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## **SECTION V**

ARE MY PEERS AND I MORE ALIKE, OR DIFFERENT,  
IN OUR SCHOOL MOTIVATION AND LEARNING?

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## CHAPTER 16

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# THE NEED FOR POSITIVE FEEDBACK

## Sociocultural Consideration of Self- Evaluative Motives in Education

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Feedback is the currency through which the social world informs, rewards, or punishes its occupants. This currency is supplied frequently and on many occasions: in schools, organizations, sports, relationships, or transient social interactions. It is dispatched not only by authority figures (e.g., teachers, managers, coaches), but also by equals (e.g., fellow students, friends, social interactants). **And** it is intended to influence.

Sometimes feedback does influence, as examples from education demonstrate (Hattie, 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Yet, feedback is often less impactful than is meant to be (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Kulhavy, 1977). As a recent article in *The Guardian* concluded, “There is remarkably little high-quality, relevant research evidence to suggest that detailed or extensive marking has any significant impact on pupils’ learning” (Aubrey, 2016, para. 1).

A good deal of factors determine the extent to which feedback will be influential (Sutton, Hornsey, & Douglas, 2012). This chapter focuses on

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the role of the self in the feedback-giving process among university students (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). It is assumed, in particular, that feedback is fundamentally a self-related phenomenon, and so its effectiveness is contingent upon self-dynamics (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Hepper & Sedikides, 2012). Self-dynamics is exemplified in terms of self-evaluation motives, and specifically self-enhancement, self-protection, self-assessment, and self-improvement. What follows is a discussion of the role of these self-evaluation motives—jointly or interactively—in the feedback process, and a consideration of the relevance of culture.

### SELF-EVALUATION MOTIVES

We define self-enhancement as the motive to secure, sustain, or augment the positivity of the self, and self-protection as the motive to avoid, repair, or diminish the negativity of the self (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Although these motives often work in tandem (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), self-enhancement tends to operate routinely (i.e., being on the look-out for self-serving opportunities), whereas self-protection tends to operate situationally (i.e., propelling into action in response to self-threat).

We define self-assessment as the motive to sustain or increase the veridicality of the self (i.e., accurate self-knowledge; Trope, 1980, 1986) and self-improvement as the motive to ameliorate aspects of the self (i.e., increase knowledge or aptitude on important self-domains; Sedikides & Hepper, 2009; Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). These two motives also work in tandem (Gregg, Hepper, & Sedikides, 2011), although self-assessment may precede, and under some circumstances precipitate, self-improvement.

### SELF-EVALUATION MOTIVES AND FEEDBACK

This section is concerned with what kind of feedback students want, how they remember it, how they react to it, and how they may group in their minds feedback-processing strategies.

#### What Sort of Feedback Do Students Want?

Do students want and pursue predominantly positive feedback (reflecting the strength of the self-enhancement/self-protection motives), accurate feedback (reflecting the strength of the self-assessment motive), or improving feedback (reflecting the strength of the self-improvement motive)?

We will first describe research among students in Western cultures before extending the findings to students in Eastern cultures.

### ***Feedback Desire***

In theory, students could desire unequivocally accurate feedback, that is, objective input based on external standards. Such feedback, however, might entail taking on board uncomplimentary, negative, or hurtful information about the self (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Vangelisti & Hampel, 2012). Indeed, how many students have stepped up to their undergraduate or graduate mentor asking them directly **what** they truly think of them? Research by Hepper, Hart, Gregg, and Sedikides (2011) showed that students desire positive feedback. In Study 1, the more positive the feedback students expected to be, the more they desired it. In Study 2, students reported that they expected to receive more positive feedback than their peers. In Study 3, the stronger the self-enhancement motive was (i.e., the higher students' level of self-esteem or narcissism), the more positive the feedback expectations were. Study 4 manipulated the strength of the self-enhancement motive via a bogus newspaper article that described the findings of a groundbreaking longitudinal investigation. In the experimental condition, students learned that people who overestimate and display their knowledge or skills (i.e., "self-enhancers") have better prospects for success in life. In the control condition, students learned that people who underestimate and underplay their knowledge or skills (i.e., "modests") have better prospects for success in life. Next, students indicated what kind of feedback (ranging from very negative to very positive) they expected to receive from both close persons (i.e., friends, family, peers) and non-close persons (i.e., academics, employers/supervisors, shop assistants). Students in the experimental condition expressed a stronger preference for positive feedback, regardless of closeness to feedback-givers, than those in the control condition. A temporarily strengthened self-enhancement motive led to rosier feedback expectations.

