



# On the Panculturality of Self-enhancement and Self-protection Motivation: The Case for the Universality of Self-esteem

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## Abstract

Do self-enhancement/self-protection and self-esteem reflect fundamental human motivations or are they culturally bound occurrences? The debate on universalism versus cultural relativism of self-motives and self-esteem shows no sign of abatement. We advance the debate by proposing the extended self-enhancing tactician model. The model aspires to account for two seemingly contradictory phenomena: cross-cultural invariance (equivalence of self-motive strength and self-esteem desire across cultures) and cross-cultural variability (differential manifestations of self-motives and self-esteem across cultures). The model's four foundational tenets address cross-cultural invariance: (1) The individual self is panculturally valued, and it is so over the relational or collective self; (2) The self-enhancement/self-protection motives are equally potent in East and West; (3) The structure of self-enhancement and self-protection strivings is similar across the cultural divide; and (4) the desire for self-esteem is pancultural. The SCENT-R model's four key postulates address cross-cultural variability. First, Easterners assign relative importance to, and report higher, liking-based self-esteem, as well as consider collectivistic attributes important and self-enhance on them, whereas Westerners assign relative importance to, and report higher, competence-based self-esteem, as well as consider individualistic attributes important and self-enhance on them. Second, when constraints on candid self-enhancement are lifted, Easterners behave like Westerners: they report higher modesty and lower self-esteem than Westerners, but, controlling for modesty, differences in self-esteem disappear; they self-enhance in competitive, but self-efface in cooperative, settings; they profit from other-mediated than own-initiated self-enhancement. Third, implicit self-esteem is similarly high across cultures. Fourth, self-esteem and self-enhancement/self-protection confer parallel benefits in East–West, depending in part on domain relevance. Self-enhancement and self-protection, as well as self-esteem, reflect fundamental human motivation.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The self is "...the totality of interrelated yet distinct psychological phenomena that either underlie, causally interact with, or depend upon reflexive consciousness" (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003, p. 110). This definition of the self appears cumbersome but has its merits. It emphasizes that the relevant properties and processes, as complex as they might be, can be conceptually defined and empirically addressed. It also embeds the self in the social world. Yet, this definition is unsatisfactory. This is the kind of self the rational android Data on *Star Trek* is likely to have, busily encoding, storing, and retrieving information in order to attain accurate knowledge or engage in effective action. Nonandroids have a different kind of self, visceral and dynamic, immersed in motivation and affect. We are concerned, in this chapter, with the motivated, affect-imbued self.

Psychologists have proposed several taxonomies of self-motives (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Epstein & Morling, 1995; Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Vignoles, Camillo, Manzi, Gollledge, & Scabini, 2006). We focus on self-enhancement and self-protection, as these motives have had a prominent status in the field and are comparatively influential (Baumeister, 1998; Brown, 1998; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Green, 2004). We define self-enhancement and self-protection as motivations to augment the positivity or diminish the negativity of the self, respectively (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Psychologists have likewise proposed several taxonomies of self-related emotions or affect (Keltner & Beer, 1995; Sedikides et al., 2015; Tangney & Tracy, 2012; Zeigler-Hill, 2013). We focus on self-esteem, also a preeminent construct in the field and, importantly, the affective correlate (and potentially cause or effect) of self-enhancement and self-protection (Baumeister, 1998; Lönnqvist et al., 2009; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Tesser, 1988). We define self-esteem as an attitude toward oneself—an attitude that involves evaluative self-beliefs (e.g., being punctual is good) and that is associated with feelings about the self (e.g., I love it when I am useful to others) (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991).

Given the potency of self-enhancement and self-protection, and the prevalence of self-esteem, one would expect them to be found universally: The

<sup>1</sup> This classification is a subset of a broader classification between approach and avoidance motivation (Elliot & Mapes, 2005).

self would be nurtured to positivity and shielded from negativity, as well as be prized, to a similar extent across cultures.<sup>2</sup> Going against the panculturality case, a cultural relativism argument states that self-enhancement and self-protection, as well as self-esteem, are found in some parts of the world (the West) but not necessarily in others (the East). The self is not promoted and protected, and is not equally treasured, across cultures.

Herein we reignite, summarize, and advance the textured debate surrounding the universalism versus cultural relativism of self-enhancement/self-protection and self-esteem. This is not a frivolous endeavor, as steps toward resolution of this debate can be generative and yield insight into the nature of motivation and the self. We begin by defining the controversy and describing the cultural relativism perspective. Then, we review the evidence in the context of the extended self-enhancement tactician (SCENT-R) Model. We conclude and draw implications.



## 2. THE CONTROVERSY

Western thinking has considered self-enhancement, self-protection, and self-esteem (or homologous constructs) as universal, since the time of Greek (Sophists; Kerferd, 1981) and Roman (Cicero; Wood, 1991) philosophers. This notion persisted, and indeed strengthened, with the Renaissance movement (Macfarlane, 1978), as well as by seventeenth century (Thomas Hobbes) and eighteenth to nineteenth century (Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill) British philosophers (Allport, 1954), and was consolidated in the United States Constitution and legal system. The notion was introduced in psychology by William James (1907), was upheld by the writings of Gordon Allport (1937), by work on reinforcement principles (Dollard & Miller, 1950), and by the insights of Abraham Maslow (1943) and Carl Rogers (1961), and led to a salvo of theoretical and empirical contributions in the 1970s–1980s and beyond (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011; Baumeister, 1998; Becker, 1968; Brown, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Dunning, 1993; Greenwald, 1980; Paulhus & Reid, 1991; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004; Schwartz, 1992; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988;

<sup>2</sup> We define culture as “patterns of historically derived and selected ideas and their embodiment in institutions, practices, and artifacts” (Ford & Mauss, 2015, p. 1; see also: Kroeber & Kluckholm, 1952).

Vignoles, 2011; Wills, 1981). In a nutshell, people, no matter the culture they come from, are motivated to self-enhance and self-protect. They desire self-positivity (the “good news,” praise, or information about their strengths and virtues) and loath self-negativity (the “bad news,” criticism, or information about their weaknesses and vices). People also value having high self-esteem (feeling good about themselves, feeling worthy and liked). For example, they list self-esteem as a key component of their most satisfying life events (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001) and choose self-esteem boosts over eating favored foods, receiving paychecks, seeing close friends, or engaging in sexual activities (Bushman, Moeller, & Crocker, 2011).

The universality of the self-motives and self-esteem was challenged by the culture movement that flourished in the 1990s. The movement offered a well-reasoned, data-backed thesis. The two motives, along with self-esteem, are culturally bound. They are observed in abundance in the West, but not in the East. For example, Japanese do not possess or wish to possess a positive self (Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; Maddux et al., 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and do not have or wish to have high self-esteem (Heine, 2012; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), compared to Americans. In fact, Japanese habitually self-criticize rather than self-enhance or self-protect (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997), and they strive for self-improvement (Heine, Kitayama, Lehman, Takata, et al., 2001). That is:

*The empirical literature provides scant evidence for a need for positive self-regard among Japanese and indicates that a self-critical focus is more characteristic of Japanese...the need for self-regard must be culturally variant...[and] the need for self-regard...is not a universal, but rather is rooted in significant aspects of North American culture.*

*Heine et al. (1999, p. 766)*



### 3. THE CULTURAL RELATIVISM PERSPECTIVE

The cultural relativism perspective posits that Western and Eastern cultural ideas, norms, and practices shape different selves, and this disparity accounts for the ensuing variation in self-motives and levels of self-esteem.

Cultural discrepancy in self-evaluation is purportedly rooted in the way, in which self-construal is forged. Norms, ideals, concepts, beliefs, or values shape the psychological system, and hence the self, via societal institutions

and socialization practices (Chiu & Hong, 2006; Morris, 2014; Nisbett, 2003). Of particular interest is the dimension of individualism—collectivism (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Triandis, 1995; see also Ford & Mauss, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Western culture forges an individualistic self. The culture mandates for independence, distinctiveness, self-sufficiency, emotional expressiveness, personal control, and personal success. East-Asian culture, on the other hand, forges a collectivistic self. The culture mandates for interdependence, cooperation, embeddedness in society, emotional control, relational harmony, and responsibility to the group.

The argument acknowledges nuances in definitions of individualism—collectivism, in the distribution of this dimension across cultures, and in its somewhat varied correlates or consequences (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Shavitt, Zhang, Torelli, & Lalwani, 2006; Van Hoorn, 2015; but see Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2005). Yet, the argument rests on the empirically informed proposition that individualism (observed disproportionately in the West) and collectivism (observed disproportionately in the East) shape self-construal differentially. Individualism forges independent self-construal, whereas collectivism forges interdependent self-construal. Independent and interdependent self-construal may have genetic links. For example, the difference in independence and interdependence between Westerners (European Americans) and Easterners (Asian-born Asians) is accentuated for carriers than noncarriers of the 7- or 2-repeat alleles of the dopamine D4 receptor gene (*DRD4*; Kitayama et al., 2014).

Divergent selves engender markedly different self-motivations and levels of self-esteem. *Individualistic selves* rely on self-expression, validation of internal attributes, and demonstration of innate ability. In a society that values independence and self-sufficiency, the person cannot afford to think lowly of the self—in fact, the astute positioning, if not the acquired motivation, is to think positively of the self and show it to others. It is functional for Westerners to endorse self-enhancement or self-protection strivings and hence to exhibit high self-esteem. *Collectivistic selves*, on the other hand, rely on self-discipline, validation of group membership, and demonstration of

<sup>3</sup> We distinguish between Eastern—Western cultures and individualistic—collectivistic cultures. The dimension of individualism—collectivism is broader, as it can incorporate countries that are geographically positioned in the East or in the West. For example, countries high on collectivism (Hofstede, 2011) can be in East-Asia (e.g., Hong Kong, Malaysia) or in the West (e.g., Chile, Serbia). Generally, though, Eastern countries are more individualistic than Western ones.

social utility. In a society that values interdependence and interpersonal harmony, the person cannot afford to stand out and tout superiority to others—in fact, the optimal route is to entertain egalitarian views of the self and convey them to others. It is functional for East-Asians to jettison self-enhancement or self-protection strivings and hence to display low self-esteem.



