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Wanting to Be Great and Better But Not Average: On the Pancultural Desire for Self-Enhancing and Self-Improving Feedback

Lowell Gaertner[1], Constantine Sedikides[2], and Huajian Cai[3]

Abstract

What is the nature of self-evaluation motives? The relativist perspective suggests that self-evaluation motives vary culturally, with self-enhancement developing in Western culture and self-effacement and self-improvement developing in East Asian culture. The universalist perspective suggests that self-enhancement and self-improvement are basic human motives that coexist in the self-system and are prevalent across cultures. We tested the competing perspectives in a cross-cultural study. Chinese and American students rated the degree to which they want to receive four types of feedback (self-enhancing, self-effacing, self-improving, and no-feedback) from four sources (parents, teachers, friends, and classmates). Chinese and Americans (a) overwhelmingly wanted self-enhancing and self-improving feedback more than self-effacing feedback and no-feedback and (b) were uninterested in self-effacing feedback. These findings attest to the universal nature of self-enhancement and self-improvement motives.

Keywords

self, self-evaluation, self-enhancement

Intensely debated is whether self-evaluative motives are culturally relative or universal. The relativist perspective suggests that internalization of the Western mandate for individualism gives rise to the self-enhancement motive, which orchestrates the self-system to achieve the cultural ideal of agency. Similarly, internalization of the East Asian mandate for collectivism gives rise to the self-effacement (e.g., criticism, averageness) and self-improvement motives. Together the latter motives minimize uniqueness and amend flaws orchestrating the self-system to achieve the cultural ideal of social harmony (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). The universalist perspective, in contrast, suggests that self-enhancement and self-improvement are

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two of four self-evaluative motives—including self-assessment and self-verification—that coexist in the self-system and operate dynamically to promote well-being and social functioning across cultures (Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

Meta-analytic support exists for both the relativist (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007) and universalist (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005, 2007) perspectives. That research, however, examines *manifestations* of self-evaluative motives (e.g., trait ratings of self vs. other) and, thus, any given manifestation could reflect the functioning of multiple motives; for example, an equivalent self-other rating could reflect an attenuated self-enhancement motive or an accentuated self-effacement motive. The current research advances the debate by operationalizing motivation in terms of desire—that is, in terms of what people *want* (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009, 2011; Hepper, Hart, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2011). Just as hungry persons (i.e., motivated by a need for sustenance) desire food, persons motivated to self-enhance desire evidence of their positive distinctiveness (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Assessing desires of multiple self-evaluation motives enables distinction among and simultaneous comparison of those motives; doing so in East Asian and Western culture promises to enrich the debate.

In this research, Chinese and American participants rated the degree to which they want to receive four types of feedback about themselves (self-enhancing, self-effacing, self-improving, and no feedback) from each of four social sources that are important to both cultures (parents, teachers, friends, and classmates). We assessed desire for feedback across those sources not for theoretical reasons, but rather in order to gauge the replicability of patterns and ensure the generality of the findings.

The universalist perspective would predict that, regardless of culture, self-enhancing and self-improving feedback are each desired more strongly than self-effacing feedback and no feedback. The relativist perspective would predict that (a) desire for self-enhancing feedback is unique to Western culture and that (b) in East Asian culture self-effacing and self-improving feedback are each desired more strongly than no-feedback; that is, self-enhancement is a product of Western culture, whereas self-effacement and self-improvement are products of East Asian culture. Although the universalist perspective predicts pancultural desire for both self-enhancing and self-improving feedback, it offers no prediction as to whether one is desired more than the other. Likewise, the relativist perspective offers no prediction as to whether, in East Asian culture, self-effacing feedback is desired more or less than self-improving feedback (i.e., both types of feedback are desired).

Method

Chinese undergraduates (65 males, 52 females) at Zhejiang University and Caucasian undergraduates (46 males, 36 females) at the University of Tennessee completed a questionnaire in their native language, with the questionnaire translated and back-translated by a "committee" of three bilingual speakers (Brislin, 1980). Participants rated how much they want to receive (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) self-enhancing, self-effacing, self-improving, and no feedback, respectively, from parents, teachers, friends, and classmates. The items in regard to parents are as follows (feedback type is denoted parenthetically here but was not denoted to participants):

I want my parents or the adults who have helped raise me to tell me. . .