### ***Feedback Solicitation***

In theory, students could also pursue obstinately accurate feedback. However, they do not. Instead, they pursue positive feedback. In experiments by Gregg, Hepper, and Sedikides (2011), students engaged in a problem-solving task for 30 minutes, attempting in pairs to build a bridge with only newspaper and adhesive tape. They were then offered the opportunity to solicit feedback about their task performance. The feedback (never actually provided) was purported to be either accurate or positive. Students solicited positive, not accurate, feedback.

It is not that students are indifferent to truthful feedback. Indeed, some research indicates that the self-assessment motive can overpower the

self-enhancement motive. For example, Trope (1986) showed that students chose feedback more on the basis of its diagnosticity (i.e., its potential to inform reliably whether they possessed the relevant aptitude) than its positivity. This choice, however, is contingent upon the centrality of the aptitude or trait for the self. It was William James (1907) who first formulated the *self-centrality breeds self-enhancement* principle. He wrote, “I, who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek” (p. 31). The principle has a venerable tradition in psychology (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Tesser, 2000). In the current context, the self-centrality breeds self-enhancement principle would suggest that the self-enhancement/self-protection motives are particularly influential in personally important domains.

The principle was put to the test in research involving solicitation of feedback about one’s personality traits (Sedikides, 1993). Students received a set of questions that they could ask, in a quiet and private moment of self-reflection, to find out who they truly were (note that these instructions, in essence, activated the self-assessment motive). The questions pertained to various traits varying on the extent to which they were central or peripheral to students’ self-definition and on whether they were positive or negative. In particular, some traits were pretested to be central and positive (e.g., friendly, trustworthy), some peripheral and positive (e.g., predictable, uncomplaining), some central and negative (e.g., unfriendly, untrustworthy), and some peripheral and negative (e.g., unpredictable, complaining). Importantly, the questions were pretested to vary in diagnosticity, that is, their potential to reveal truly what kind of person the student was. For example, the high diagnosticity question—“Would I introduce a new classmate to my friends?”—could tell whether the student was friendly, whereas the low diagnosticity question—“Do I interrupt my professor in class?”—could not. Likewise, the high diagnosticity question—“Do I constantly inform others about my problems or ailments?”—could reveal whether the student was complaining, whereas the low diagnosticity question—“Do I like my class?”—could not. Support for the self-assessment motive would be obtained, if students were equally likely to choose high diagnosticity questions to find out if they possessed central negative traits and positive central traits; in this case, students would not be afraid of the truth even if it hurt (i.e., even if they risked drawing the inference that they were untrustworthy or unkind). On the other hand, support for the self-enhancement motive would be obtained, if students were less likely to choose high diagnosticity questions to find out if they had negative central traits than positive central traits. Here, students would avoid potentially hurtful self-knowledge, opting for comfort over truth. This pattern, though, would

not emerge in the case of peripheral traits, as knowledge about one's negative peripheral traits does not present a self-threat.

Across six experiments, students selected lower diagnosticity questions when self-reflecting on their central negative traits as opposed to their central positive traits (although they did not differ in the diagnosticity of the selected questions when self-reflecting on their peripheral negative and peripheral positive traits). Students bypassed the opportunity for accurate knowledge about their negative central traits even when they were explicitly instructed to conduct the self-reflection process the way a scientist would (Experiment 5) and even when they generated their own questions to test the central and peripheral traits that they listed as having (Experiment 3). Finally, students did so only when they were attempting to figure out what kind of person *they* were; when they tried to figure out what kind of person an acquaintance was, they selected high diagnosticity questions for this person's central negative traits, not central positive traits (Experiment 6). Accuracy is important for others, whereas positivity is important for the self.

