations: The Role of Evaluation Apprehension and Directness of Expression

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Abstract

The authors contend that although people in both Eastern and Western cultures are motivated to make favorable self-evaluations, the actual likelihood of expressing favorable self-evaluations in a concrete situation depends on (a) the dominant self-presentation norms in the culture, (b) how salient the norm is in the immediate situation, and (c) the availability of normatively permissible means to make favorable self-evaluations. The authors tested this proposal in three studies. Study 1 showed that given the strong influence of the modesty norm in Eastern cultures, Chinese are more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations when evaluation apprehension pressure in the immediate situation is reduced. Furthermore, Studies 2 and 3 showed that Asian Americans and Chinese are more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations when they can do it indirectly by denying possession of negative traits than when they have to do it directly by claiming possession of positive traits. In contrast, among European Americans, given the relative weak influence of the modesty norm in their culture, they are equally comfortable with making favorable self-evaluations in public and private situations through affirmation of positive self-aspects and repudiation of negative self-aspects.

Keywords

cross-cultural differences, self-evaluations, modesty, negativity

One robust finding in cross-cultural psychology is that compared to Westerners (individuals from the Western European cultural traditions, including European Americans and European Canadians), Easterners (individuals from Asian cultural traditions, including Asian Americans

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and Asian Canadians) are much less willing to communicate to others favorable evaluations of the self. For example, in a national survey of nearly 1 million high school seniors conducted by the College Board (1976-1977) in the United States, no participants rated themselves below average on the ability to get along with others. Similarly, Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) found that almost all (more than 93%) European Canadians rate themselves above the theoretical midpoint on the Rosenberg (1965) Global Self-Esteem Scale. In addition, Americans are unrealistically optimistic that positive events are more likely to occur to themselves than to others, and that negative events are less likely to occur to themselves than to others. For example, about 95% of 5,367 newlyweds in the United States expected a less than 50% chance that their marriages would end up in separation or divorce (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991), when the divorce rate was about 50% in the United States. Also, people in Western cultures are motivated to maintain positive self-evaluations by engaging in various compensatory self-protective strategies, such as self-serving attribution (Blaine & Crocker, 1993), self-handicapping strategies (Tice & Baumeister, 1990), self-justification (Steele, 1988), downward social comparison (Gibbon & McCoy, 1991), and discounting negative information of the self (Baumeister, 1982).

Although Easterners make favorable self-evaluations, they are less prevalent, and their expressions more constrained, in Eastern compared to Western cultural contexts (Cai, Brown, Deng, & Oakes, 2007; Heine et al., 1999; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Kurman, 2001). Easterners' reluctance to evaluate themselves favorably is puzzling given that in both Eastern and Western cultures, favorable self-evaluations seem to have important protective functions (Sedikides & Strube, 1997) and are associated with many indicators of psychological health, including less depression and anxiety (Cai, Wu, & Brown, in press; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), better self-regulation (Baumeister & Tice, 1985), happier marriage (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), and better coping strategies (Carver et al., 1993).

To resolve this puzzle, we posit that Easterners feel a need to make favorable self-evaluations, although they are more comfortable doing so in some situations than in others. An interesting question, then, is when Easterners would feel comfortable making favorable evaluations of the self. Some studies that have begun to address this question have shown that Easterners are willing to admit having desirable attributes that are perceived to be culturally important (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002, 2003; Kurman, 2001, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Other studies have shown that Easterners tend to make favorable self-evaluations when they respond to implicit or indirect measures of self-evaluation (Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003; Takata, 2003; Yamaguchi et al., 2007) or when they expect their responses to be completely private and anonymous (Kudo & Numazaki, 2003). In this article, we seek to provide an integrated theoretical framework to understand these past findings and guide new empirical examinations of the relationships between culture, society, and self.