. . .I am a great child (*self-enhancing*)

. . .how to be a better child (*self-improving*)

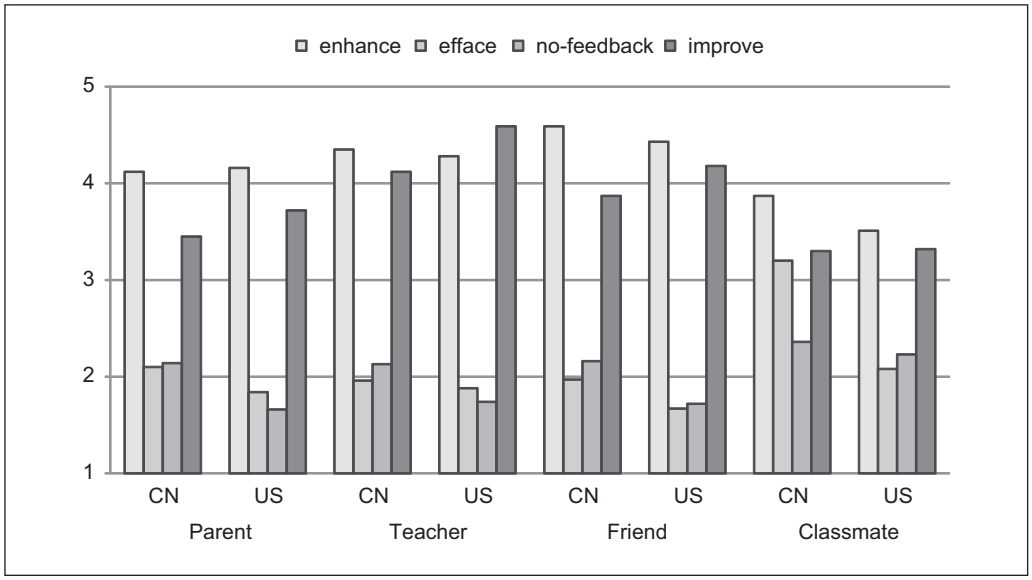

Figure 1. Feedback Preference Within levels of Source and Culture

. . .I am an average child (*self-effacing*)

. . .nothing about the kind of child I am (*no feedback*)

Similar items assessed desire for each feedback type from teachers (e.g., "*I want my teachers to tell me. . .I am a great student*"), friends (e.g., "*I want my friends to tell me. . .how to be a better friend*"), and classmates (e.g., "*I want my classmates to tell me. . .I am an average classmate*").

We adapted the items from Neiss, Sedikides, Shahinfar, and Kurpersmidt (2006; for additional validation, see Gregg, Hepper, & Sedikides, 2011) and operationalized self-effacement following Heine and Lehman's (1995) suggestion that, for East Asians, "self-effacement, in the form of seeing oneself as average . . . would more likely serve their cultural mandate of maintaining interpersonal harmony" (p. 596).

Results

We excluded nine participants (one U.S. female, three U.S. males, and five Chinese males) identified by regression diagnostics as having extreme responses across multiple items (Fox, 1991). We entered the "want" ratings into a 4 (feedback: enhance, improve, efface, none) × 4 (source: parents, teachers, friends, classmates) × 2 (culture: China, USA) × 2 (sex) multivariate ANOVA, with feedback and source as within-subjects variables. A Feedback × Source × Culture interaction, $F(9, 177) = 4.26$, $p = .0001$, indicated that patterns of preference among the four feedback types varied as a function of source and culture. Cultural differences were matters primarily of magnitude rather than direction. Figure 1 and Table 1 together clarify the patterns. Figure 1 depicts the mean rating of each feedback type within source and culture. Table 1 provides the effect size for each comparison between feedback type within source and culture and indicates whether the comparison is significant (Bonferroni adjusted) and varies culturally.

Table 1. Cohen's *d* for Feedback Preference and Whether the Preference Varies by Culture