#### **4. THE EXTENDED SELF-ENHANCEMENT TACTICIAN MODEL (SCENT-R): FOUNDATIONAL TENETS**

Our proposal is that culture, a source of normative and informational social influence, can affect self-enhancement or self-protection as observed effects. However, culture cannot affect self-enhancement or self-protection as underlying motives. To use a gastronomic analogy (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), culture can affect how much one eats (e.g., observed effect: self-criticism), but cannot affect how hungry one will get (e.g., underlying motive: self-enhancement). A person can self-criticize when the person's motive is to self-enhance. That is, even when members of East-Asian culture are observed to display lower levels of self-positivity than their Western counterparts (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine et al., 2000; Kitayama et al., 1997), this observation does not imply that they lack the motive to self-enhance or that the motive to self-enhance is weaker. They may simply manifest the motives differently. A theory is needed, then, that will account for (1) equivalence of motive strength and desire for self-esteem across cultures, but (2) differential manifestations of self-motives and self-esteem across cultures. This theory is the Extended Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT-R) model (for its initial formulation, see: Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

The gist of the SCENT-R model is that people in the East and West satisfy the two self-motives and their desire for self-esteem differently. The model consists of four foundational tenets that transcend contextual considerations. The tenets are as follows: Universal valuation of the individual self over the relational or collective self, universal strength of self-enhancement and self-protection motivation, universality of self-enhancement and self-protection strategies, and universality of desire for self-esteem. We elaborate on these tenets below.

##### **4.1 Universal Valuation of the Individual Self over the Relational Self or Collective Self**

The SCENT-R endorses the idea that the individual (or personal) self is valued not only to the same degree across cultures, but also to a higher



degree than the relational or collective self across cultures. The individual self represents the unique side of the person and comprises aspects (e.g., traits, roles, experiences) that differentiate the person from others. The relational self refers to attachments with close others and comprises aspects shared with these others, and aspects that are associated with role obligations. Lastly, the collective self refers to identification with important social groups and comprises aspects that define the in-group and differentiate it from the relevant, antagonistic out-group (Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O'Mara, & Gebauer, 2013). We assumed, in line with past research (Lea & Webley, 2006), that the value of each self can be conveyed monetarily, with the more important group being worthy of a higher amount. We allocated to Chinese and American participants a putative sum of money and asked them to distribute it, in any way they wished, to the three selves (which we defined for participants in advance). Irrespective of culture, participants allocated the highest monetary amount to the individual self, followed by the relational self and then by the collective self (Gaertner, Sedikides, Luke, et al., 2012; Study 3).

In a follow-up study (Gaertner, Sedikides, Luke, et al., 2012; Study 4), we examined whether Westerners and Easterners value characteristics (i.e., goals) of the future individual self more so than characteristics of the future relational or collective self. We assumed that the more primary a self was, the more this self would be associated with future goals (Emmons, 1986). We instructed Chinese and American participants to write a narrative describing their individual, relational, or collective self. For example, the third of participants who were in the individual-self condition read: "Being a unique individual is an important part of life. Indeed, you are a unique individual with your own unique background, personality traits, skills, abilities, interests, and hobbies. Please take a few minutes and describe what makes you unique" (p. 1007). Upon completion of the narratives, participants listed 12 future goals. Subsequently, they indicated whether each goal referred to the individual, relational, or collective self (which we defined for them at that point). Regardless of culture, participants attributed more than twice as many goals to the individual self than either the relational or collective self. Put otherwise, the individual self was associated with over half of the desired goals that Chinese and American participants had.

Collectively, the findings established a cross-cultural motivational hierarchy, with the individual self at the top, followed by the other two selves. Del Prado et al. (2007) reported similar results with the individual self being assigned primacy over the collective self across cultures. Other researchers



have also reported results consistent with the primacy of the individual self. Ybarra and Trafimow (1998, Experiment 3) primed either the individual self or the collective self, and found that participants in both conditions wrote down more descriptions pertaining to the individual than the collective self (see also Gaertner, Sedikides, & Graetz, 1999; Experiment 4). Finjeman, Willemsen, and Poortinga (1996) assessed expected inputs to and outputs from various kinds of relationships (e.g., parents, siblings, cousins, friends, acquaintances, strangers) in both individualistic (The Netherlands and United States) and collectivistic (Hong Kong, Greece, Turkey) cultures, and found that, regardless of culture, the willingness to provide for others was related to expectations of what would be received from others. Aarts, Oikawa, and Oikawa (2010) found that the experience of self-agency consists of a nonconscious and universal (i.e., observed both in Japan and The Netherlands) component. Further, Japanese, when asked to describe their ideal self, express a stronger desire to be independent than interdependent (Hashimoto, Li, & Yamagishi, 2011), South Koreans regard themselves as less collectivistic than their peers (Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009), Japanese and Americans have an equally strong need for uniqueness (Kim & Markus, 1999), and Japanese are even more likely than Americans to free ride, that is, exit the group in the absence of mutual monitoring or sanctioning (Yamagishi, 1988; see also Parks & Vu, 1995).

#### 4.2 Universal Strength of the Self-enhancement and Self-protection Motives

The SCENT-R model endorses the notion that the self-enhancement motive is potent among Westerners and Easterners. To be more precise, the model rejects the notion that this motive is stronger in the West than the East. We addressed these issues empirically (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Cai, 2012). We operationalized self-motivation in terms of what people desire or want for themselves (Hepper, Hart, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2011). To return to the gastronomic analogy, just as persons driven by hunger desire food, persons motivated by self-enhancement would desire positive distinctiveness. Chinese and American participants rated the extent to which they wanted to receive self-enhancing feedback, and also self-improving and self-effacing feedback, from multiple sources (friends, parents, teachers, classmates). The inclusion of two additional types of feedback—self-improving and self-effacing—allowed us to test whether Chinese, more than Americans, are motivated by self-improvement or self-criticism. We also incorporated a no-feedback control condition. As an example of the

format in which participants received the feedback, the items pertaining to friends (with feedback type, in italics, unseen by participants) were: “I want my friends to tell me...” “(a) I am a great friend (*self-enhancing*), (b) how to be a better friend (*self-improving*), (c) I am an average friend (*self-effacing*), and (d) nothing about the kind of friend I am (*no feedback*).” We adapted the feedback format and feedback items from Neiss, Sedikides, Shahinfar, and Kupersmidt (2006; see Gregg, Hepper, & Sedikides, 2011, for additional validation). Further, we operationalized self-effacement in accordance with Heine and Lehman’s (1995) 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” (p. 596). Being average implies higher similarity to others (Ott-Holland, Huang, Ryan, Elizondo, & Wadlington, 2014), compared to any other position in the distribution, thus capturing the essence of East-Asian self-effacement (e.g., being like others or being connected to others).

The results of our investigation (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Cai, 2012) were revealing. Chinese and American participants overwhelmingly desired self-enhancing and self-improving feedback more than any other kind of feedback. Persons, regardless of culture, wanted feedback that extolled their virtues and ensured that they could become even better. Moreover, neither Chinese nor American participants desired self-effacing feedback; they both deemed self-effacing feedback to be as undesirable as no feedback. In short, the findings are consistent with the idea that the self-enhancement motive is vibrant in both cultures (for similar conclusions, see: Becker et al., 2012; Church et al., 2012; Niiya, Crocker, & Mischkowski, 2012). The findings also indicate that the Chinese are as motivated to self-improve, and as unmotivated to self-criticize, as Americans.

The SCENT-R model capitalizes on the notion that not only the self-enhancement motive, but also the self-protection motive is potent across cultures. Again, to be precise, the model rebuffs the notion that this motive is stronger in the West than the East. As we mentioned,<sup>1</sup> self-protection is a specific case of avoidance motivation (Elliot & Mapes, 2005). Avoidance goals are stronger in East-Asian than in Western culture (Elliot, Chirkov, Sheldon, & Kim, 2001; Elliot et al., 2012; Hamamura, Meijer, Heine, Kamaya, & Hori, 2009). East-Asians score higher on prevention focus (an instance of avoidance motivation) than promotion focus (an instance of approach motivation) (Hepper, Sedikides, & Cai, 2013; Kim, Peng, & Chiu, 2008; Lalwani, Shrum, & Chiu, 2009). Likewise, self-protection motivation is stronger in East-Asian than Western culture. To begin,

collectivism or interdependence involves rejection avoidance along with harmony seeking (Hashimoto & Yamagishi, 2013). Further, East-Asians manifest excessive concern with face saving or embarrassment avoidance (Ho, 1976; Hwang, 1987; Triandis, 1995) and show conformity in a strategic attempt to avoid a negative reputation (Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008). The modesty norm is indeed stronger in East-Asian than Western culture (Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007), with East-Asians favoring modesty in self-presentation to a greater extent than Americans (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1978) and perceiving Americans as immodest (Terracciano & McCrae, 2007). As supplementary evidence for the relative vigor of the self-protection motive, East-Asians are more likely to render positive self-judgments by repudiating negative self-qualities (e.g., “I am flawless”) than by affirming favorable self-qualities (e.g., “I am perfect”), whereas the reverse pattern is observed among Westerners (Kim, Chiu, Peng, Cai, & Tov, 2010).

The domain of memory is well suited for the investigation of self-protection motivation (Sedikides, 2012; Skowronski, 2011). Here, the findings also attest to panculturality. The fading affect bias, whereby negative affect associated with autobiographical events fades faster than positive affect associated with such events, is present both in Western and Eastern cultures (Ritchie et al., 2015). Moreover, mnemonic neglect, whereby negative feedback about important self-attributes (but not negative feedback about unimportant self-attributes or about attributes pertaining to another person) is remembered poorly compared to positive feedback about important self-attributes (Sedikides & Green, 2009), is observed both in the West and the East (Tan, Newman, & Zhang, 2014). In short, the evidence is congruent with the notion that the self-protection motive is at least as powerful in the East as it is in the West—and, in fact, may be more powerful in the former than the latter.

### 4.3 Universal Structure of Self-enhancement and Self-protection Strivings

The SCENT-R model posits that, not only the underlying self-motives, but also the corresponding strivings are found cross-culturally. However, the model distinguishes between structural and content manifestation. In particular, the model posits cultural invariance in the structural manifestation of the self-motives; that is, as we advocate below, the self-motives are characterized by a universal structure of four strivings: defensiveness, positivity embracement, favorable construal, and self-affirming reflections. However,

as we will discuss in a later [Section 5.1](#), the model proposes cultural variability in content manifestation of the two self-motives; that is, the content of these strivings may be expressed differently, depending on culture.

We put the proposition of universality in structural manifestation of self-enhancement/self-protection strivings to test ([Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010](#)). Following a literature review, we compiled an exhaustive list of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strivings of self-enhancement or self-protection motivation. For each striving, we wrote a representative item. For example, for “better-than-average beliefs” we wrote “Thinking of yourself as generally possessing positive personality traits or abilities to a greater extent than most people,” and for “self-serving bias” we wrote “When you achieve success or really good grades, thinking it was due to your ability.” We generated 60 items in total. Then, we conducted two studies with Western participants.