In explaining East-West differences in the likelihood of making favorable self-evaluations, Chiu and Hong (2006) proposed that given the protective functions of favorable self-evaluations, people in both Eastern and Western cultural contexts are motivated to evaluate themselves favorably. However, cultural norms regulate the expression of this motive. In Eastern cultures, the dominant norm of modesty prescribes downplaying one's accomplishments and showing moderation in self-presentation and proscribes direct communication of favorable self-evaluations (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Pualengco, Chiu, & Kim, in press; Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982). Although modesty is also valued in Western culture (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986), it has relatively less authority over self-expression (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The preceding analysis explains why Easterners are less likely than Westerners to express favorable self-evaluations directly. This analysis has another important implication: Easterners should be more comfortable with making favorable self-evaluations when the pressure of evaluation

apprehension is reduced (as when they feel that nobody can monitor their self-evaluations) or when they do not need to express their favorable self-evaluations directly.

This explanation of East-West differences in the likelihood of making favorable self-evaluations is consistent with past findings. First, the assumption that both Easterners and Westerners are motivated to evaluate themselves favorably is consistent with the finding that Easterners make favorable self-evaluations when they respond to implicit or indirect measures of self-evaluation (Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003; Takata, 2003; Yamaguchi et al., 2007).

Second, there is good evidence that the norm of modesty has strong influence on self-presentation in Eastern cultures. For example, Bond et al. (1982) found that in Chinese societies, students who showed self-effacing attributions were perceived more favorably than those who displayed self-enhancing attributions. In addition, in Eastern cultures, subscription to the modesty norm predicts stronger self-criticism and weaker self-enhancement. Furthermore, subscription to the modesty norm has been shown to mediate cross-cultural differences in self-enhancement (Kurman, 2001, 2002, 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002) and the extremity of positive self-cognitions (Cai et al., 2007). Although in Western cultures, self-promoters (vs. ingratiators) are not perceived to be likable (Godfrey et al., 1986), the weight of evidence suggests that the norm of modesty has greater authority in regulating self-enhancing behaviors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Finally, Easterners display self-enhancing behaviors (e.g., make self-serving attributions for their achievement outcomes) when the norm of modesty is not salient, as when the participants' responses are completely private and anonymous (Kudo & Numazaki, 2003) or when the situational norm emphasizes interpersonal competition (Takata, 2003). There is some evidence (Kitayama & Uchida, 2003) that when assured of the complete anonymity of their responses, Easterners are more critical of themselves than of their close friends. However, it is unclear from this result whether Easterners are indeed more critical of the self or more generous when rating their close friends (see Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000; Muramoto, 2003; Muramoto & Yamaguchi, 1997, 2003). In short, the available evidence is consistent with the idea that dominant cultural norms of self-presentation moderate overt expressions of favorable self-evaluations.

This article reports three studies that seek to provide further direct evidence for this normative interpretation of East-West differences in the likelihood of making favorable self-evaluations. In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis that Easterners would make strong favorable self-evaluations when evaluation apprehension pressure is reduced. To achieve this objective, we measured Chinese participants' and European American participants' tendency to make favorable performance forecasts in public and private settings. Although in a previous study (Kudo & Numazaki, 2003), Japanese participants also made self-serving attributions in private settings, because this study did not include a Westerners sample, it is unclear whether Japanese would display the self-serving bias to the same extent as Westerners in private situations. By including both European American and Chinese samples and a different measure of favorable self-evaluations (favorable performance forecasts), we sought to extend Kudo and Numazaki's (2003) results. We hypothesize that Chinese would make more favorable performance forecasts in private than public settings. We also hypothesize that European Americans would make favorable performance forecasts in both private and public settings.

In Studies 2 and 3, we tested the prediction that when Easterners do not need to express their favorable self-evaluations directly, they feel comfortable making favorable self-evaluations. Past research (see Kim, Peng, & Chiu, 2008) has shown that people can communicate favorable self-evaluations directly by attributing positive qualities to the self (e.g., "I am smart." "I am perfect.") or indirectly by denying possession of negative attributes (e.g., "I am not stupid." "I am flawless."). Although unrealistic denial of negative traits (e.g., "I am flawless.") is a manifestation of favorable self-evaluation as much as unrealistic affirmation of positive traits (e.g.,

“I am perfect.”), expressing favorable self-evaluation indirectly through denying possession of negative traits is not in direct opposition to the modesty norm, which proscribes playing up one’s positive qualities and achievements. Thus, we hypothesize that Easterners would be more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations through repudiation of negative self-aspects than through affirmation of positive self-aspects, whereas Westerners would be comfortable making favorable self-evaluations through both means.