### ***Feedback Satisfaction and Usefulness***

The abovementioned experiments pitted the self-enhancement against the self-assessment motive. But how about self-improvement? Sedikides, Luke, and Hepper (2016) assessed whether students perceive positive and improving feedback as more satisfying than useful. From a self-enhancement perspective, students would desire positive rather than improving feedback, and so they would (a) perceive positive feedback as more satisfying than improving feedback, (b) judge positive feedback as more satisfying than useful, and (c) be influenced more by positive feedback than improving feedback. However, from a self-improvement perspective, students would desire improving than positive feedback, and so they would (a) perceive improving feedback as more useful than positive feedback, (b) judge improving feedback as more useful than satisfying, and (c) be influenced more by improving feedback than positive feedback. Across four testing sessions, the authors provided either steadily positive feedback (percentile rankings of 92, 90, 91, and 92) or improving feedback (percentile rankings of 59, 68, 81, and 92), which they dispatched either sequentially (at each testing juncture) or cumulatively (at the conclusion of the testing session). Lastly, the authors assessed—sequentially or cumulatively—perceptions of feedback (satisfying vs. useful), psychological consequences of it (optimism about task performance), and behavioral consequences (task persistence intentions).

More concretely, the authors simulated a naturalistic setting (e.g., classroom) in each of three experiments. In Experiment 1, they gave feedback (on multiple aptitude domains, such as analytical ability or creativity) sequentially, but assessed its perceptions cumulatively. In Experiment 2, they gave feedback (also on multiple aptitude domains) sequentially, and

assessed its perceptions and psychological consequences sequentially. In Experiment 3, they gave feedback (on a single aptitude domain, cognitive flexibility) both sequentially and cumulatively, and assessed all dependent measures sequentially and cumulatively. When feedback was assessed cumulatively, the results signaled the operation of the self-enhancement motive. Students considered positive (vs. improving) feedback as more satisfying and useful, and regarded positive feedback as more satisfying than useful. In addition, positive (relative to improving) feedback led to higher satisfaction, more optimism about future performance, and stronger intentions to persist. When feedback was assessed sequentially, however, the results were nuanced. Students considered positive (vs. improving) feedback as more satisfying and useful in the short-term, but not long-term. Further, they perceived positive feedback as less satisfying and less useful over time (i.e., in the long-term than short-term). Yet, they deemed improving feedback as more satisfying, but not more useful, over time. On balance, these findings attested to the strength of the self-enhancement motive, as positive feedback was desired more, and was more impactful both psychologically and behaviorally, at least in the short-run.

### *Cultural Context*

What is the role of culture on the kind of feedback that students want or solicit? Gaertner, Sedikides, and Cai (2012) addressed this issue by testing samples of American and Chinese students. These researchers included not only positive feedback, but also improving feedback and effacing feedback (as well as a no-feedback control), given that some studies had suggested East-Asian students value self-improvement (Heine et al., 2001) and self-effacement (Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; but see Yik, Bond, & Paulhus, 1998, for nuanced findings) rather than valuing self-enhancement or self-protection.

In particular, American and Chinese students rated the degree to which they desired positive, improving, or effacing feedback (vs. no-feedback) from multiple sources (teachers, classmates, friends, parents). To illustrate the feedback format, the items pertaining to teachers as a source of feedback were: “I want my teachers to tell me (a) I am a great student (*positive*), (b) how to be a better student (*improving*), (c) I am an average student (*effacing*), and (d) nothing about the kind of student I am (*no feedback*).” The researchers operationalized self-effacement as per the suggestion that, for East-Asians, “self-effacement, in the form of seeing oneself as average . . . would more likely serve the cultural mandate of maintaining interpersonal harmony” (Heine & Lehman, 1995, p. 596). Both Chinese and American students expressed a desire for positive and improving feedback compared to effacing feedback or no feedback; in fact, neither cultural group wanted effacing feedback, which they perceived as undesirable as no feedback.



Taken together, the self-enhancement motive was equally strong among Chinese and American students, and so was the self-improvement motive.

## How Do Students Remember Feedback?

Students seem to desire positive feedback (Hepper et al., 2011), and solicit positive rather than negative feedback (Gregg et al., 2011), regardless of how accurate the feedback is (Sedikides, 1993). But what do students remember, or, for that matter, forget? For example, when they receive positive and negative feedback in equal measure, which sort of feedback are they more likely to forget? Again, we will discuss findings in Western cultures first, followed by those in Eastern cultures.