In Study 1 ([Hepper et al., 2010](#)), we instructed participants that they would be presented with “several patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior in which people engage during the course of everyday life” (p. 791), and asked them to indicate the extent to which each pattern (i.e., striving) was characteristic or typical of them. We subjected participants’ responses to an exploratory factor analysis, which resulted in four factors (i.e., manifestations). The first factor was *defensiveness*, that is, self-protection strivings triggered by self-threat. Such strivings involve preparing for (behaviorally) and deflecting (cognitively) undesirable feedback (e.g., self-handicapping prior to evaluative settings in order to make an excuse for failure, attributing undesirable feedback to external sources, expending disproportionate cognitive effort toward the discounting of undesirable feedback). The second factor was *positivity embracement*, that is, self-enhancement strivings triggered by positive feedback opportunities. Such strivings involve obtaining (behaviorally) and making the most of (cognitively) desirable feedback (e.g., selectively interacting with persons likely to provide positive feedback, self-presenting favorably in social interactions, taking credit for group success). The third factor was *favorable construal*, that is, chronic self-enhancement strivings. These strivings involve self-serving cognition about the social world (e.g., believing one is better-than-average on important traits, anticipating a rosier future for the self than for others, interpreting ambiguous feedback as favorable). The fourth and final factor was *self-affirming reflections*, that is, self-enhancement strivings triggered by self-threat. These strivings entail the preservation of self-integrity in the face of imminent or past threat (e.g., bringing to mind one’s values when confronted with failure,

comparing favorably one's present to one's own past, engaging in counterfactual thinking about worse alternatives).

In Study 2 (Hepper et al., 2010), we validated the four-factor manifestation structure via a confirmatory factor analysis, ruling out alternatives (i.e., one-factor and two-factor models). In addition, we obtained theory-consistent associations between the factors and individual differences such as regulatory focus, self-esteem, and narcissism. Defensiveness (a family of strivings relevant to actual or anticipated self-threat) was positively related to prevention focus, whereas the other three factors (families of enhancement-oriented strivings) were positively related to promotion focus (Higgins, 1998). Self-esteem was negatively related to defensiveness, congruent with findings that persons with high self-esteem are less prone to self-protection (Tice, 1991), but was positively related to the other three factors, congruent with findings that persons with high self-esteem are more prone to self-enhancement (Tice, 1991). Finally, narcissism was related positively both to defensiveness and the other three factors, congruent with findings that narcissists respond self-protectively to failure and self-enhance at any opportunity (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011).

More important, we wondered whether the four-factor configuration of self-enhancement and self-protection manifestations, as well as pertinent links with individual differences, is applicable to Eastern culture. For that purpose, we (Hepper et al., 2013) recruited a Chinese sample and compared it to a Western sample, namely that of Hepper et al.'s (2010) Study 2. We assessed self-enhancement and self-protection expressions not with the full 60-item set used in Hepper et al. (2010), but rather with an abbreviated 20-item scale comprising the five items that loaded the highest on each of the four factors (i.e., defensiveness, positivity embracement, favorable construal, self-affirming reflections). We also assessed regulatory focus, self-esteem, and narcissism with scales validated in China. The factor structure of the manifestations was similar in the two samples: the four-factor model fits well and fits better than alternatives (one-factor or two-factor) models. The four-factor model exhibited scalar invariance (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), which is a strong form of measurement invariance across cultures (Meredith, 1993). Specifically, it indicates that a researcher can legitimately compare each factor's correlations, and even each factor's latent mean, across cultures (Horn & McArdle, 1992). Further, and in replication of past findings (Kim et al., 2010; Lalwani et al., 2009), Chinese, compared to Westerners, scored higher on defensiveness (a family of self-protective strivings), but lower on positivity embracement (a family of self-enhancement strivings). Yet, Chinese scored higher on favorable

self-construal, an enhancement-oriented family of strivings. This finding broadly contradicts prior results suggesting that East-Asians, relative to Westerners, manifest lower levels of the better-than-average effect (BTAE) and unrealistic optimism (Heine & Hamamura, 2007). The finding, though, is reminiscent of “spiritual victories,” a prominent concept in Chinese literature, denoting attempts to convince oneself of one’s goodness and superiority. Spiritual victories are famously epitomized in Lu Xun’s *The Real Story of Ah-Q* (trans. Lovell, 2010), written in the early twentieth century and still considered a reflection of national character. Such a finding is a step toward legitimizing the use of such measures as better-than-average judgments to assess Chinese self-enhancement. Finally, the associations between the three individual difference variables (regulatory focus, self-esteem, and narcissism) and the four families of strivings (defensiveness, positivity embracement, favorable construal, and self-affirming reflections) evinced a similar pattern in the Chinese and Western sample. In all, members of both cultural groups manifest the self-enhancement and self-protection motives, and arguably satisfy these motives, using similar strivings. Also, individual-level variation in the reported use of these expressions is comparable across cultures.

#### 4.4 Universality of Desire for Self-esteem

The fourth and final foundational tenet of the SCENT-R model is that the desire for self-esteem is universal. Although Easterners score lower on explicit self-esteem scales (e.g., Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-esteem Scale or RSES) than Westerners, they typically score above the theoretical midpoint of the rating scale (Brown, Cai, Oakes, & Deng, 2009; Cai et al., 2011; Cai, Wu, & Brown, 2009; Kwan, Kuang, & Hui, 2009; Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Yamaguchi et al., 2007; but see Diener & Diener, 1995) indicating universally positive self-attitudes or self-love. Also, East-Asians (i.e., Japanese) regard self-esteem to be as desirable as Westerners (i.e., Americans), emphasizing its role in healthy child development (Brown, 2008a) and good mental health (Brown, 2008b).

But why do Easterners report lower self-esteem than Westerners? A key reason is modesty, a pervasive norm in the East (Chiu & Hong, 2006; Shikanai, 1978; Yamaguchi, Lin, & Aoki, 2006). Japanese children, as young as eight years old, internalize the modesty norm (Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982). Chinese children claim it is moral not only to underreport one’s good deeds but also to lie about them (Lee, Xu, Fu, Cameron, & Chen, 2001). More generally, in China the modesty norm (reflecting the Confucian proverb “haughtiness invites loss while modesty brings benefits”) is



considered a powerful deterrent to positive self-attitudes and self-love in China (Bond et al., 1978; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1977; Tseng, 1973). Indeed, modesty among Chinese is negatively correlated with explicit self-esteem (Cai, Brown, Deng, & Oakes, 2007; Cai et al., 2011; Study 1).

Furthermore, self-esteem is universally derived from fulfillment of one's cultural value priorities. Relying on cross-sectional and longitudinal samples of 20 cultures that varied on individualism—collectivism, Becker et al. (2014) examined the influence of four self-evaluative bases (achieving social status, controlling one's life, doing one's duty, benefiting others) on self-esteem. Participants derived self-esteem from all four self-evaluative bases, but particularly from adhering to the bases that were prioritized highly by others in their own cultural milieu. Likewise, Kwan et al. (2009) found that both Chinese and American participants relied on the same three sources of self-esteem, namely benevolence (positive perceptions of self and others), merit (noteworthy accomplishments), and bias (self-positivity).

Evidence from the literature on mortality coping is also indicative. Terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 2004) proposes that the universal desire for self-esteem is underpinned by the fundamental need for psychological security that arises from one's vulnerability, existential angst, and mortality awareness. In support of these ideas, the literature has established that mortality reminders strengthen attempts to defend or elevate self-esteem, and that self-esteem acts as a vital resource that buffers anxiety and reduces defensiveness against mortality. Crucially to our argument, these effects are obtained both in Western cultures (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Greenberg, 2008) and in East-Asian cultures (Heine, Niiya, & Harihara, 2002; Kashima, Halloran, Yuki, & Kashima, 2004; Nodera, Karasawa, Numazaki, & Takabayashi, 2007; Tam, Chiu, & Lau, 2007; Wakimoto, 2006).

## 4.5 Summary and Conclusions

The SCENT-R model is built on four tenets that aim to highlight the equivalence across East and West of the strength of self-enhancement/self-protection and of the desire for self-esteem. We reviewed evidence consistent with these four foundational tenets. First, the individual self is universally valued, and is also valued universally over the relational or collective self. Second, the strength of self-enhancement and self-protection motivation is equivalent across Eastern and Western cultures. Third, members of both cultural groups rely on the same expressions of the self-enhancement and self-protection motives. Finally, the desire for self-esteem



is universal. Having articulated the foundational tenets and reviewed empirical support for them, we proceed to a consideration of the model's key postulates.



## 5. THE EXTENDED SELF-ENHANCEMENT TACTICIAN (SCENT-R) MODEL: KEY POSTULATES

The SCENT-R model comprises four key postulates. These postulates refer to context-sensitive or tactical; yet still universal, content manifestations of self-enhancement, self-protection, and self-esteem. The first postulate builds on the principle “self-centrality breeds self-enhancement” and focuses on the role of attribute centrality or importance in the East and the West. The second postulate refers to the role of modesty and its differential relevance in the two cultural groups. The third postulate concerns implicit self-esteem across cultures, and its motivational significance in the East. The fourth and final postulate advocates the functionality of self-esteem and self-motives across the East/West divide. We elaborate on these postulates below.

### 5.1 Self-centrality Breeds Self-enhancement: The Role of Domain Importance

[William James \(1907\)](#) was the first to articulate the principle “self-centrality breeds self-enhancement,” namely that self-enhancement and self-protection occur mainly in domains that matter to the self. James stated (p. 31): “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.” The principle has a venerable tradition in psychology ([Crocker & Wolfe, 2001](#); [Greenberg et al., 1997](#); [Harter, 1993](#); [Sedikides & Strube, 1997](#); [Tesser, 2000](#)). A recent empirical example is the work of [Gebauer, Wagner, Sedikides, and Neberich \(2013\)](#). They focused on agency, a construct homologous to individualism, which they operationalized with a set of 10 adjectives (e.g., ambitious, dominant, leader) and on communion, a construct homologous to collectivism, which they operationalized with another set of 10 adjectives (e.g., caring, compassionate, understanding). (For a review of agency and communion, see: [Abele & Wojciszke, 2014](#).) Gebauer et al. hypothesized that agency would predict self-esteem strongly in individuals for whom agency was central, whereas communion would predict self-esteem strongly in individuals for whom communion was central. The results were

consistent with the hypotheses. Another example is the work of [Lönnqvist et al. \(2009\)](#). Endorsement of achievement and universalism values predicted self-esteem among persons, who considered these values important, whereas endorsement of self-direction and hedonism values predicted self-esteem among persons, who considered these values important.