There is some indirect evidence for this prediction. East Asians are more comfortable engaging in prevention-focused (vs. promotion-focused) regulation compared to European Americans (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2002). A prevention focus orients individuals to pursue goals by avoiding negative consequences, whereas a promotion focus orients individuals to attain goals by approaching positive consequences (Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002; Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2004). This cross-cultural difference in self-regulation is consistent with the hypothesis that East Asians would be more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations indirectly through repudiation of negative self-aspects.

In addition, it has been found that only Canadians display an optimism bias for positive events (expecting more positive events to occur to self than to others). However, both Canadians and Japanese display an optimism bias for negative events (expecting more negative events to occur to others than to self; see also Ji, Zhang, Osborne, & Guan, 2004). Other investigators (Chang, Asakawa, & Sanna, 2001; Heine & Lehman, 1995) have found that East Asians show an unrealistic optimism for negative events only.

In summary, based on our review of the extant literature, we propose that although people in both Eastern and Western cultures are motivated to make favorable self-evaluations, the actual likelihood of expressing favorable self-evaluations in concrete situations depends on the interplay of three factors: (a) the dominant self-presentation norms in the culture, (b) how salient the norm is in the immediate situation, and (c) the availability of normatively permissible means to make favorable self-evaluations. The objective of the report of the three studies below is to provide a systematic assessment of this model.

Study 1

Study 1 tested the prediction that evaluation apprehension pressure would affect Chinese participants’ performance forecasts only. In this study, European American and Chinese participants received the same moderately positive performance feedback on an ability test and were asked to estimate their test result in a next test of a similar nature. We manipulated evaluation apprehension by asking the participants to report their estimate privately in a completely anonymous situation or publicly to the experimenter. We hypothesized that Chinese participants would make more favorable performance forecasts in the private condition than in the public condition. In contrast, the public/private manipulation would not affect American participants’ performance forecasts.

Method

Participants. Seventy-two European American participants (46 women) were recruited from a public university in the United States, and 128 Chinese participants (78 women) were recruited from a public university in Southern China. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 22 ($M = 18.68$, $SD = 0.82$) among European Americans and from 17 to 27 ($M = 19.83$, $SD = 1.21$) among Chinese. European American participants received extra credit toward their class for their participation, and Chinese participants received 5 Chinese Yuan (US\$0.60) for their participation.

Procedures. Four participants were run in each session in an experimental laboratory with a center room and four cubicles surrounding it. On consenting to participate in the experiment, each participant drew a private subject number from a concealed box and used it during the entire experiment. Next, participants learned that they would work on two practical intelligence tests. After completing each test, participants would receive performance feedback and be asked for their opinions about the test. Thereafter, the first test was enclosed in a folder and given to each participant. Each participant was assigned to a separate cubicle and given 10 minutes to complete the test while the experimenter waited in a separate room. The test was a sample item taken from the Practical Intelligence Test (Sternberg, Wagner, Williams, & Horvath, 1995). The participants were given a hypothetical scenario wherein a mid-level manager in a company was confronted by a challenging situation (e.g., being asked to take over another department), was given a list of things she could do to achieve the given goal, and was asked to rate the importance of each by its priority. At the end of the allotted time, the experimenter instructed the participants to put the completed tests back into the folders and return the folders to a table in the center room.

The experimenter collected the four folders and ostensibly graded each participant's test. Next, he put each participant's actual first test and the performance feedback sheet in a new folder with the participant's number written on it. The folders were left on the table in the center room so that each participant could collect his or her folder and check his or her feedback once the experimenter left the room. Each participant opened up the folder in his or her cubicle and read the following from the feedback sheet: "Your performance was fair. It means that your performance was a little better than average, although it was not outstanding." In addition, participants found the handwritten comment "fair" on the first page of the first test. This performance feedback was given to all participants to create a standardized perception of performance level across all participants before they were asked to estimate their test results in a similar subsequent test.

