

[Research Note]

Self-Perception across Cultures: Focusing on Economic (In)equality

Joonha Park

“I possess more desirable characteristics than others do.” People often display a biased self-view perceiving themselves as better than the average (better-than-average effect, BTA, Alicke, 1985). This biased self-perception is considered to be motivated by *self-enhancement* needs (Brown, 1986). According to this account, people appraise themselves more positively than they appraise others because it makes them feel good about themselves to believe they are above average.

Self-enhancement has been a hot topic in cultural psychological research for more than a decade. There has been a great deal of research and good deal of debates with regard to whether the desire to self-enhance is common to all people regardless of cultures (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), or whether stronger among Westerners than East Asians (Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Lehman, Markus & Kitayama, 1999). After briefly reviewing the different views of the relationships between biased self-perception and culture, I introduce an alternative view based on empirical evidence gathered in 15 nations (Loughnan et al., 2011).

Contradictory Views in Cultural Psychology

Sedikides and colleagues argue that self-enhancement is common motivation all human beings have, but the ways and tactics subtly differ across cultures (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Let me call this view *universality hypothesis* in this note. For example, people from individualistic cultures (e. g., Americans) perceive characteristics reflecting independence (e.g., efficient, independent, imaginative) as personally more important and attribute those more to themselves than to others whereas those from collectivistic cultures (e. g., Japanese) perceive characteristics reflecting interdependence (e.g., responsible, cooperative, polite) as more important and attribute those traits more to themselves than to others (Sedikides et al., 2003) because those traits are culturally more acceptable. In their review article (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), self-enhancement, like eating, is a fundamental part of human nature. Supporting the universality hypothesis, Yamaguchi et al. (2007) found that the implicit level of self-enhancement appeared not only among North Americans but also among Chinese and Japanese participants, although explicit self-enhancement was the most prevalent among the Americans followed by the Chinese and not observed among the Japanese.

On the other hand, the other side of research teams have found stronger self-enhancement among Westerners than East Asians. This cultural difference, often between the West and East Asia, is consistent with *relativity hypothesis* in this note. Heine et al.'s (2007) meta analysis found that Westerners were significantly more likely to self-enhance than East Asians in 79 out of 81

studies. The prevailing explanation for the cross-cultural variability in levels of self-enhancement is related to the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism and the associated concepts of independence and interdependence respectively. It is often argued that Westerners, whose self orientations are individualistic, are more likely to seek personal success and uniqueness, and thus self-enhance more than East Asians, who are more likely to be collectivists seeking interpersonal harmony and belonging (Boucher, 2010; Heine & Hamamura, 2007). In contrast to the self-enhancement, East Asians (mostly Japanese samples) have been shown to express even *self-criticism* at bad outcomes (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000).

The Alternative Approach: Our study (Loughnan et al., 2011)

Our recent investigation focus on economic inequality differing across nations. In economically unequal societies, wealth is concentrated at the top, disadvantage at the bottom is extreme, and differences in social standing are very salient (Kerbo, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). In those societies, individuals are hence strongly motivated to stand out as superior to others. One way of expressing this desire would be to engage in stronger self-enhancement. In societies where wealth is well distributed and the gap between the top and the bottom is not visible, people's desire to see themselves as above average should weaken as the benefits of superiority diminish. Based on this assumption, we conducted a cross-cultural study as follows, which was published in the journal *Psychological Science* in 2011.

We measured self-perception patterns of 1,625 participants (mean age=21.55 years, 67% females) from 15 nations in five continents: Europe (Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain), the Americas (Peru, the United States, Venezuela), Asia (China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea), Africa (South Africa), and Oceania (Australia). Participants completed a questionnaire involving a set of self-enhancement measure. The two focus items were (1) "How much do you possess this characteristic compared to the average student (person)," and (2) "This characteristic is desirable, it is a characteristic that people generally want," both of which were rated on a 7-point scale. We selected 80 personality traits and values from on the basis of previous research to cover all domains of the main values and personality factors (e. g., Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005) (for the detail, see the original article, Loughnan et al., 2011).

Economic inequality was assessed with national Gini coefficients, which gauge the income distribution within a society. A Gini value of 100 means that a single individual receives all the income (perfect inequality), and a Gini value of 0 means that income is evenly distributed across the population (perfect equality). We also assessed national levels of individualism, collectivism and power distance from Hofstede's (2001) report.