### **5.1.1 Self-esteem**

The “self-centrality breeds self-enhancement” principle is relevant to the issue of panculturality of self-esteem. Adhering to standards of high self-centrality is the primary source of self-esteem ([Brown, 2010a](#); [Greenberg et al., 1997](#); [Yamaguchi, Lin, Morio, & Okumura, 2008](#)). However, as we have discussed, different sources are primary in the West and the East. [Tafarodi and colleagues \(Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Tafarodi & Swann, 1996\)](#) distinguished between self-esteem based on self-competence (i.e., feeling that one is capable and efficacious) and self-esteem based on self-liking (i.e., feeling that is relationally skillful and accepted by others). Further, [Tafarodi et al.](#) proposed that individualistic cultures would assign foremost importance to competence-based self-esteem and collectivistic cultures to liking-based self-esteem. It follows that members of individualistic (e.g., Western) cultures would report higher levels of competence-based self-esteem, whereas members of collectivistic (e.g., Eastern) cultures would report higher levels of liking-based self-esteem. This pattern has been obtained consistently across Eastern and Western cultures ([Baranik et al., 2008](#); [Kwan et al., 2009](#); [Nezlek et al., 2008](#); [Schmitt & Allik, 2005](#); [Tafarodi, Lange, & Smith, 1999](#); [Tafarodi & Swann, 1996](#); [Tafarodi & Walters, 1999](#)).

### **5.1.2 Self-enhancement and Self-protection**

The “self-centrality breeds self-enhancement” principle is also highly relevant to the issue of panculturality of self-motives. The SCENT-R model assumes that self-enhancement (or self-protection) can be either candid or tactical. Candid self-enhancement is expressed directly and immediately. However, tactical self-enhancement is more susceptible to acute concerns and often forgoes immediate aggrandizement for long-term gain. In this section, we are concerned with candid self-enhancement (and self-protection).

The SCENT-R model posits that individuals will self-enhance or self-protect on domains that are important (rather than unimportant) to them ([Sedikides, 1993](#)). Self-enhancing or self-protecting on personally important attributes (e.g., traits or behaviors) allows individuals to feel that they adhere

to culturally prescribed roles. Indeed, to a substantial degree, the personal importance of an evaluative domain is prescribed by culture (Fischer, 2006). In a cross-cultural context, the implication is that Westerners will self-enhance or self-protect on individualistic attributes (due to the personal importance of these attributes), whereas Easterners will self-enhance or self-protect on collectivistic attributes (due, again, to the personal importance of such attributes).

Sedikides, Gaertner, and Toguchi (2003) documented this pattern. In Study 1, American and Japanese participants imagined being a member of a 16-person task force, whose mission was to solve four types of business problems (advertising, planning, personnel, and budget). All group members were to be of the same ethnicity as well as demographics (age, gender, educational level). Then, participants spent 10 min imagining and writing down ideas and solutions to the business problem for hypothetical sharing with other members. Finally, participants were presented with a set of individualistic traits (e.g., independent, original, self-reliant) and behaviors (e.g., trust your own instincts rather than your group's instincts, disagree with your group when you believe the group is wrong, desert your group when the group does not represent you anymore), and also with a set of collectivistic traits (e.g., cooperative, compromising, loyal) and behaviors (e.g., conform to your group's decisions, avoid conflict with your group at any cost, do anything for your group). Pretesting had determined that individualistic attributes had been rated by participants as more "individualistic" than "collectivistic" (according to definitions provided), and vice versa. On each set, participants compared themselves to the typical group member. They indicated how well each trait described them, and how likely they were to enact each behavior, relative to the typical member of the task force. In support of the SCENT-R model, Americans self-enhanced (or self-protected) more strongly than Japanese on individualistic than collectivistic attributes, whereas Japanese self-enhanced more strongly than Americans on collectivistic than individualistic attributes. In all, self-enhancement took a tactical form. Both cultural groups self-enhanced (thus demonstrating equivalent strength of underlying motive), but on different domains (thus demonstrating distinct motive manifestation).

In Study 1, we (Sedikides et al., 2003) assumed but did not test the idea that self-construal (independent vs interdependent) is responsible for the obtained effects (Matsumoto, 1999). We also did not test directly the idea that personal importance drives the influence of self-enhancement motivation on self-evaluative judgments. We addressed these issues in Study 2

(Sedikides et al., 2003). We engaged, in particular, in a within-culture test, with all participants being from the United States. In the first phase of the study, we administered to a large group of participants the Singelis (1994) self-construal scale. On this basis, we divided participants into two groups: a sample that scored high on independence but low on interdependence (analogous to Study 1's American participants) and a sample that scored low on independence but high on interdependence (analogous to Study 1's Japanese participants). Four to eight weeks later, we randomly drew from each sample 48 participants (henceforth "independents" and "interdependents") and invited them to the laboratory for a second session, where we tested them individually. The procedure was the same as in Study 1, with a key addition: Participants rated the personal importance of the trait or behavior. The results, once again, were consistent with the SCENT-R model. Independents self-enhanced (or self-protected) more than interdependents on individualistic than collectivistic attributes, whereas interdependents self-enhanced more than independents on collectivistic than individualistic attributes. In addition, independents considered individualistic attributes more personally important than collectivistic ones, whereas the reverse was true for interdependents. Finally, attribute personal importance mediated the influence of the self-enhancement motive on self-evaluative judgments. Independents self-enhanced on individualistic attributes due to the personal importance that such attributes had, and likewise interdependents self-enhanced on collectivistic attributes due to the personal importance of such attributes. Both self-construal groups self-enhanced on personally important domains, albeit distinct ones. As predicted by SCENT-R, what matters is not the domain per se but rather whether the domain is tethered to the self.

These findings were not idiosyncratic, confined to our own laboratory. We replicated them by meta-analyzing the extant literature. In line with the specifications of the SCENT-R model, we searched for studies in which participants (1) rated the self (on positive or negative attributes) in comparison to another person (2) on a domain that was empirically validated a priori by researchers to be personally important or unimportant to participants (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2007b, 2007a). In one meta-analysis (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005; Experiment 1), we demonstrated that Western participants indeed self-enhanced (or self-protected) on individualistic attributes, whereas East-Asian participants self-enhanced on collectivistic attributes. In another meta-analysis (Sedikides et al., 2005; Experiment 2), we demonstrated that members of each cultural group

self-enhanced on the corresponding domain—individualistic for Westerners, collectivistic for Easterners—because that domain was personally important to them.

### **5.1.3 The BTAE as an Index of Self-enhancement or Self-protection Motivation**

The results of the above-described program of research (Sedikides et al., 2003, 2005, 2007b, 2007a) were based on the BTAE, whereby people overestimate their merits (or underestimate their liabilities) in comparison to their peers. The effect is robust and pervasive, found across a wide range of samples, ages, and evaluative domains (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). People truly believe in their better-than-average judgments, betting money on them (Williams & Gilovich, 2008). Crucially, the BTAE reflects motivation and indeed may be the single best index of (explicitly expressed) self-enhancement motivation (Guenther & Alicke, 2010; cf. Hamamura, Heine, & Takemoto, 2007). It may also be suitable for capturing self-enhancement in the East, or at least in some (e.g., Chinese) Eastern cultures due to the similarity between the BTAE and the construct of “spiritual victories” (Lovell, 2010). We have reviewed elsewhere the reasons why the BTAE is motivated (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012), and recapitulate below.

The BTAE varies in accordance to principles of motivation theory. First, the BTAE is stronger on personally important than personally unimportant traits (Brown, 2012; Studies 1–4). For example, people regard themselves as superior to others on trustworthiness but not necessarily on punctuality—a sign of self-enhancement motivation. Second, the BTAE varies as a function of attribute valence and controllability (Alicke, 1985). The effect is stronger on positive traits on which people have high control (e.g., resourceful) than low control (e.g., mature), and it is stronger on negative traits on which people have high control (e.g., unappreciative) than low control (e.g., humorless). Stated otherwise, people regard themselves as more resourceful, but not necessarily more mature, than others, and they regard themselves as less unappreciative (or more appreciative), but not necessarily as less humorless (or more humorous), than others. The former pattern is a sign of self-enhancement motivation, the latter of self-protection motivation. Third, the BTAE varies as a function of attribute verifiability (Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). It is stronger on attributes that cannot be objectively verified (where the individual can claim superiority with relative impunity, as in the moral or social domain), but it is weaker on attributes that can be objectively verified (where the individual may be threatened with ridicule or exclusion, as

in the athletic performance or intelligence domain). Finally, the BTAE varies as a function of self-threat (Brown, 2012; Study 5). Self-threat, where participants receive negative feedback (vs no feedback) on a domain important to them (i.e., intellectual ability) before engaging in self-other comparisons, intensifies the effect—a sign of self-protection motivation.

We have also refuted purely nonmotivational accounts of the BTAE (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). The most prominent of them are egocentrism, focalism, individuated-entity versus aggregate comparisons, and assimilation/contrast. *Egocentrism* (Champers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003) states that, when comparing themselves to peers, people think selectively about their strengths or about their peers' weaknesses. However, selective thinking can itself be a mark of self-enhancement or self-protection motivation (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1999). Also, egocentrism cannot explain why the BTAE emerges in cases in which the behavioral evidence for traits relevant to the self and relevant to the typical peer is standardized (Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001). Finally, egocentrism cannot explain (1) why the BTAE emerges (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), and does so cross-culturally (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002, 2003), not only with direct measures (participants rating the self against peers on a single scale), but also with indirect measures (participants rating the self, their best friend, and other people on separate scales), and (2) why the BTAE is stronger on unverifiable than verifiable attributes (Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). *Focalism* states that individuals, when comparing themselves to the average peer, place the self or the self-relevant attributes in a focal position, thus highlighting their unique attributes and consequently perceiving the self as less similar to the peer (Paul & Eiser, 2006). However, focalism cannot explain why the BTAE is obtained even when the peer is a highly concrete other (rather than the average or typical other) and is known to them through personal contact (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995), when the behavioral evidence relevant to the judgment is standardized for self and others (Alicke et al., 2001), and when the measures are indirect rather than direct (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Also, focalism cannot explain why the BTAE varies as function of attribute importance, valence, controllability, and verifiability (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 2012). *Individuated-entity versus aggregate comparisons* states that any member of a liked group (e.g., soap fragrance) is rated more positively than the aggregate or group average (e.g., average fragrance), whereas the inverse occurs for disliked groups (Klar, 2002). The implication is that the self is seen as an individuated entity, whereas the average is seen as an aggregate. However, individuated-entity



versus aggregate comparisons cannot explain why the BTAE emerges when the self is compared to another highly individuated-entity (Alicke et al., 1995), why the effect emerges even when participants are under cognitive load (Alicke et al., 1995; Study 7)—a pattern indicative of self-enhancement (Paulhus, 1993), why the effect is stronger on important than unimportant attributes when the comparison target is a single person (Brown, 2012), and why the effect varies according to the motivational significance of the judgment (i.e., attribute valence, controllability, verifiability; Alicke, 1985). Finally, *assimilation/contrast* states that the BTAE involves anchoring the self and contrasting the average peer from that point (Kruger, 1999). However, judgments of the average peer are assimilated toward, not contrasted from, the self (Guenther & Alicke, 2010).