Next, participants were called to the center room. The experimenter explained the nature of the second practical intelligence test. The participants learned that the second test had an identical test format and the same level of difficulty as the first one; the only difference between the two tests was the scoring system. They learned that they would receive a pass/fail grade on the second test. In addition, participants were informed that 80% of the people whose performance in the first test was in the top 20% would pass the second test and that 80% of the people whose performance in the first test was in the bottom 20% would fail in the second test. This information was given to standardize the base rate probability of passing the test.

The participants were asked to return to their individual cubicles. The experimenter asked for their opinions about the first test individually in their own cubicles before they were to receive the second test. Participants were randomly assigned to the private or public rating condition. In the private rating condition, they were given questionnaires asking for their opinions about the first test and were told to deposit the questionnaires in a concealed box located on the table in the center room when they were finished. There were three questions that required the participants to estimate their test result on the second test (e.g., "How likely do you think that you will fail/do well on the second test?"). They indicated their responses on a probability scale ranging from 0% to 100%. In the public rating condition, the experimenter orally asked participants the questions from the questionnaire and wrote down their responses in a notebook. Once participants had given their ratings, the experiment was actually over. Finally, all participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

The test, performance feedback, and questionnaire were written in English, translated into Chinese, and then back-translated into English. Two Chinese-English bilinguals independently verified the adequacy of the translation. The European American and Chinese participants received the English and Chinese versions of the experimental materials, respectively.

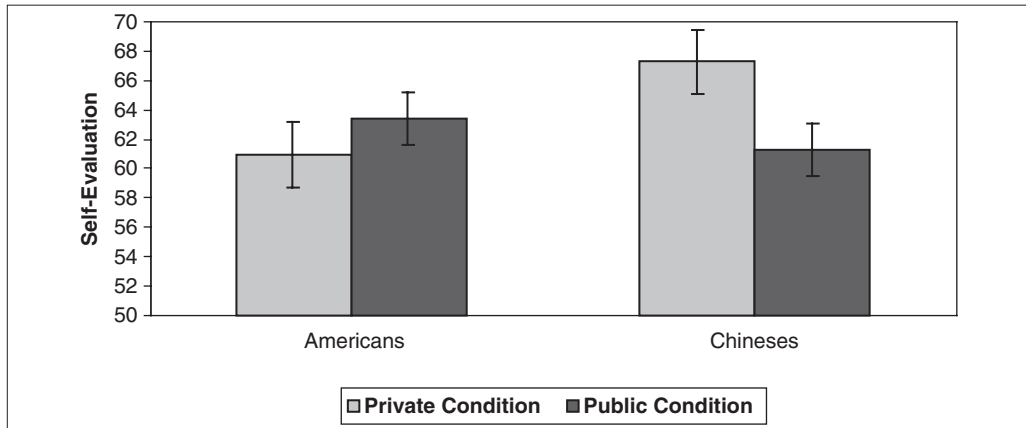


Figure 1. Predicted test result (likelihood of passing the test) as a function of the public-private manipulation and culture (American vs. Chinese)
 Note: Error bars indicate ± 1 standard error (Study 1).

Results and Discussion

Participants' responses to the three items were scored in such a way that higher scores indicated higher levels of positive self-regard. The three items were averaged to form an aggregate measure of the extent of positive self-regard ($\alpha = .82$ among Chinese participants and $\alpha = .90$ among European American participants). A 2 (Culture) \times 2 (Experimental Condition: Private vs. Public) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. As expected, only the two-way interaction was significant, $F(1, 196) = 12.75, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .061$. The main effect of culture was not significant, $F(1, 196) = 1.86, ns$, suggesting that the two cultural groups did not differ in the overall favorability of their performance forecast. As shown in Figure 1, further analyses revealed that the Chinese participants made more favorable performance forecasts in the private condition ($M = 73.69, SD = 15.22$) than in the public condition ($M = 63.71, SD = 13.13$), $F(1, 126) = 15.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$. In contrast, European American participants showed similar levels of positive self-regard in the public condition ($M = 68.55, SD = 15.35$) and the private condition ($M = 62.85, SD = 16.75$), $F(1, 70) = 2.26, ns$.