Main analyses were conducted with multilevel modeling method. To summarize the results, individualism/collectivism predicted self-enhancement statistically significantly; however, the model was better predicted when Gini coefficients were included as an additional predictor. It is implied that economic inequality as indexed by the Gini coefficients was more associated with self-enhancement than individualism/collectivism. Moreover, when power distance variable was

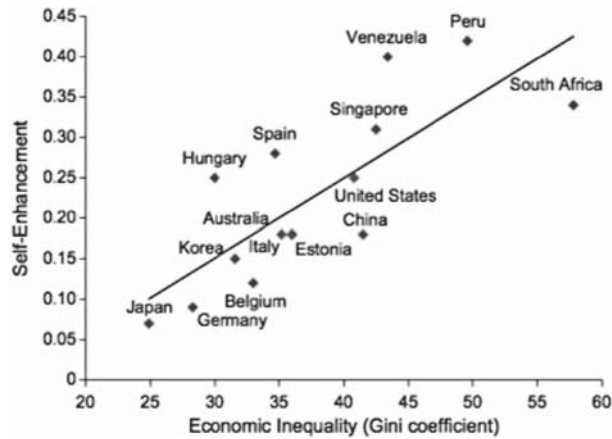


Figure 1 Scatter plot showing self-enhancement as a function of economic inequality across nations (Loughnan et al., 2011).

included to the model, economic inequality was still a strong predictor whereas the significant effect of individualism/collectivism disappeared. To sum up, our study suggests importance of economic inequality in predicting self-biased perception, self-enhancement. In conclusion, people appear to see themselves as better than (or superior to) others to a greater extent in societies with a higher level of income inequality (Figure 1).

Implications and Future Question

Our study was a new approach to understanding the relationship between self-perception and culture by considering socioeconomic structure of each nation (economic inequality). We do not argue that the prevalent view of self-enhancement, whether the universality or relativity, is wrong. Consistent with the *universality hypothesis*, we did observe self-enhancement effect across all nations although the magnitude differed. Also, economic inequality may be closely associated with individualism. Economic inequality provokes competitiveness between individuals, which is one of characteristics of individualistic society (Chen & West, 2008). Rather, the current findings suggest complementary roles of both socioeconomic structure and individualism/collectivism at national level in understanding people's biased self-perception.

Importantly, we have to further investigate relationships between the biased self-perception and rates of social and psychological problems (e. g., crimes, ill-being, war). Researchers have found economic inequality had significant effects on higher rates of health and social problems, and lower rates of social goods (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2009). Then, it is necessary to examine whether those who express higher self-enhancement as well as those who keep strong implicit self-enhancement would experience less subjective well-being. In fact, although it is commonly understood that self-esteem is positively associated with subjective well-being, there is a growing argument that striving for high self-esteem sometimes be counterproductive (e. g., Neff, 2011). If that were the case, we will be able to find another promising route to improve people's well-being and minimize

social issues caused by the perceived inequality. This is one of the most emergent questions to be explored in future research.

References

- Alicke, M. (1985). Global self-evaluation as determined by the desirability and controllability of trait adjectives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *49*, 1621–1630.
- Boucher, H. (2010). Understanding Western-East Asian differences and similarities in self-enhancement. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass*, *4*, 304–317.
- Brown, J. D. (1986). Evaluations of self and others: Self-enhancement biases in social judgments. *Social Cognition*, *4*, 353–376.
- Chen, F., & West, S. (2008). Measuring individualism and collectivism: The importance of considering differential components, reference groups, and measurement invariance. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *42*, 259–294.
- Haslam, N., Bain, P., Douge, L., Lee, M., & Bastian, B. (2005). More human than you: Attributing humanness to self and others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *89*, 937–950.
- Heine, S. J., & Hamamura, T. (2007). In search of East Asian selfenhancement. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *11*, 4–27.
- Heine, S. J., Kitayama, S., & Hamamura, T. (2007). Inclusion of additional studies yields different conclusions: Comment on Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea (2005), *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, *10*, 49–58.
- Heine, S. J., Lehman, D., Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (1999). Is there a universal need for positive self-regard? *Psychological Review*, *106*, 766–794.
- Heine, S. J., Takata, T., & Lehman, D. R. (2000). Beyond self-presentation: Evidence for self-criticism among Japanese. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *26*, 71–78.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kerbo, H. (2011). *Social stratification and inequality* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Loughnan, S., Kuppens, P., Allik, J., Balazs, K., de Lemus, S., Dumont, K., Gargurevich, R., Hidegkuti, I., Leidner, B., Matos, L., Park, J., Realo, A., Shi, J., Eduardo Sojo, V., Tong, Y., Vaes, J., Verduyn, P., Yeung, V. & Haslam, N. (2010). Economic Inequality Is Linked to Biased Self-Perception, *Psychological Science*, *22*, *10*, 1254–1258.
- Neff, K. D. (2011). Self-compassion, self-esteem, and well-being. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *5*, *1*, 1–12.
- Pickett, K. E. & Wilkinson, R. G. (2009). Greater equality and better health, *British Medical Journal*, *339*. doi: 10.1136/bmj. b4320.
- Sedikides, C., Gaertner, L., & Toguchi, Y. (2003). Pancultural selfenhancement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *84*, 60–79.
- Sedikides, C. & Gregg, A. P. (2008). Self-enhancement: Food for thought. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *3*, *2*, 102–116.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London, England: Penguin.
- Yamaguchi, S., Greenwald, A. G., Banaji, M. R., Murakami, F., Chen, D., Shiomura, K. et al. (2007). Apparent Universality of Positive Implicit Self-Esteem. *Psychological Science*, *18*, 498–500.