MODESTY IN SELF-PRESENTATION:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE U.S. AND JAPAN

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Center for Experimental Research in Social Sciences (CERSS) was established in April 2007 at Hokkaido University to provide an infrastructure for research and educational activities in social sciences. Its aims are to advance experimental studies in the social sciences, develop and promote young social scientists, expand our research activities internationally and develop collaborative relationships with leading educational and research centers around the world. Those who are interested in our Center are encouraged to contact us at cerss@lynx.let.hokudai.ac.jp.

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TOSHIO YAMAGISHI
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Abstract

In this study American and Japanese participants judged whether their performance was above or below the school average after taking a bogus intelligence test. The results replicate the standard finding that Japanese are self-effacing and Americans, especially males, are self-enhancing. But this result obtained only in the control condition, in which no reason was given as to why the participants were being asked to make these self-evaluation judgments. In the experimental condition in which the participants were offered a monetary bonus for making the correct judgment, the cultural difference in levels of self-evaluation between Japanese and American participants disappeared. These results support the view that the modesty observed in self-evaluations among Japanese participants can be viewed as a “default strategy” used to avoid offending others under certain circumstances.

Keywords: self-enhancement, self-effacement, self-construal, default strategy, cultural differences
Introduction

Studies by cultural psychologists (e.g., Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991a) show that the general human inclination to perceive oneself in a positive light, or to engage in self-enhancement, once regarded as a robust and universal finding (Alicke, 1985; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994), is not observed as commonly in East Asian cultures as it is in the West. For example, Heine and Lehman (1999) compared European Canadians, Asian Canadians, and Asians and found the better-than-average effect only among European Canadians. Asian Canadians did not show the better-than-average effect, and Asians even showed a self-effacing tendency to present themselves as less qualified and competent than others (see Heine, 2008, for more studies reporting similar findings).

Advocates of the cultural-specificity of this self-enhancement tendency generally attribute the differences between cultures in the level of self-enhancement to the differential nature of self-construal processes across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). According to Markus and Kitayama’s work, Westerners construe the self as an independent entity, which is internally driven and operates independently from others in the society. In contrast, East Asians share an interdependent construal of the self, according to which the self is meaningful only in terms of its relations with others. Westerners who share the independent construal of the self tend to be motivated to excel as independent agents and are motivated to see themselves in a positive light. In contrast, East Asians who share the interdependent construal of the self tend to be motivated to accommodate themselves to the states and needs of others. How well their views of themselves fit in to the social context is thus more important for East Asians than how much they excel in comparison with others. To facilitate this process of accommodation, they are often motivated to focus attention on their shortcomings (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

The dispute over the universality versus cultural specificity of this self-enhancing tendency, however, has not yet been resolved. Advocates of the universality of self-enhancement have generated evidence demonstrating that East Asians do engage in self-enhancement (e.g., Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005, 2007). Brown and Kobayashi (2002) demonstrated that Japanese see themselves and their friends as better than unrelated
others on traits that are important to them, while they consider themselves and their friends not to be as good as others on traits they view as unimportant. Similarly, Sedikides, Gaertner, and Vevea (2005) demonstrated that even East Asians tactically engage in self-enhancement on personally valued dimensions. Furthermore, recent findings using measures of implicit self-enhancement reveal positive implicit self-esteem among Japanese participants (Yamaguchi, et al., 2007). Advocates of the cultural specificity of self-enhancement, however, have also provided more evidence in support of their argument (Heine, 2005; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Kitayama & Hamamura, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to propose a third approach, which Yamagishi and his colleagues (Yamagishi, in press; Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008) call the institutional approach to culture, according to which the self-effacing tendency observed in East Asians is considered to be a “default strategy” used to avoid accruing a negative reputation. In line with the argument of cultural psychologists such as Markus and Kitayama (1991b) and Nisbett (2003), Yamagishi and colleagues (Hashimoto, Li, & Yamagishi, in press; Yamagishi, in press; Yamagishi, et al., 2008) emphasize the critical role of shared beliefs about human nature in explaining cultural differences in self-perception and self-presentation. Yamagishi and colleagues, however, differ from other cultural psychologists in viewing humans as “cultural game players,” instead of the standard cultural psychology view according to which humans are primarily “cultural agents” motivated by internalized cultural mandates. Cultural game players, according to Yamagishi and colleagues, pursue their own goals in a social environment by responding properly to anticipated responses from those around them. Such cultural game players differ from “cultural agents” (who pursue internalized cultural values and preferences) in terms of the critical role that the expected reactions of other people play in efforts to achieve personal goals (some of which could be internalized cultural values and preferences). Culturally shared beliefs about human nature (and the nature of the society) are clearly indispensable when it comes to anticipating responses from other people in the society.