Although in the private condition, the Chinese participants made more favorable performance forecasts than did the European American participants, this result should be interpreted with caution given that results from between-culture comparisons are often difficult to interpret when only two cultures are sampled (Bond, 2007; Bond & Van de Vijver, in press; Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006). For instance, in the current study, the Chinese (vs. European American) participants might have interpreted the "fair" feedback from the experimenter more positively.

In sum, consistent with our hypothesis, the Chinese made more favorable performance forecasts in the private condition than in the public condition, whereas the European Americans made equally favorable performance forecasts in both rating conditions.

Study 2

Study 1 results show that when normative self-presentation pressure is relaxed, as when self-ratings are made in completely private contexts, Chinese participants are comfortable making favorable self-presentations. In the next two studies, we tested another prediction of our model. Given that the modesty norm proscribes showing off one's positive attributes but not denying

one's negative attributes, we predicted that participants from Asian contexts would be more comfortable expressing their positive self-evaluations by denying having negative traits than by affirming having positive ones.

Method

Participants. From a public university in the United States, 197 participants (118 women) were recruited. There were 95 European Americans and 102 Asian Americans. The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 25 ($M = 19.30$, $SD = 1.30$) among European Americans and from 18 to 22 ($M = 19.87$, $SD = 0.80$) among Asian Americans. Participants received extra course credit for their participation.

Materials and Procedure. The extent of positive self-regard was measured by the extent to which participants attributed positive or negative personality adjectives to themselves. Based on past cross-cultural studies of positive self-regard (e.g., Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sedikides et al., 2003), we selected five most commonly used positive personality adjectives to measure participants' extent of positive self-regard. Two independent (intelligent, attractive) and three interdependent (moral, friendly, honest) traits were chosen, given the findings that individuals are more likely to show positive self-regard on culturally valued traits (e.g., Kurman & Sriram, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2003).

Two versions of a questionnaire (positive vs. negative) were created to test our hypothesis. The positive questionnaire included the above five positive adjectives. We added a negation prefix to each positive adjective (*unintelligent*, *unattractive*, *immoral*, *unfriendly*, *dishonest*) to form the negative questionnaire. In both questionnaires, participants were asked to indicate their agreement that each adjective described them on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants were randomly assigned to either the positive or the negative questionnaire. At the end of the study, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

Responses from the negative questionnaire were reversely scored so that higher scores reflected more favorable self-evaluations. Next, a composite score of positive self-regard was calculated separately for each trait type (independent or interdependent), and a 2 (Ethnicity: European or Asian American) \times 2 (Valence: Positively or Negatively Framed Items) \times 2 (Trait Type: Independent or Interdependent) ANOVA was performed on the two self-evaluation scores. Trait type was treated as a within-subjects factor. The three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 193) = 0.64$, *ns*, whereas as expected, the Ethnicity \times Valence interaction and the Ethnicity \times Trait Type interaction were significant, $F(1, 194) = 4.00$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; $F(1, 193) = 18.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, respectively.

To understand the nature of the Ethnicity \times Valence interaction, we evaluated the simple main effect of valence separately for each ethnicity. Again, we focused on within-culture comparisons given the problematic nature of between-culture comparisons when only two cultures were sampled (Bond, 2007; Bond & Van de Vijver, in press; Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006). As shown in Figure 2, the Asian participants expressed more favorable self-evaluations on the negatively framed items ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 0.90$) than on the positively framed items ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.00$), $F(1, 101) = 12.43$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. In contrast, this difference was not significant for the American participants ($M_{\text{negative items}} = 5.72$, $SD = 0.65$ vs. $M_{\text{positive items}} = 5.52$, $SD = 0.62$), $F(1, 93) = 2.18$, *ns*. This result indicates that Asian Americans are more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations by denying having negative traits than by affirming having positive ones.