### *Recall as the Signature of Self-Protection or Self-Assessment*

The operation of the self-protection motive would be reflected in a pattern where students selectively forget feedback that (a) pertains to their negative central attributes as opposed to their positive central attributes (especially when feedback behaviors are high rather than low in diagnosticity), and (b) refers to them personally instead of a hypothetical peer. In all, student would process shallowly and thus recall poorly feedback that threatens the self (i.e., negative central, self-referent, high diagnosticity). By contrast, the operation of the self-assessment motive would be reflected in a pattern where students are equally likely to remember feedback: (a) about their negative central and positive central attributes, (b) especially when it refers to them (given that the peer is a hypothetical acquaintance), and (c) especially when it is high than low in diagnosticity. In all, student would process deeply and recall well both negative and positive feedback—especially accurate one—that refers to the self, as they are unafraid to pursue true self-knowledge.

The contours of the experimental paradigm are as follows (Sedikides, Green, Saunders, Skowronski, & Zengel, 2016). Students take a bogus personality questionnaire, and subsequently receive feedback in the form of behaviors they are likely to enact. The behaviors portray students' central negative traits (e.g., unkind, untrustworthy) or central positive traits (e.g., kind, trustworthy). Sample behaviors are: "You are the kind of person who would refuse to lend classnotes to a friend who was ill" (unkind) or "A teacher would leave me alone in a room while taking a test and not be afraid that I would cheat" (trustworthy). For half of students, the behaviors refer to the self; for the other half, they refer to Chris, the hypothetical peer (e.g., "Chris is the kind of person who would refuse to lend class notes to a friend who was ill," or "a teacher would leave Chris alone in a room while taking a test and not be afraid that Chris would cheat."). Following

feedback delivery, students work for a few minutes on an unrelated task (e.g., name as many states of the United States as possible) and then, in a surprise move, are asked to recall all feedback behaviors in any order they come to mind. Students recall a low percentage of negative central behaviors (compared to positive central behaviors), when these behaviors refer to them rather than Chris. Further, this recall pattern is augmented when the behaviors are high rather than low in diagnosticity. In conclusion, feedback recall is in the service of the self-protection motive: Students are more concerned with defending their self-image than acquiring valid self-knowledge. This conclusion is reinforced by studies on autobiographical memory in laboratory or naturalistic settings (Ritchie, Sedikides, & Skowronski, 2017; Skowronski, 2011).

The self-improvement motive, however, when activated, can mitigate the potency of the self-protection motive. Green, Sedikides, Pinter, and Van Tongeren (2009, Experiment 1) activated the self-improvement motive via a sentence-completion (language fluency) task comprising 20 sets of 4–6 words each. In the experimental condition, 16 word sets were related to improvement (e.g., aspirations, raises, improved), whereas the remaining four word sets were fillers. In the control condition, only one word set was related to improvement. Then, students completed a bogus personality questionnaire and received feedback in the form of behaviors they were likely to perform. Recall followed. In the control condition, students manifested selective forgetting: They recalled a lower percentage of negative central behaviors than positive central behaviors. This pattern, however, was cancelled out in the experimental condition. Under the influence of the self-improvement motive, students were equally likely to recall feedback about their substantive follies and strengths.

### *Cultural Context*

Selecting amnesia of one's shortfalls is also observed in East-Asian culture (Tan, Newman, & Zhang, 2014). More generally, self-protective recall is observed panculturally. The fading affect bias (FAB) is a case in point. According to it, negative affect associated with autobiographical events fades faster than the positive affect associated with these events. Put otherwise, the FAB serves to promote the retention of positive emotions. The FAB has been found in samples from 10 cultures (Ritchie et al., 2015).

In fact, it is likely that the self-protection motive is more prevalent in East-Asian than Western culture. Assuming that the self-protection motive is a specific case of avoidance motivation (Elliot & Mapes, 2005), avoidance goals are more potent in East-Asian than Western culture (Elliot, Chirkov, Sheldon, & Kim, 2001; Elliot et al., 2012). Also, compared to Western culture, prevention focus is more potent than promotion focus in East-Asian culture (Hepper, Sedikides, & Cai, 2013; Lalwani, Shrum, & Chiu, 2009). In addition, East-Asian

culture is purported to be relatively high on collectivism or interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995), and these dimensions entail not only harmony seeking, but also avoidance (Hashimoto & Yamagishi, 2013). Moreover, members of East-Asian cultures are excessively concerned with embarrassment avoidance or face saving (Ho, 1976; Hwang, 1987) and display conformity in an attempt to eschew a negative reputation (Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008). Lastly, East-Asians, compared to Westerners, are more likely to dispute having negative traits than claim they have positive traits (Kim, Chiu, Peng, Cai, & Tov, 2010).