#### **5.1.4 Self-enhancement and Self-protection Motivation in Socially Desirable Responding**

The postulate that individuals will self-enhance or self-protect on domains that are important (rather than unimportant) to them has been replicated in several independent laboratories (Kam et al., 2009; Tam et al., 2012; for an earlier review, see Sedikides et al., 2005). For illustration purposes, we will focus on the work of Shavitt and colleagues (Johnson, Holbrook, & Shavitt, 2011; Shavitt, Torelli, & Riemer, 2011). They proposed that cultures assign different importance to self-presentational styles. East-Asian or collectivistic cultures, compared to Western or individualistic cultures, are avoidance-oriented and emphasize face-saving, while valuing honesty less and tolerating lying more in social interactions (Triandis et al., 2001; Van Hemert, Van de Vijer, Poortinga, & Georgas, 2002). As such, East-Asians will be likely to dissemble and provide false or deceptive responses to questionnaires in adhering to the cultural value of harmonious fit with their social surroundings. For example, they will score relatively high on impression management (IM), denoting attempts to present oneself in such a manner as to create a favorable impression (Paulhus, 1984). IM is related to faking (i.e., dissimulation or deception), as it entails “an attempt to control images that are projected in real or social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6). Typical scale items are “I have never dropped litter on the street” and “I sometimes drive faster than the speed limit” (reverse scored; Paulhus, 1988). Westerners, on the other hand, will be likely to present themselves as better or loftier than others in adhering to the cultural value of distinguishing oneself from others. For example, they will score relatively high on self-deceptive enhancement (SDE), denoting the proclivity to furnish overly



positive, if not grandiose, self-descriptions in questionnaire responses (Paulhus, 1984). Typical scale items are “I am very confident of my judgments” and “My first impressions of people usually turn out to be right” (Paulhus, 1988). In all, the two cultural groups will be equally motivated to self-enhance (or self-protect), but they will do so in distinct ways.

Results were consistent with the reasoning of Shavitt et al. East-Asians scored higher on IM, and lower on SDE, than Westerners. Correspondingly, collectivism predicted IM, and individualism predicted SDE (Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006; Studies 1–4). Further, collectivism (but not individualism) was linked with favorable responding to behavioral scenarios of image protection, whereas individualism (but not collectivism) was linked with favorable responding to behavioral scenarios of self-reliance (Lalwani et al., 2006; Study 4). Likewise, interdependent self-construal was related to IM and the proclivity to present oneself as competent and skillful (i.e., in terms of test choice, gift-giving scenarios, and performance), whereas interdependent self-construal was related to SDE and the proclivity to present oneself as appropriate and socially sensitive (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009).

## 5.2 Constraints on Candid Self-enhancement: Modesty, Setting Orientation, and Other-Mediation

As stated above, the SCENT-R model distinguishes between candid and tactical self-enhancement (or self-protection). In this section, we focus on constraints upon candid self-enhancement as imposed by normative or contextual influences. In particular, we consider three forms of tactical self-enhancement: modesty, setting orientation, and other-mediation.

### 5.2.1 Modesty

Modesty is a more prevalent norm in the East than the West (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Shikanai, 1978; Yoshida et al., 1982; for a review, see Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007). As such, the SCENT-R model postulates that acute modesty concerns will influence strongly the self-evaluation judgments of Easterners. Cai et al. (2007, Study 2) put that idea to test. East-Asian and Western participants completed the 9-item Inclination Toward Modesty subscale of the Modest Responding Scale (Whetstone, Okun, & Cialdini, 1992). Sample items are: “It’s difficult for me to talk about my strengths to others even when I know I possess them” and “I believe it is impolite to talk excessively about one’s achievements, even if they are outstanding.” Participants also completed two measures of self-esteem, the RSES and a 4-item scale (proud, pleased with myself, ashamed,

humiliated) introduced by [Brown and Dutton \(1995\)](#). In replication of past findings, East-Asians reported higher modesty and lower explicit self-esteem than Westerners. Of interest, though, when modesty scores were statistically controlled, the two cultural groups ceased to differ on self-esteem.

These findings are backed by research that [Kurman et al.](#) reported. Overall, members of East-Asian cultures reported higher levels of modesty and lower levels of self-enhancement than members of Western culture. However, cross-cultural differences in self-enhancement (academic self-evaluation, ratings on erudition and athleticism) reflected cross-cultural differences in modesty ([Kurman, 2002](#); Study 2), modesty predicted negatively self-enhancement (academic self-evaluation; [Kurman & Sriram, 2002](#)), and modesty mediated (i.e., reduced) cultural influences on self-enhancement (academic self-evaluation, the BTAE; [Kurman, 2003](#); Study 2).

Easterners manifest substantially lower self-enhancement or self-protection strivings in public than in private ([Crittenden, 1991](#)). Due to self-presentational concerns, modesty will lessen, if not diminish, self-enhancement and self-protection strivings in public forums. The evidence is consistent with this idea. [Tafarodi, Shaughnessy, Yamaguchi, and Murakoshi \(2011\)](#) found that, when self-inflation was legitimized (and thus the modesty norm relaxed), Japanese participants reported higher self-esteem compared to when self-inflation was condemned. [Han \(2010\)](#) demonstrated that Chinese participants self-enhanced, that is, made internal (ability and effort) attributions for their successes in the presence of an acquaintance, but self-effaced, that is made external (luck) attributions for their successes in the presence of an intimate other. In an effort to reduce Japanese participants' self-presentational concerns, [Kudo and Numazaki \(2003\)](#) assured them that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. Subsequently, the researchers provided participants with bogus success or failure feedback on a social sensitivity task and assessed their attributional style, that is, whether they attributed the task outcome to internal factors (effort and ability) or external factors (task difficulty and luck). In contrast to findings from studies that did not control for self-presentational concerns (and thus the potency of the modesty norm; [Heine & Hamamura, 2007](#)), participants displayed the self-serving bias. They took more credit for their successes than their failures.

Yet, there is evidence that East-Asians (e.g., Chinese) manage the modesty norm intricately and skillfully. [Chen \(1993\)](#) pointed out that, although societal norms mandate modesty, this does not mean that the Chinese refrain from self-positivity. "All they need to do," he stated, "is to

appear humble, not necessarily think humbly of themselves” (p. 67). Indeed, an investigation of evaluative judgments of compliments revealed that Chinese do appreciate and attempt to elicit compliments (Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001). Wu (2011) drew similar conclusions in her investigation of self-praising in everyday social interactions. She identified three practices that Chinese use in the service of self-praise. First, the speaker offers self-praise (by directing the listener’s attention to a presumably worthy quality of her or him), but immediately retracts it or qualifies it (thus face saving or reducing the need for verifiability or accountability). Second, the speaker praises the self not as best, but as second best; however, the comparison group is an extreme case scenario. Finally, the speaker raises a complaint, but only ostensibly so; in actuality, the complaint is meant to highlight a positive aspect about him or her. In this way, the speaker attempts to reduce the risk of being seen as a braggart.

### 5.2.2 Setting Orientation

A social behavior setting can range along the competitiveness—cooperativeness continuum. Self-enhancement strivings can be rewarded in competitive, but not in cooperative, settings. Hence, according to the SCENT-R model, East-Asians (who do not lack competitive cognitions; Shwalb, Shwalb, & Nakazawa, 1995; Tang, 1999) will be more likely to self-enhance in competition-oriented situations than in cooperation-oriented situations.

The evidence is consistent with this prediction. Chinese make more self-enhancing predictions of their performance in private than in public (Kim et al., 2010; Study 1). Japanese self-enhance at job interviews, a prototypically competitive setting. Specifically, when requested to generate their self-presentational strategies at prospective job interviews, participants mentioned touting their competence and highlighting their sunny disposition (Matsumoto & Kijima, 2002). Likewise, when a work or professional (school, in this case) setting is salient, Chinese rate themselves highly on the domain of competence (Fahr, Dobbins, & Cheng, 1991) and Taiwanese rate themselves more favorably than their employers do (Falbo, Poston, Triscari, & Zhang, 1997).

The relevance of setting orientation has been documented experimentally. In research by Chou (2002), Chinese participants made internal attributions (ability and effort) for their academic accomplishments in a competitive context, but made external attributions (luck) for the same accomplishments in a cooperative context. Also, in research by Takata

(2003), Japanese participants self-enhanced when they received performance feedback in comparison to a relationally distant partner (competitive situation), but self-effaced when they received performance feedback in comparison to a relationally close partner (cooperative situation). These findings are remarkably similar to those obtained in Western cultures under virtually identical conditions (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998). Additionally, Japanese self-enhance more when self-interest (e.g., a monetary reward) is at stake. In an experiment by Suzuki and Yamagishi (2004), participants who had taken a bogus intelligence test were asked whether their performance fell below or above that of their peers. Over two thirds of participants judged their performance to be below average. However, when offered a bonus for making a correct decision, over two-thirds of them judged their performance to be above average. Yamagishi et al. (2012, Study 1) replicated these findings using different experimental tasks, namely an embedded figure test and a trustworthiness judgment task.

### 5.2.3 Other-Mediation

Theorists have argued that Japanese often prefer other-mediated self-enhancement (Kuwayama, 1992; Lebra, 2004; Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986; Yum, 1985). Stated otherwise, they may self-enhance more through others (given how prominently others are represented in interdependent self-construal) than through own-initiated action. Research by Muramoto (2003) has demonstrated this form of self-enhancement. Japanese participants brought to mind a time when they had succeeded or failed. Subsequently, they attributed this outcome to various factors, and then indicated how they thought their family, friends, peers, and strangers would attribute the same outcome. Participants refrained from making self-serving attributions (i.e., taking personal responsibility for success while displacing the blame for failure). However, they expected that their family and friends would do so. They expected their loved ones to credit them for successes and blame situations for failures in order to protect them, enhance them, or preserve their self-esteem. In a conceptual replication of these findings, Dalsky, Gohm, Noguchi, and Shiomura (2008) showed that Japanese engage in “mutual self-enhancement,” a social dance in which they give and receive praise from close others.