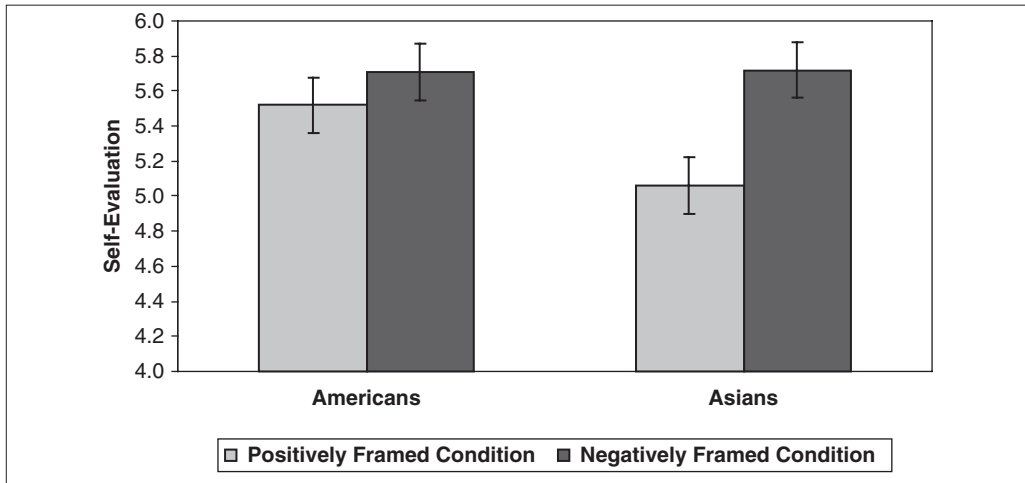


Figure 2. Self-evaluation as a function of the valence of the items (positive or negative) and culture (American or Chinese)

Note: Error bars indicate ± 1 standard error (Study 2).

Follow-up analyses on the Ethnicity \times Trait Type interaction revealed that Asian Americans rated themselves more favorably on interdependent traits ($M = 5.79, SD = 0.99$) than on independent ones ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.36$), $F(1, 102) = 69.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .40$. In contrast, this difference was not significant among European American participants ($M_{\text{interdependent traits}} = 5.70, SD = 0.79$ vs. $M_{\text{independent traits}} = 5.46, SD = 0.99$), $F(1, 94) = 3.64, p > .05$. This result is consistent with previous findings that Asians tend to make favorable self-evaluations on interdependent (culturally relevant) traits (Sedikides et al., 2003). The Ethnicity \times Valence \times Traits interaction was not significant, $F(1, 193) = 0.64, ns$; the Ethnicity \times Valence interaction was equally pronounced for both independent and interdependent traits. In short, Asian Americans make more favorable self-evaluations by repudiating negative traits than by affirming positive traits for both independent and interdependent traits. In contrast, European Americans are equally comfortable making favorable self-evaluations by both means.

Study 3

In this study, we sought to generalize Study 2 results to a different set of personality adjectives. In addition, we recruited Asian participants from Mainland China. To compare the tendency to make favorable self-evaluations by both self-attribution of positive traits and denial of negative traits within the same individual, we had the participants respond to both the positive and the negative items.

Method

Participants. One hundred twelve European American participants (88 women) from a public university in the United States and 194 Chinese participants (129 women) from a public university in China were recruited. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 23 ($M = 19.58, SD = 1.08$) among European Americans and from 17 to 24 ($M = 20.84, SD = 1.45$) among Chinese. Participants received extra course credit for their participation.

Materials and Procedure. Three independent trait domains (intelligence, attractiveness, independence) and three interdependent trait domains (sociability, trustworthiness, relationship quality) that had been used in previous cross-cultural studies of positive self-regard were selected. For each trait domain, 4 adjectives were selected (e.g., *smart, intelligent, bright, and competent* for the trait domain of intelligence), resulting in 24 adjectives in total.