### **How Do Students React to Feedback?**

Students recruit a panoply of strategies in reacting to negative feedback (Sedikides, 2012). The self-serving bias is an example of such strategies. We consider research in Western cultural context before incorporating East-Asian cultural context.

#### ***The Self-Serving Bias***

This refers to readily accepting responsibility for success (by attributing it to one's ability or effort), but equally readily displacing blaming for failure on others or the situation (e.g., luck). In the typical experimental protocol (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998, Experiment 1), students engage in a personally important task (e.g., creativity) with a co-worker. As part of the task, they generate solutions to a problem, such as uses for a spoon or a brick. The outcome of the task is interdependent; that is, feedback about success or failure is directed at the dyad, not at the individual. After completing the task, students receive randomly determined feedback. When the feedback is positive, students attribute the success more to themselves than their co-worker; however, when the feedback is negative, students attribute the failure more to their co-worker than the self. The self-serving bias has been documented extensively (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012), and its strength is rising as perceived self-threat rises (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999), reflecting the signature of the self-protection motive.

#### ***Cultural Context***

The self-serving bias is pervasive in East-Asian culture as well (Mezulis et al., 2004; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). Occasionally, though, it takes on a more intricate expression. In particular, the modesty norm is relatively restrictive in East-Asia (Chiu & Hong, 2006; Yamaguchi, Lin, & Aoki, 2006). It is when this norm is relaxed, that the self-serving bias will be more pronounced. For example, Chinese students make external—luck—attributions for their successes

in the presence of a close other, but make internal—ability or effort—attributions for their successes in the presence of an acquaintance (when, presumably, the modesty norm is eased; Han, 2010). Also, Japanese students took more credit for their successes than their failures when self-presentational concerns are removed (i.e., when they are assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses; Kudo & Numazaki, 2003). Finally, Chinese students make internal (ability or effort) attributions for their academic accomplishments in a competitive setting, but make external (luck) attributions for the same accomplishments in a cooperative setting (Chou, 2002).

### **How Do Students Cognitively Organize Feedback-Processing Strategies?**

#### *Organization of Feedback-Processing Strategies in the West*

Following a review of the literature, Hepper, Gramzow, and Sedikides (2010) identified 60 manifestations of the self-enhancement and self-protection motives in Western culture. Next, these authors presented a sample of students with these manifestations (or strategies) and asked them to judge how characteristic each was for them. As an example, for “self-serving bias,” students first imagined, “When you achieve success or really good grades, thinking it was due to your ability,” and then indicated how characteristic this strategy was for them. Similarly, for “better-than-average beliefs,” students thought of themselves “as generally possessing positive traits or abilities to a greater extent than most people do,” and subsequently rated how characteristic this strategy was of them. Through multivariate (i.e., factor analytic) techniques, Hepper et al. distilled these 60 strategies into four groups, all of which implicated feedback.

One group was *positivity embracement* (comprising 10 strategies), which referred to the acquisition or retention of positive feedback, or the maximization of anticipated success. Strategies included the self-serving bias, remembering selectively positive feedback, and presenting oneself favorable to others so as to elicit positive feedback. The second group, *favorable construals* comprised six strategies implicated in interpreting feedback creatively in ways that would optimize self-enhancement and self-protection strivings. Examples of these strategies are construals of ambiguous feedback as positive, comparative optimism, and positive illusions. The third group was *defensiveness*, consisting of 18 strategies that targeted protection from self-threatening feedback. Such strategies included self-handicapping, defensive pessimism, and self-serving attributions for failure. The fourth and final group was *self-affirming reflections*. It consisted of six strategies oriented toward the attainment of favorable outcomes or self-views in the face of negative feedback. Examples of such strategies are downward counterfactual

thinking, temporal comparison, or focusing on one's psychological assets. In all, this research demonstrated the plethora of self-enhancement or self-protection strategies that students can deploy to cope with an ever-changing, and often threatening, social world.

### ***Cultural Context***

The abovementioned strategies were identified in Western culture (i.e., United Kingdom, United States), as mentioned above. Follow-up research examined their relevance in East-Asian culture. In particular, Hepper et al. (2013) presented Chinese students with an abbreviated list of 20 self-enhancement/self-protection strategies. The list consisted of the five strategies that had loaded most highly on each of positivity embracement, favorable construals, defensiveness, and self-affirming reflections in the Hepper et al. (2010) study. The results demonstrated that Chinese students organized those strategies in a very similar manner to those of Western students, that is, in terms of the four groupings of positivity embracement, favorable construals, defensiveness, and self-affirming reflections.