Theorists have also argued that Chinese make ample use of other-mediation. As Yang (1985) put it evocatively in regards to Taiwanese: “...if someone invites me for a speech, and I say: Oh, no, I am not really good at speech! However, if that one does not keep on inviting me, maybe

I will throw him a brick next time I see him in Taipei” (p. 30). Han (2008) reported that, although Taiwanese interviewees made external (luck) attributions for their successes, they expected that the interviewer would praise them and even express admiration for them. Han (2011) demonstrated compellingly other-mediation in three studies. In Study 1, participants recorded in writing their conversations between achievers and admirers. When receiving a compliment from an admirer, achievers responded modestly by denying their accomplishments. Achievers, however, rejected admirer’s modest responding and intensified their compliments. In Study 2, observers approved both achievers’ modest responding to admirers’ compliments and admirers’ increasing compliments. In Study 3, admirers’ compliments following achiever’s modest responding gave a boost to achievers’ self-esteem. Finally, it is worth noting that Taiwanese and China (including Hong Kong) perceive themselves as making more use of other-mediation than Americans do (Fong, 1998).

### 5.3 Implicit Self-esteem: Manifestations and Motivational Significance

So far, we have been concerned with explicit self-evaluation. We now turn to implicit self-evaluation, and in particular, to implicit self-esteem. Measures of implicit self-esteem have the potential to capture the influence of self-enhancing or self-protective motivation (i.e., self-positivity) more purely, given that they minimize cultural constraints known to undermine the validity of self-report measures (e.g., modesty, self-presentation, other-mediation).

#### 5.3.1 *Implicit Self-esteem in the East and the West*

The literature on implicit self-esteem strongly suggests that Easterners are, in an absolute sense, not short on positive self-attitudes or self-love. This conclusion is based on a variety of implicit measures deployed across an array of different countries. In particular, evidence based on the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) has been gathered in both China (Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, 2012, Studies 1–2; Cai, Wu, Luo, & Yang, 2014; Yamaguchi et al., 2007) and Japan (Szeto et al., 2009; Yamaguchi et al., 2007), and is supplemented by evidence based on semantic priming tasks from the latter country (Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999). In addition, evidence based on name-letter preferences or whole-name liking has been gathered in China (Cai et al., 2012; Study 2), Thailand (Hoorens, Nuttin, Erderlyi-Herman, & Pavakanum, 1990), Singapore

(Pelham et al., 2005), and Japan (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Komori & Murata, 2008), and is supplemented by evidence based on birthday-number preferences from the latter country (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997). Moreover, using an alternative index of implicit self-esteem, the Go/No-Go Association Task (Nosek & Banaji, 2001), Boucher, Peng, Shi, and Wang (2009) found that Chinese evinced higher positive and higher negative implicit self-esteem than Americans.

Crucially, the literature on implicit self-esteem has shown that Easterners and Westerners are equally prone to exhibit positive self-attitudes or self-love. Evidence derived from the IAT indicates that the Chinese and Japanese, like Westerners, have more positive, and/or less negative, associations toward themselves than toward others (Cai et al., 2012; Study 2; Falk, Heine, Takemura, Zang, & Hsu, 2014; Kitayama & Uchida, 2003; Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003; but see Szeto et al., 2009). Furthermore, the Chinese and Japanese, like Westerners, would appear to regard the self more favorably than they regard their best friend or their in-group (Yamaguchi et al., 2007). In a conceptual IAT replication and extension with a Western sample, participants also preferred themselves over their romantic partner or even their own child (Gebauer, Görtz, Hofmann, & Sedikides, 2012). A meta-analysis (Heine & Hamamura, 2007) has indeed reported no significant differences in self-positivity when comparing East-Asians with Westerners on implicit self-esteem measures.

### **5.3.2 Validity of the Self-esteem IAT**

The above arguments hinge on the validity of the IAT as an index of cross-cultural differences in self-esteem (and, more broadly, of self-evaluation). This validity has been questioned recently (Falk & Heine, 2015). Although a detailed consideration of this critique is beyond the scope of the present article, we wish to point out that, even if some concerns about validity are justified, any confounds would likely apply equally to Easterners and Westerners. At the very least, anyone claiming that the former self-enhanced less than the latter, on the basis of IAT evidence suggesting parity, would be obliged to specify how a confound applied more in one culture than another, a nontrivial challenge.

More importantly, though, ample evidence exists for the validity of the IAT—evidence that Falk and Heine (2015) do not review. Specifically, the validity of implicit self-esteem has been documented in the balanced identity theory literature involving IAT measures. One example is the studies supporting the balance–congruity principle of balance identity



theory (Greenwald et al., 2002). The second example involves studies among children documenting the validity of the self-esteem IAT in the context of support for the balance–congruity principle (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, submitted for publication). The third example is a small meta-analysis that reinforces support for the balance–congruity principle (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, 2012). The fourth and final example is a larger scale meta-analysis that cements support for the principle (Cvencek et al., submitted for publication). Interestingly, this meta-analysis, which includes a few Asian-born participant samples, evinced support of the balance–congruity, the principle from IAT measures but not from self-report measures. Indeed, explicit self-esteem measures have also come under similar validity criticism (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). We duly acknowledge that all measures of self-esteem, implicit or explicit, are subject to confounds that compromise their validity, which should be duly borne in mind. However, we would like to reassure investigators that implicit measures such as the IAT exhibit discriminative predictive validity in general (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009; Yang, Shi, Luo, Shi, & Cai, 2014), as well as in other specific domains (Gregg & Klymowsky, 2013), and that IAT measures of implicit self-esteem also show such discriminative predictive validity (Conner & Barrett, 2005; DeHart, Tennen, Armeli, Todd, & Mohr, 2009), as do other implicit measures of self-esteem (Hoorens, 2014).

### **5.3.3 Self-esteem IAT and the Motivational Dynamics of Self-evaluation**

Not only do implicit self-esteem measures have sufficient degree of validity, they are also capable of capturing the motivational dynamics of self-evaluation. Chinese and American participants in an investigation by Cai et al. (2012, Study 3) were placed in private cubicles and were informed they would rate themselves on several trait characteristics in an impending task. Before this self-evaluation task, participants were subjected to a modesty manipulation. In particular, they were assigned to one of three experimental conditions. In the modesty condition, participants were instructed: “When rating yourself, please try to be as modest as possible.” In the self-enhancement condition, they were instructed: “When rating yourself, please try to enhance yourself as much as possible.” In the control condition, they were instructed: “please rate the extent to which the traits describe you.” The self-evaluation task—in actuality the modesty manipulation check—followed. Finally, participants completed a self-esteem IAT.



The results indicated that the manipulation of modesty was successful. Participants in the modesty condition assigned themselves lower self-evaluation scores than those in the control condition, who in turn assigned themselves lower scores than those in the self-enhancement condition. Moreover, these findings generalized across cultural groups. However, the implicit self-esteem results differed for Chinese and Americans. The manipulation of modesty raised the implicit self-esteem of Chinese, but not of American, participants. Specifically, in comparison to Americans, Chinese participants manifested higher implicit self-esteem in the modesty condition, equivalent self-esteem in the control condition, and lower self-esteem in the self-enhancement condition.

The last set of findings is worth further consideration. Implicit self-esteem, as assessed by the IAT, can be manipulated, and, when it does so, it fluctuates according to theoretical predictions. Modesty is a prevailing norm in China. Due to strong, if not prohibitive, socialization pressures, modesty would be associated with relatively low explicit self-esteem: modesty would dissuade Chinese people from touting their achievements or flaunt their self-love. Indeed, modesty is negatively associated with explicit self-esteem (Cai et al., 2012; Studies 1–2). However, being modest would privately make Chinese individuals feel that they are fulfilling cultural norms of what it means to be a “good person.” As such, acting modestly would elevate implicit self-esteem. This is what Cai et al. (Study 3) observed. Notably, this pattern of results was exclusive to Chinese participants, and is thus a conceptual replication of Han’s (2011) Study 3, where admirers’ in reaction to achievers’ modesty increased achievers’ self-esteem. American participants, on the other hand, who are subject to different cultural norms or socialization pressures, reported lower implicit self-esteem under modesty conditions, but reported higher implicit self-esteem under self-enhancement conditions. Such studies are flanked by others implicating implicit self-esteem in motivational dynamics (Weisbuch, Sinclair, Skorinko, & Eccleston, 2009).

#### **5.4 Functionality of Self-esteem and Self-motives: Equivalence across East and West on Psychosocial Health**

We will be concerned, in this section, with three instances of functionality of self-esteem, and the two self-motives, across the East and West. The instances refer to the relation between self-esteem and self-enhancement, the relation between self-esteem and psychosocial health, and the relation between self-motives and psychological health.

#### **5.4.1 The Relation between Self-esteem and Self-enhancement**

Self-esteem and self-enhancement vary predictably, and similarly, in Eastern and Western samples (Kurman, 2003; Study 1; but see Kitayama et al., 1997). Of interest, high-self-esteem persons are more likely to manifest self-enhancement strivings (e.g., the BTAE, the self-serving bias) than low-self-esteem persons (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Kurman, 2003; Study 1; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). In work by Kobayashi and Brown (2003), Japanese and Americans regarded themselves (and their best friends) as superior to others. Importantly, this pattern was more evident among high self-esteem than low self-esteem participants from both cultures.

Work by Brown et al. (2009) extended these findings. In Study 1, Chinese and American participants engaged in a social sensitivity task and subsequently received false success or failure feedback. Overall, participants made self-serving attributions, that is, they took more personal credit for task success than task failure. However, this pattern was stronger among high self-esteem than low-self-esteem participants, irrespective of culture. In Study 2, Chinese and American participants engaged in an intellectual ability (“integrative orientation”) task, and then received bogus success or failure feedback. Again, regardless of culture, participants made self-serving attributions, with high-self-esteem participants making stronger such attribution than their low-self-esteem counterparts. Furthermore, both Chinese and Americans felt momentarily worse about themselves (i.e., reported lower state self-esteem) when they failed than when they succeeded. Brown and Cai (2009) replicated these findings. Following a social sensitivity or intellectual task, Chinese and American participants received false success or failure feedback. All participants displayed the self-serving bias, and this bias predicted corresponding fluctuation in state self-esteem.

#### **5.4.2 The Relation between Self-esteem and Psychosocial Health**

Self-esteem and psychological health also vary predictably, and similarly, in Eastern and Western culture. In Western culture, high self-esteem predictably varies with indices of psychological health, such as lower depression and anxiety, and higher subjective well-being (Brown, 1998; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). Cai et al. (2009, Study 2) documented this pattern in China. In a meta-analysis of 50 independent samples involving approximately 22,000 participants, higher self-esteem was associated with lower depression, lower anxiety, and higher subjective well-being. Yamaguchi (2013; see also Yamaguchi, Morio, & Sedikides, Unpublished manuscript) established the

same pattern in Japan. In a meta-analysis of 239 independent samples with more than 60,000 participants, self-esteem was positively associated with psychological well-being (subjective well-being and positive mood) and was negatively associated with depression and anxiety.