A positive questionnaire was constructed using these 24 adjectives. Next, we created a negative questionnaire by adding *not* to each of the 24 adjectives (e.g., *not intelligent*). The two questionnaires were presented to the participants in random order. To prevent participants from using the numerical anchors to form consistent responses (e.g., giving a certain score on the rating scale to the positive adjectives and the reverse score to the negative equivalents; Bailey, 1994; Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999), we used an analog scale (a horizontal line that does not have any numerical values) in place of a rating scale. Specifically, for each item, participants indicated their extent of agreement that each adjective described them by putting a check mark on the horizontal line without any numerical anchors. The two ends of the line were marked with the anchors “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.” In addition, the length of the horizontal line varied across the two questionnaires (from 8.5 to 13.0 cm). The questionnaire was written in English, translated into Chinese, and then back-translated into English. Two Chinese-English bilinguals independently verified the adequacy of the translation. The American and Chinese participants completed the English and Chinese versions of the questionnaire, respectively.

Results and Discussion

The extent of agreement for each item was measured by calculating the length between the left edge and the check mark divided by the length of the line. Responses to the negatively framed items were reversed so that higher scores reflected more favorable self-evaluations. A 2 (Country) \times 2 (Valence) \times 2 (Trait Type) ANOVA was performed, with both valence and trait type treated as within-subjects factors. As in Study 2, the three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 304) = 0.36$, *ns*, whereas the Valence \times Country interaction, the main effect of trait type, and the main effect of valence were significant, $F(1, 304) = 20.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$; $F(1, 304) = 56.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$; $F(1, 304) = 66.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$, respectively.

To understand the nature of the Country \times Valence interaction, the simple main effect of valence was evaluated separately for each ethnicity. As shown in Figure 3, the Chinese participants were more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations by denying possession of negative traits ($M = 0.77$, $SD = 0.13$) than by attributing positive traits to the self ($M = 0.71$, $SD = 0.15$), $F(1, 245) = 69.16$, $p < .001$. In contrast, although European American participants displayed the same directional difference, the size of the difference was considerably smaller ($M_{\text{positively framed items}} = 0.79$, $SD = 0.09$ vs. $M_{\text{negatively framed items}} = 0.81$, $SD = 0.11$), $F(1, 113) = 6.85$, $p < .05$.

Further analyses of the main effect of trait type showed that both Chinese and European American participants rated themselves higher on interdependent traits ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 0.14$) than on independent traits ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.15$), $F(1, 305) = 88.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$. In addition, the main effect of valence showed that for both Chinese and European American participants, denying possession of negative traits ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 0.16$) occurred more often than affirming positive traits ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.14$), $F(1, 305) = 62.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$.

General Discussion

One frequently researched topic in cross-cultural psychology concerns East-West differences in the tendency to make favorable self-evaluations (Heine et al., 1999). In this article, we propose

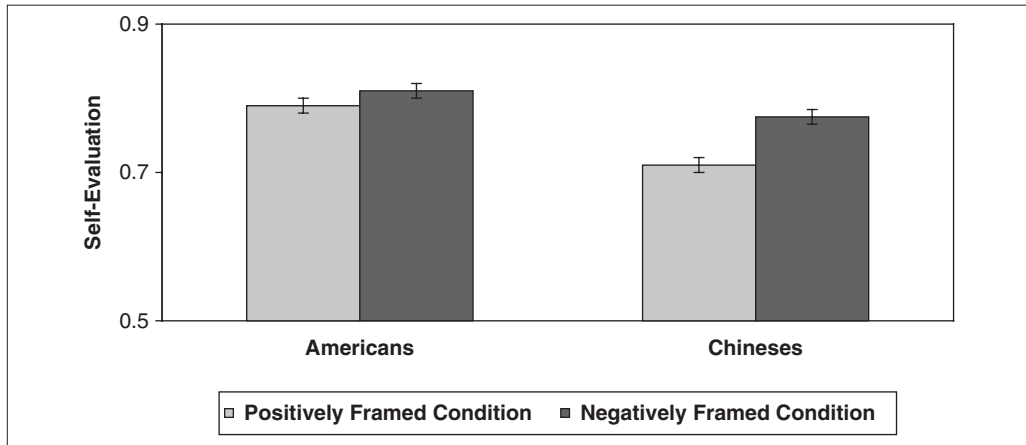


Figure 3. Self-evaluation as a function of the valence of the items (positive or negative) and culture (American or Asian)