## **LINGERING ISSUES**

### **Further Thoughts About Culture**

The reviewed literature indicated that the self-enhancement and self-protection motives have a strong influence on feedback-related processes in both Western and East-Asian culture (albeit the self-improvement motive is also influential), situational complexity aside (Liem, McInerney, & Yeung, 2015; Pavlova, Lechner, & Silbereisen, 2017). The argument for cultural similarity needs to be qualified. It states that, although the two motives are fundamental in both cultures, their expression differs. Work by Sedikides, Gaertner, and Toguchi (2003; see also Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005) illustrates this principle. These authors theorized that, in the case of social comparison, the personal importance of the evaluative domain would diverge across cultures. Individualism would be more personally important (or central) for Westerners than East-Asians, whereas collectivism would be more personally important (or central) for East-Asians than Westerners. Relying on the self-centrality breeds self-enhancement principle (James, 1907) the authors hypothesized that Westerners would self-enhance on individualistic attributes, whereas Easterners would self-enhance on collectivistic attributes. Indeed, American students rated themselves as superior to their coworkers on individualistic traits (e.g., independent, self-reliant) and behaviors (e.g., trust your own instincts rather than your group's instincts, desert your group when the group does not represent you anymore),

whereas Japanese students rated themselves as superior to their coworkers on collectivistic traits (e.g., compromising, loyal) and behaviors (e.g., conform to your group's decisions, avoid conflict with your group at any cost). By implication, Westerners and East-Asians may appear to react differently to negative (or positive) feedback on individualistic versus collectivistic dimensions, but the difference can be explained in terms of the importance the two groups ascribe to each dimension; that is, controlling for importance, the feedback reactions would be indistinguishable.

The domain of feedback elicitation provides another illustration of the self-centrality breeds self-enhancement principle. Both Westerners and Easterners value receiving compliments or self-praise, given the universality of self-esteem (Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Sedikides Gaertner, & Cai, 2015), but they do so differently. Westerners appreciate self-praise and are comfortable with it (Leary, 2005; Sedikides et al., 2015). East-Asians also value it (Spencer-Oatley & Ng, 2001), but, in conformity with the modesty norm (Chen, 1993), express it indirectly. The gist of the following conversational script typifies the process (Wu, 2011). The speaker praises herself (by directing the listener's attention to an important attribute of hers), but instantaneously qualifies or retracts the self-praise (saving face or decreasing the need to back it up). Instead, the speaker proceeds to praise herself as second best (rather than best), although she skillfully chooses an extreme comparison group. Finally, the speaker humblebrags (Steinmetz, Sezer, & Sedikides, 2017): She raises a complaint, but only en route to showcasing her strength. For feedback, then, to be more receptive among East-Asian students, it will have to comply to the modesty norm or to a script such as this.

The effectiveness of feedback among East-Asian recipients may also increase via other-mediation. Theorists speculated that East-Asians self-enhance indirectly, that is, through close others (Kuwayama, 1992; Yum, 1985). Muramoto (2003) provided evidence for this speculation. Japanese students thought of a situation where they had either succeeded or failed, attributed the outcome to various causes, and reported how their family, friends, peers, and strangers might attribute this outcome. Students expected that their family and friends would exhibit the self-serving bias on their behalf; that is, their close others would give students credit for successes and blame situations for their failures. As another example of indirect self-enhancement, Dalsky, Gohm, Noguchi, and Shiomura (2008) found that Japanese engage in "mutual self-enhancement," where they exchange praise with close others.

### **Can Students Open Up to Negative Feedback?**

The potency of the self-protection motive is understandable: Negative feedback is aversive or hurtful (Sedikides, 2012; Vangelisti & Hampel,

2012). Of course, negative feedback can likewise be useful. It may, for example, be high in diagnosticity (accurate) and hence likely to prompt efforts toward improvement. If so, it is worth examining circumstances under which students are amenable to negative feedback.