Further, self-esteem predicts happiness (e.g., “I generally consider myself a happy person”) and job satisfaction in Japan (Piccolo, Judge, Takahashi, Watanabe, & Locke, 2005), and predicts life satisfaction in Hong Kong (Kwan et al., 1977). Finally, self-esteem is inversely related to neuroticism (a marker of psychological distress) and is positively related to extraversion (a general marker of psychological well-being) in both Eastern and Western samples (Diener & Diener, 1995; Kim et al., 2008; Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

In a review of the literature, Baumeister et al. (2003) showed that self-esteem is positively related to several indices of social health (i.e., sociocultural adjustment; Ward & Kennedy, 1994) in Western culture. Yamaguchi et al. (2008) relied, when possible, on Baumeister et al.’s classification scheme in examining the association between self-esteem and social health in Japan. Their findings paralleled those of Baumeister et al. First, Japanese self-esteem was related to school performance. In particular, it was positively related to self-perceptions of ability, actual school performance, achievement motivation, persistence in learning, and optimism, whereas it was inversely related to procrastination and the planning fallacy. Second, Japanese self-esteem was related to group behavior. In particular, it positively predicted in-group favoritism. Third, Japanese self-esteem was related to perceptions of physical appearance. In particular, it was positively related to satisfaction with physical appearance, and was inversely related to concern about body appearance. Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, and Campbell (2007) drew a similar conclusion from their investigation of narcissism (excessive self-love) and romantic attraction in Thailand. That is, narcissism functioned in Thailand as in the Western culture: High (compared to low) narcissists were more attracted to admiring and high status others. Finally, in a meta-analysis based on 76 independent samples that included more than 17,000 participants, Yamaguchi et al. (Unpublished manuscript) found that self-esteem was positively associated with higher quality of interpersonal relationships.

### **5.4.3 The Relation between Self-motives and Psychological Health**

Not only self-esteem, but also self-enhancement varies predictably, and similarly, across cultures. In Western culture, self-enhancement (e.g., self-serving attributions, perceptions of self-efficacy, optimism) has been positively linked with many indices of psychological health (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009;

Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). The same is true for Eastern culture. For example, comparative studies indicate that self-serving attributions, perceptions of self-efficacy, and optimism are related to lower depression and life satisfaction among Chinese and Westerners (Anderson, 1999), Japanese and Westerners (Kobayashi & Brown, 2003), Singaporeans and Westerners (Kurman & Sriram, 1997), and Singaporeans, Chinese, and Westerners (Kurman, 2003). Optimism, in particular, is positively and strongly associated not only with subjective well-being but also with perceived physical health across a wide range of 142 cultures (Gallagher, Lopez, & Pressman, 2012). As another example of equivalency of the relation between self-enhancement and psychological health, self-enhancement (academic self-evaluation and the BTAE) is associated with positive affectivity, and is inversely associated with negative affectivity and emotional self-criticism, in both cultural contexts (Kurman, 2003; Study 1). Also, autonomy motivation, a correlate of self-enhancement motivation (Bridget & O'Mara, 2015) is linked to psychological well-being similarly across cultures (Church et al., 2012).

A key postulate of the SCENT-R model is that Easterners self-enhance on collectivistic attributes due to the personal importance ascribed to them, whereas Westerners self-enhance on individualistic attributes due, similarly, to the personal importance ascribed to them (*Self-centrality Breeds Self-enhancement: The Role of Domain Importance*). Gaertner, Sedikides, and Chang (2008) conducted a test of the implications of this postulate for psychological health using a Taiwanese sample. Participants filled out a measure of self-enhancement. That is, they completed better-than-average ratings (i.e., “rate yourself in comparison to your peers”) on seven collectivistic attributes (i.e., traits) and seven individualistic attributes. Both sets of attributes were selected for their relevance to Taiwanese culture. Next, participants’ rated the personal importance of each attribute. Finally, they responded to four psychological health indices: depression, stress, subjective well-being, and satisfaction with life. Gaertner et al. hypothesized that participants’ who self-enhanced to a greater degree on more personally important attributes would evince the highest level of psychological health (i.e., lowest depression and stress, highest subjective well-being and satisfaction with life). The results were consistent with the hypothesis. (For conceptual replications, see: Kitayama, Karasawa, Curhan, Ryff, & Markus, 2010; Kwan et al., 1977; Li, Be, & Rao, 2011; Stewart et al., 2003.)

Although Gaertner et al. (2008) showed links among self-enhancement, attribute personal importance, and psychological health, their results were

correlational. The results do not establish that self-enhancement promotes psychological health. In search of causality, O'Mara, Gaertner, Sedikides, Zhou, and Liu (2012) extended these results with a longitudinal-randomized-experimental design. At Time 1 (baseline), Chinese and American participants responded to 5 indices of psychological health: depression, anxiety, stress, subjective well-being, and satisfaction with life. At Time 2, 1 week later, participants listed an attribute they regarded as personally important. A manipulation of self-enhancement followed. Participants were assigned to one of two conditions. In the self-enhancement condition, participants wrote about how their experiences in the preceding week demonstrated that this important attribute is more characteristic of them than their peers. In the self-effacement condition, participants wrote about how their experiences over the last week demonstrated that the important attribute is less characteristic of them than their peers. Finally, participants responded again to the above-mentioned five indices of psychological health. Self-enhancement increased significantly psychological health from baseline among both Chinese and Americans, whereas self-effacement had no effect on psychological health. The results establish that self-enhancement promotes psychological health in both cultural groups.

## 5.5 Summary and Conclusions

The SCENT-R model offers four key postulates to highlight the tactical, or context-sensitive, manner in which self-enhancement, self-protection, and self-esteem are expressed across cultures. The first postulate relies on the “self-centrality breeds self-enhancement” principle in emphasizing the cross-cultural relevance of domain importance. Collectivistic cultures assign relative importance to, and report higher levels of, liking-based self-esteem, whereas individualistic cultures assign relative importance to, and report higher levels of, competence-based self-esteem. In a similar vein, Easterners regard collectivistic attributes as personally important and self-enhance (or self-protect) on them, whereas Westerners regard individualistic attributes as personally important and self-enhance on them. A good deal of evidence for the latter findings is based on the BTAE, a valid index of self-enhancement/self-protection motivation, although evidence involving alternative measures is also supportive. The second postulate explicates cultural constraints on candid self-enhancement. One constraint is modesty. East-Asians report higher modesty and lower self-esteem than Westerners. When modesty is controlled for, however, East-Asians and Westerners do not differ on explicit self-esteem. An additional constraint is setting

orientation. East-Asians display substantially stronger self-enhancement or self-protection striving in competitive than in cooperative settings. Yet another constraint is other-mediation. East-Asians profit from other-mediated self-enhancement, that is, from self-enhancing or self-protecting through others (especially close ones) than through own-initiated strivings. The third postulate refers to implicit self-esteem, which is relatively free of cultural mandates and pressures. Evidence indicates that implicit self-esteem is high in the East, and is equivalently high between cultures. Evidence also vouches for the validity of implicit self-esteem indices, including IAT. The motivational significance of implicit self-esteem is illustrated by findings that implicit (but not explicit) self-esteem is augmented among self-enhancing Chinese (but not self-enhancing Americans). Finally, the fourth postulate advocates parallel functionality (i.e., health benefits) of self-esteem and self-enhancement/self-protection across East–West. Irrespective of cultural background, people with high self-esteem are more likely to self-enhance than people with low self-esteem. Also irrespective of culture, high self-esteem predicts improved psychological health (i.e., lower depression and anxiety, higher subjective well-being) and improved psychosocial health (i.e., school performance, group behavior, perceptions of physical appearance). And irrespective of cultural group, self-enhancement predicts, and indeed leads to, better psychological health.



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## 6. DISCUSSION

The universalism versus cultural relativism debate on self-enhancement/self-protection motivation and desire for self-esteem shows no signs of abatement (Boucher, 2010; Brown, 2010a; Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2011; Falk et al., 2014; Hepper et al., 2013; Kurman, 2010). The debate is somewhat reminiscent of the interminable controversy between objectivism or realism on the one hand and relativism or constructivism on the other (Rorty, 1979; Searle, 1997). Are self-enhancement/self-protection and self-esteem fundamental human attributes with a permanent presence or are they merely contingent human practices with an ephemeral presence?

For self-enhancement/self-protection and self-esteem to qualify as fundamental human attributes, they ought to reflect the characteristics of basic human needs. They ought to be universal rather than culturally specific, not necessarily pursued or valued at the conscious level, and natural



rather than acquired (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). In an attempt to advance the debate toward a possible resolution, we proposed the SCENT-R model. The model acknowledges the lower overall levels of content manifestations of self-enhancement (but not necessarily self-protection) and of explicit self-esteem in East-Asian than Western samples. However, on the basis of this empirical pattern, it cannot be logically concluded that the self-enhancement motive and the desire for self-esteem do not exist in East-Asia or that they are weaker. Such a conclusion would be as fallacious as deducing that, in the United States, Southerners lack the motive to self-enhance and the desire for self-esteem because they project a more modest demeanor than Northerners (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Discrepancies in the manifestation of the self-motives or self-esteem have no implications for their potential existence or nonexistence or for their strength.<sup>4</sup> The SCENT-R model, then, aspires to reconcile two seemingly contradictory empirical phenomena: differential manifestation of the two self-motives and self-esteem across cultures (i.e., cross-cultural variability) and equivalence of motive strength and desire for self-esteem across cultures (i.e., cross-cultural invariance).

## 6.1 Are the Self-motives and Self-esteem Universal or Culture Bound?

We amassed evidence in favor of the view that the self-motives and self-esteem are universal or pancultural. In particular, the four foundational tenets of the SCENT-R model summarized the evidence for cross-cultural invariance. The referent of these motives is the individual self, and this type of self is primary across cultures over other types of self (i.e., relational, collective). Further, the strength of the two self-motives, their expression, and the desire for self-esteem are comparable across East and West. We also amassed evidence in favor of the view that the manner, in which the self-motives and self-esteem follow, is manifested is universal and tracks motivational principles. In particular, the four key postulates of the SCENT-R model summarized the evidence for cross-cultural variability.

<sup>4</sup> Loughnan et al. (2011) made a similar argument. They demonstrated that self-enhancement varies among nations: it is higher in nations with larger than smaller income inequality. Stated otherwise, self-enhancement is differentially adaptive, depending on national income inequality. In nations with a relatively large income inequality, it is adaptive for people to “tout their own horns” (i.e., emphasize positive distinctiveness) as a way to advance themselves. However, in nations with a relatively small income inequality, it is adaptive for people to adopt a modest demeanor (i.e., emphasize communality) as a way to advance themselves.