Feedback Preference	*d*[a]		$F^{b}_{Preference \times Culture}$
	China	United States	
Parent			
Enhance vs. efface	2.28*	2.49*	3.03
Enhance vs. no feedback	2.10*	2.63*	6.25*
Efface vs. no feedback	–0.05	0.20	1.24
Improve vs. enhance	–0.64*	–0.37	1.18
Improve vs. efface	1.24*	1.75*	5.97*
Improve vs. no feedback	1.13*	1.88*	7.87**
Teacher			
Enhance vs. efface	2.77*	2.66*	0.01
Enhance vs. no feedback	2.40*	2.88*	2.47
Efface vs. no feedback	–0.21	0.17	3.36
Improve vs. enhance	–0.26	0.42	11.40***
Improve vs. efface	2.22*	3.53*	8.59**
Improve vs. no feedback	1.92*	3.81*	17.83***
Friend			
Enhance vs. efface	3.32*	3.40*	0.71
Enhance vs. no feedback	2.94*	3.16*	2.26
Efface vs. no feedback	–0.20	-0.06	0.77
Improve vs. enhance	–0.80*	–0.24	6.94**
Improve vs. efface	1.89*	2.69*	7.38**
Improve vs. no feedback	1.64*	2.52*	9.59**
Classmate			
Enhance vs. efface	0.64*	1.30*	15.01***
Enhance vs. no feedback	1.57*	0.99*	0.96
Efface vs. no feedback	0.86*	–0.17	27.03***
Improve vs. enhance	–0.52*	–0.12	4.59*
Improve vs. efface	0.09	1.08*	25.82***
Improve vs. no feedback	0.90*	0.81*	0.26

a. A positive (negative) *d* indicates a greater (lesser) preference for the feedback-type listed first in the comparison. We scaled *d* as a between-subject effect using the pooled standard deviations of the compared means. The superscripted inferential test is Bonferroni adjusted with $\alpha = .05$.
b. Test of the cultural difference is based on $F(1, 185)$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

With two exceptions, the following patterns occurred on each source. First, both Chinese and Americans (a) wanted self-enhancing feedback more than either self-effacing feedback or no feedback, (b) wanted self-improving feedback more than either self-effacing feedback or no feedback, and (c) deemed self-effacing feedback to be as undesirable as no feedback. Second, Chinese wanted self-enhancing feedback *more* than self-improving feedback, whereas Americans wanted equally self-enhancing and self-improving feedback. The two exceptions involved classmates, from whom Chinese (a) preferred self-effacing feedback to no feedback and (b) had no preference for self-effacing versus self-improving feedback. Even in this instance with classmates, Chinese nonetheless wanted self-enhancing feedback more than any other type of feedback.

Discussion

Assessing the extent to which persons want (i.e., desire) different types of self-evaluative feedback enabled us to distinguish among and compare the self-evaluative motives. Assessing such wants in an East Asian and Western culture further enabled us to test the relativist and universalist perspectives. The patterns of "want" for self-enhancing and self-improving feedback were consistent with the universalist perspective such that both Chinese and Americans predominantly wanted self-enhancing and self-improving feedback. Rather than arising from unique cultural forces, these data suggest that the self-enhancement and self-improvement motives are shared universally and prevalently across cultures. The pattern of "want" for self-effacing feedback from classmates provided mixed support for the relativist perspective. Chinese (but not Americans) wanted self-effacing feedback more than no feedback from classmates. However, from each of the other sources—parents, teachers, and friends—Chinese (and Americans) reported no such desire for self-effacing feedback. Indeed, from every source, including classmates, Chinese (and Americans) overwhelmingly desired self-enhancing feedback. The majority of "want" patterns, including want for self-effacement, were inconsistent with the relativist perspective.

Three caveats are in order. First, a skeptic might suggest that the weak evidence of self-effacement is an artifact of our operationalization. We emphasize in return that our treatment of self-effacement as a desire to learn that the self is average follows established conceptualizations of self-effacement (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1995, p. 596). Being "average" means being more similar to others, compared to occupying any other point in the relevant distribution. This is the essence of Eastern self-effacement (i.e., being like others, being connected to others). Self-enhancement (e.g., being special or superior to others) stands in contrast to self-averageness (e.g., being non-special or like others; Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, 2008; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Second, our samples are limited to the cultural contexts of China and the United States. We selected those contexts based on the theoretical argument that collectivistic norms of East Asian culture alter the motivational structure of the self relative to that of Western culture. The pattern of findings is consistent with the universal argument. Nonetheless, replicating the findings across a broader sampling of cultural contexts would provide more comprehensive support for the universalist argument. Third, one might suggest that our findings reflect a cultural snapshot in time (Paletz & Peng, 2008) such that different findings of "wants" might have emerged at an earlier juncture particularly to the extent to which Westernization has begun spreading through China (Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, in press). Again, a broader sampling of cultural contexts represents an avenue ripe for future research.

In conclusion, the current cross-cultural exploration of motives as "wants" extends beyond existing empirical treatments of the relativist-universalist debate. The findings indicate that both Chinese and Americans predominantly desire self-enhancing and self-improving feedback. As such, the findings provide novel evidence that self-enhancement and self-improvement are universal motivations.

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