One such circumstance involves armoring the self prior to receiving the negative feedback. For example, self-affirmation (writing about one's cardinal values; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), positive mood (Aspinwall, 1998), and a sense of control (Trope, Gervy, & Bolger, 2003), all make negative feedback more palatable. So does bringing to mind a close other. In a study by Kumashiro and Sedikides (2005), students completed an intellectually demanding task and then visualized a close positive other (e.g., friend, partner), a close negative other (e.g., mother-in-law, former friend), or a neutral other (e.g., public transportation worker, checkout clerk). All students received false negative feedback about their task performance. Following that, students expressed their level of interest in receiving feedback that focused on their liabilities and skill limitations at the relevant performance domain. Students who visualized a close positive other (vs. controls) declared the strongest interest in receiving liability-focused feedback.

The role of close relationships in increasing receptiveness to negative feedback was also demonstrated by Sedikides et al. (1998, Experiment 2; see also Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002). Students worked on an interdependent outcomes task (i.e., creativity) either with a stranger or a close other. Upon reception of feedback, students manifested the self-serving bias (e.g., blaming the coworker for the dyadic failure), when their partner was a stranger, but not when their partner was a close other. Takata (2003) reported similar findings with Japanese students. They self-enhanced when they learned that they outperformed a stranger, but self-effaced when they learned that they outperformed a close other.

In addition, close relationships influence memory for negative feedback. Green et al. (2009, Experiment 2) examined whether selective forgetting will be cancelled out when the feedback is given by a close other as opposed to a stranger (i.e., the experimenter). In the case of close other, the feedback might be interpreted as a helpful attempt toward improvement rather than as an evaluation. This was indeed the case. Students remembered the negative central behaviors equally well with their positive central behaviors, when the feedback was dispatched from a close other (a friend) rather than a distant other.

Besides self-affirmation and relational closeness, other circumstances that might conduce to the receptiveness of negative feedback involve introspection and accountability. It has been shown that introspection (i.e., reflecting on whether and why one might have negative traits and positive traits) increases endorsement of negative characteristics while decreasing endorsement of positive characteristics (Sedikides, Horton, & Gregg,

2007). Also, accountability (i.e., having to explain and justify the way one thinks about themselves) curtails the positivity of one's self-views (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter addressed the role of self-evaluation motives in the feedback process. It emphasized the influence of the self-enhancement and self-protection motives (and, secondarily, the influence of the self-improvement motive) among students in both Western and East-Asian cultures. It is not that accurate feedback is irrelevant or unimportant. Rather, positive feedback is what students want and solicit, even if they have to compromise on its veracity.

The evidence indicates that the self-protection motive is more prevalent in East-Asian than Western cultures (Sedikides et al., 2015). It is not clear what the implications of this finding are. One could argue that negative feedback is more likely to optimize performance for East-Asian than Western students. We doubt, however, that this would be the case. Concern with protecting the self may be more widespread in East-Asian than Western cultures, but this does not mean that the consequences of negative feedback (i.e., hurt, aversive feelings, drop in self-esteem) are any less impactful for one cultural group over another; in fact, research demonstrates that East-Asian students are as undesirous of negative feedback as Western students are (Gaertner et al., 2012). On the other hand, it could be that the incentive to avoid receiving negative feedback is more energizing for East-Asian than Western students. Perhaps it is to the extent that East-Asians avoid negativity that they are motivated toward self-improvement. Corresponding, it may be to the extent that Western students pursue positivity that they are motivated toward improvement.

Relatedly, East-Asians show a weaker self-serving bias than Westerners (Mezulis et al., 2004), as modesty norms are more strongly internalized in the East than the West. This findings has pedagogical implications. For example, dyadic or group-based projects may be more functional in East-Asian cultures, as the feedback process may contribute toward maintaining healthier relationships among members of the dyad or the group. Students will be less likely to alienate others by attributing project failure to them or by claiming disproportionate responsibility for project successes.

We focused almost exclusively on East-Asian versus Western cultures, and on individualism versus collectivism (or on independence vs. interdependence). A task for future research would be to understand better how feedback is perceived, desired, remembered, or reacted upon across the entire span of cultures. Research by Vignoles et al. (2016) in 55 cultural groups and 33 nations has already taken steps in that direction. The cultural



groups endorse different aspects of independence or interdependence, as a function of not only individualism-collectivism, but also religious heritage and country-based socioeconomic development. In fact, seven dimensions emerged: difference versus similarity, self-containment versus connection to others, self-direction versus receptiveness to influence, self-reliance versus dependence on others, consistency versus variability, self-expression versus harmony, and self-interest versus commitment to others. This multifaceted approach promises to refine the feedback-receiving and feedback-giving process.

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