East-Asians assign personal importance to liking-based self-esteem, where they score higher, and to collectivistic attributes, where they self-enhance, whereas Westerners assign personal importance to competence-based self-esteem, where they score higher, and to individualistic attributes, where they self-enhance. When the pressure of cultural norms diminishes, East-Asians report equivalent self-esteem with Westerners and self-enhance in competitive settings while self-effacing in cooperative settings; also, they strategically engage in more other-mediated than own-initiated self-enhancement. Additionally, East-Asians reap the same psychosocial health benefits from self-esteem and self-enhancement/self-protection that Westerners do. In all, our review suggested that the motives are universal and their manifestations vary in universal (and theory-specific) ways.

## **6.2 Are the Self-motives or Self-esteem Necessarily Pursued or Valued at the Conscious Level?**

We accumulated evidence in favor of the position that the self-motives or self-esteem are not necessarily pursued or valued exclusively at the conscious level. This evidence derives from studies of implicit self-esteem among East-Asians and Westerners. Regardless of assessment method (i.e., name-letter preferences, birthday-number preferences, semantic priming, the IAT), the two cultural groups manifest similar levels of implicit self-esteem. East-Asians and Westerners are equally prone to unconscious self-love.

## **6.3 Are the Self-motives and Self-esteem Natural rather than Acquired?**

We have not discussed work relevant to this question in the context of the SCENT-R model. However, drawing on several evidentiary domains, we are led to the conclusion that the two self-motives and self-esteem are natural. These domains concern subjective pleasantness, brain regions underlying self-enhancement/self-protection strivings and self-esteem, as well as evolutionary perspectives.

First, as we have mentioned, the self-enhancement/self-protection bifurcation has its origins in the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation, which relies on a more primitive system of pleasantness/unpleasantness. Humans show an overwhelming preference for pleasantness and derive meaning from it (Osgood, 1979). Self-positivity and self-esteem, reflecting pleasantness for arguably the most cherished entity (Gebauer, Görtz, et al., 2012), are likely to reflect fundamental and natural, rather than acquired, processes. Indeed, such processes are marked by physiological

correlates. For example, threat (but not challenge) increases cardiac contractility (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000), and failure (but not success) feedback leads to a heightened cortisol response (Pruessner, Hellhammer, & Kirschbaum, 1999).

Second, a specific site in the brain has been implicated in serving self-enhancement dynamics. In particular, studies in Japan and the United States show that ventral striatum, the part of the brain that responds to all of the primary rewards (e.g., sugar, sex) also responds to self-positivity (e.g., positive feedback or regard from others; Izuma, Saito, & Sadato, 2008; Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2009; for a more general discussion, see Kühn & Gallinat, 2012). Studies in the US indicate that self-protective responding in the presence (but not absence) of self-threat is associated with increased activation of the orbitofrontal cortex (Hughes & Beer, 2012, 2013). Thus, the self seems to have a locatable physical substratum. Also, a study in Japan (Onoda et al., 2010) suggested that heightened activity of the dorsal anterior cortex (dACC) may underlie the more intense feelings of worthlessness that low (compared to high) self-esteem persons experience as a result of negative feedback (e.g., social exclusion). The dACC is involved in the experience of both physical and social pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Price, 2000). In general, different neural correlates underlie high and low self-esteem (Chavez & Heatherton, 2015). Somewhat relatedly, self-esteem is genetically based (Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2002; Neiss et al., 2005) and so is its correlate, narcissism (Luo, Cai, Sedikides, & Song, 2014; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Of course, genes can be distributed differentially across cultures (Kitayama et al., 2014; see also Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011), but arguably the genetic underpinnings of self-esteem are indicative of its fundamental character. Stated otherwise, how could the argument "...the need for self-regard...is not a universal, but rather is rooted in significant aspects of North American culture" (Heine et al., 1999, p. 766) be supported by evidence for the genetic basis of self-esteem?

If the self-motives and self-esteem are natural, what is their role in human evolution? Self-enhancement and self-esteem can be conceptualized as adaptations evolved to promote reproductive fitness (Barkow, 1989; Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995; Hill & Buss, 2008; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997). Indeed, researchers have constructed theoretical models, supported by empirical evidence, that specify the kind of adaptation self-enhancement/self-protection and self-esteem are. Specifically, they are specified as: an energizing principle that assists in goal-setting and persistence (Alicke &

Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000), a system that permits failure without lingering and debilitating negative feelings (Brown, 2010b; Campbell & Foster, 2006; Sedikides, Skowronski, & Dunbar, 2006), an index of mate value (Baumeister & Tice, 2000; Holtzman & Strube, 2011; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000), a symbol of relational value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), a monitor of prestige or status hierarchies (Cameron, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001; Mahadevan, Gregg, Sedikides, & De Waal-Andrews, submitted for publication), a defense against mortality (Pyszczynski et al., 2004), and a mechanism working to convince others that the self is better than it really is (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011).



## 7. RESEARCH AGENDA

Research on cultural self-evaluation has an exciting future. We highlight two sets of issues. One set is related to the universalism of the two self-motives and self-esteem, whereas the other set is more general.

### 7.1 Self-motive and Self-esteem Universalism

There are several paths research can take to clarify further the universalism of the two self-motives and self-esteem while enriching the SCENT-R model. The scope of the empirical agenda would need to be expanded to address differences between East-Asian cultures and also to include other “Eastern” countries, such as Latino or Middle-Eastern cultures. Similarly, more refined theoretical formulations would need to be developed to account for within-culture variation in collectivism (Yamawaki, 2012) or independence (Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, 2006). And more attention would need to be paid to rising individualism and narcissism in East-Asian cultures (Cai et al., 2012; Hamamura, 2012).

Some self-enhancement indices, such as the self-serving bias, seem to be more amenable to cultural influences than other indices, such as optimism or overconfidence. For example, although in a meta-analysis (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004) the effect size of the self-serving bias in China and Korea was found to be comparable to that in the United States, the corresponding effect size in Japan was substantially lower. However, optimism (Gallagher et al., 2012; Li et al., 2011) and overconfidence (Stankov & Lee, 2014) appear to be equally strong across Eastern and

Western cultures. More generally, additional research is needed into the psychometric properties of explicit measures of self-enhancement.

Self-enhancement has been operationalized in many ways. Two broad approaches involve social comparison and self-insight (Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004). In social comparison, people perceive themselves more favorably than they perceive others. In self-insight, people perceive themselves more favorably than they are perceived by others. The social comparison approach has been by far the more popular in the cultural self-evaluation literature. Future research should consider the implications of self-insight for cultural universalism versus relativism. For example, what is the relation between self-insight and psychological health, and does this relation generalize across cultural context?

## 7.2 Broader Issues

Although the weight of the evidence is in favor of the panculturality of self-enhancement and self-protection, there are other cultural differences worth examining as potential moderators of the manifestation of the two motives. For example, dialecticism, defined as managing contradicting views about oneself, may be a stronger norm in East-Asian than Western culture (Spencer-Rodgers, Boucher, Mori, Wang, & Peng, 2009). This would explain the findings of Boucher et al. (2009), whereby Chinese participants reported both higher positive and higher negative implicit self-esteem than American participants. Also, viewing oneself from the perspective of others may be a stronger norm in East-Asian than Western culture (Cohen & Gunz, 2002), a norm that, when salient, would tone down East-Asian self-enhancement (Heine, Takemoto, Moskalenko, Lasaleta, & Henrich, 2008). More generally, momentarily activated norms (or mind-sets, to be exact) are likely to moderate self-enhancement. Indeed, bilingual Hong Kong students primed with an individualistic mind-set (e.g., writing in English, thinking of a time when they resisted temptation) versus a collectivistic mind-set (e.g., writing in Chinese, thinking of a time when they succumbed to temptation) self-enhanced to a great extent, that is, they displayed a stronger BTAE and greater distancing from competitors who outperformed them (Lee, Oyserman, & Bond, 2010).

It is also worth speculating about other cultural dimensions, besides individualism–collectivism. Gelfand et al. (2011) drew a distinction between loose and tight cultures. Loose cultures are characterized by weak norms and a tolerance for anti-normative behavior, whereas strong cultures are characterized by strong norms and a punitive attitude toward anti-normative

behavior. Self-enhancement strivings might be stronger in loose than tight cultures, whereas self-protection striving might be stronger in tight than loose cultures. Such a finding would be consistent with evidence that lack of mobility strengthens adherence to cultural norms and decreases expressions of one's distinctive qualities (Chen, Chiu, & Chan, 2009). Low-mobility cultures are likely to be tight cultures.

Recent research has started to highlight the relevance of a match between the person and the culture in influencing the person's self-esteem. In particular, the relation between one's personally important attributes (e.g., agency, communion, religiosity, extraversion) and self-esteem is higher in cultures that value that attribute compared to cultures that do not value it (Fulmer et al., 2010; Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012; Gebauer et al., 2013). Research has also started to highlight the complex interplay among self-enhancement/self-protection strivings, cultural goal congruence, and personality differences. Leung, Kim, Zhang, Tam, and Chiu (2012) tested Chinese and American participants in the context of a reward allocation task. Self-enhancement/self-protection strivings were influenced by culture: Chinese participants rewarded the group more than the self, but American participants rewarded the self more than the group. However, these strivings depended on cultural goal congruence: They emerged among Chinese, who considered avoidance (vs approach) goals a success experience and among Americans, who considered approach (vs avoidance) goals a success experience. This pattern, in turn, was moderated by need for closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994): It was obtained only among participants (Chinese or Americans) high in need for closure, who exhibited culturally typical behavior. This study is illustrative, because it places self-enhancement/self-protection striving in a broader nexus of cultural, motivational, and personality influences, and, by so doing, calls for more fine-tuned research in that direction.

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## 8. CODA

The self is immersed in motivation and imbued in affect. We focused on two self-motives, self-enhancement and self-protection, and on a self-relevant affect, self-esteem, in charting the evaluative territory of the cultural self. We conclude that the motives to enhance or protect the self, and the desire for self-esteem, are pancultural. We also conclude that the manifestations of self-enhancement and self-protection, and the strivings to increase or protect self-esteem, are influenced by culture, but in predictable ways.



These conclusions have implications for the nature of motivation and the nature of personhood. In regards to motivation, self-enhancement and self-protection are appetitive motives. They require satiation either in a direct (candid) manner or an indirect (tactical) manner. In regards to the person, he or she is an active agent, fully aware of the subtleties surrounding cultural norms and constraints, and at the ready for exploiting these cultural contingencies to their benefit. Persons may be influenced by culture, but they often manage to protect and advance their wishes and desires as to avoid punishment, exclusion, or humiliation and to maximize reward, inclusion, and pride.

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