Note: Error bars indicate ± 1 standard error (Study 3).

a theoretical framework to integrate the extant research findings. We contend that people in both Eastern and Western cultures are motivated to make favorable self-evaluations. However, the actual likelihood of expressing favorable self-evaluations in concrete situations depends on (a) the dominant self-presentation norms in the culture, (b) how salient the norm is in the immediate situation, and (c) the availability of normatively permissible means to make favorable self-evaluations.

The results of the three studies reported above provided evidence for our proposed framework. Given that the modesty norm has greater authority over Easterners' self-presentation, we showed that Chinese are more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations when evaluation apprehension pressure in the immediate situation is reduced. Furthermore, Asian Americans and Chinese are more comfortable making favorable self-evaluations when they can do it indirectly by denying possession of negative traits than when they have to do it directly by claiming possession of positive traits. In contrast, among European Americans, given the relative weak influence of the modesty norm in their familiar cultural contexts, they are equally comfortable making favorable self-evaluations in public and private situations through affirmation of positive self-aspects and repudiation of negative self-aspects.

Based on a literature review and meta-analysis, Heine and his colleagues (1999, 2007) argued that self-enhancement is not as prevalent among people from Eastern cultures as it is among people from Western cultures. Heine and Hamamura (2007) maintained that self-enhancement has been reliably shown among Westerners: Across 48 studies, the weighted average effect size (d) was .87. In contrast, the self-enhancement effect was not reliable among Easterners: Across 46 studies, $d = -.01$. These investigators also found that the effect size of East-West difference in the extent of self-enhancement is substantial: Across 91 comparisons, $d = .84$.

Our results show that this seemingly robust East-West difference in the relative likelihood of making overly positive evaluations of the self arises in part from the stronger norms against playing up one's positive attributes in Eastern cultures. In addition, there may be stronger social pressure toward normative conformity in Eastern cultures. Because of the strong influence of the modesty norm in Eastern cultures, compared to Western cultures, Easterners have to make more deliberate choices about when and how to express favorable self-evaluations. This analysis suggests that although it may be difficult to detect self-enhancement in Eastern cultures,

favorable self-presentation is not absent in these cultures. Instead, our analysis and results suggest that there is considerable situational variability in favorable self-presentation among the Easterners: The same individual may make relatively unfavorable self-evaluations in situations wherein the normative pressure for modesty and self-effacement is strong but favorable self-evaluations in situations wherein such normative pressure is weak. Indeed, consistent with our view, some researchers (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005, 2007) have disputed Heine and Hamamura's (2007) conclusion that self-enhancement is absent in Eastern cultural contexts, citing other meta-analysis results indicating that depending on how self-enhancement is measured, Easterners may display self-enhancive behaviors. One possible reason Heine and Hamamura did not find self-enhancement among Easterners in the studies they reviewed is because in these studies, the investigators did not distinguish between affirmation of positive self-aspects and repudiation of negative ones as different means of expressing a positive self and/or because the participants in these studies did not perceive the test situation as a private one.

In conclusion, our analysis and results call for replacing a trait theory of cultural differences in favorable self-evaluations that focuses on chronic, stable cultural differences in the tendency to make favorable self-evaluations with a social psychology of culture, which emphasizes the interplay of basic human motivations (the need for positive self-evaluations), the dominant self-presentation norms in the culture, the salience of these norms in the situation, and the availability of normatively permissible means to make favorable self-evaluations. We believe this alternative approach to studying culture will afford a more nuanced understanding of not only global differences between cultures but also situational variation of behaviors within each individual culture.

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