Yamagishi and colleagues further argue that some of the routine decision rules that most often invite positive responses and attenuate negative responses from the relevant others become “default” strategies. A default strategy is a decision rule people use when it is not clear what kind of decision rule should be used (Yamagishi, in press; Yamagishi, et al., 2008). Which decision rules get included in the default category depends on the
nature of the social relations in a particular society. For example, in collectivistic societies where groups are typically closed to outsiders (Greif, 1989; 1994; Yamagishi, Cook & Watabe, 1998), it is wise to avoid inciting negative responses from others since the cost of being negatively regarded, and eventually being excluded from the current relationship is often quite high. This is because those who are excluded from their current relationships may find no alternatives in collectivistic societies, and therefore the cost of being excluded is large. In such a society, the best decision rule to use in most social situations is to avoid any behavior that might offend others. “Be modest” and “avoid any social risks of making people upset” are wise strategies or prudent behavioral principles that work best in most social situations in such a society. This strategy is thus used as the default response mode, that is, unless it is clearly understood that such a strategy is not relevant.

Always being modest may be a reasonable strategy to reduce the risk of being disliked and eventually excluded from a current relationship. On the other hand, it has its own costs. By not being aggressive enough in a situation in which one needs to assert oneself, one fails to get what s/he wants. Whether or not to adopt the modesty principle as a default strategy will ultimately depend on the balance between these two types of errors (as in the realm of statistical decision-making). The balance is between the cost of being ostracized from one’s own community and the cost of failing to get one’s wishes by not being aggressive enough. The balance tips toward the former cost in a collectivist society in which finding alternative relationships is difficult. In a society in which the cost of offending others is not so high, the balance shifts toward the latter.

Suzuki and Yamagishi (2004) conducted an experiment to demonstrate that this logic of error management (Haselton & Buss, 2000; Yamagishi, Jin & Kiyonari, 1999) operates in the self-effacing evaluation of one’s own competence observed among Japanese participants even in total anonymity (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000). Since this study was published in Japanese, and is not readily available to non-Japanese speaking scholars, we first review this study in some detail. Then, we present our study conducted in the United States with American participants, and compare our results with those from Suzuki & Yamagishi (2004).

**Suzuki and Yamagishi’s (2004) Experiment on Self-Effacement/Enhancement**

Participants in Suzuki and Yamagishi’s (2004) study, who were all Japanese natives, first took a bogus intelligence test, called the “Integrated Cognitive Ability Test.” Since
participants were told that their performance scores depended on both the accuracy and the speed of reaching their answers, it was very difficult for them to judge precisely how well they actually performed on the test. After taking the test, they were asked to judge whether their performance level was above or below the average performance level in their own university (Hokkaido University). Since the anonymity of their judgments was assured even to the experimenter they interacted with, there was no reason for them to be concerned about how their answers would be evaluated by others.

Two between-participants conditions were included in the study. In the control condition, participants were asked, in the post-experimental questionnaire, to make a judgment concerning their performance without any additional explanation as to why they were being asked to make this judgment. This condition represented the standard situation in which such judgments were made in typical social psychological studies. With this standard protocol, 72% (79/110) of the participants judged that their performance as below the school average. This result was in sharp contrast to the better-than-average effect often observed among Americans (Alicke, 1985; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). A very clear self-effacing tendency emerged in this condition despite the fact that all of the participants were assured of the complete anonymity of their judgments.

This self-effacing tendency observed in the control condition, however, was completely reversed in the bonus condition. In the bonus condition, participants were told that they would be paid 100 yen if their judgment was accurate. Through this manipulation, participants were provided a reason for making the judgment – providing accurate judgments to earn extra money – though the amount of money (about one dollar) was very small as an incentive. This situation contrasted with the control condition in which participants were not provided any reason for making this judgment. This difference, Suzuki and Yamagishi (2004) predicted, would affect the use of the default strategy for self-presentation: the Japanese should use the modesty strategy by default in the control condition but not in the bonus condition where it was made salient that the modesty strategy was inappropriate for the purpose of expressing their true judgment in order to earn money. In the bonus condition, 69% (36 of 52) of the participants judged their performance to be above, not below, the school average. These results demonstrated that the strong self-effacing tendency observed in the control condition under strict anonymity was not a straightforward reflection of participants’ self-assessments. It was only when they lacked a reason to report their self-assessments
that Japanese participants exhibited the tendency to be self-effacing.

**Cultural Differences Emerged only in the Control Condition, not in the Bonus Condition**

The findings reported by Suzuki and Yamagishi (2004), and summarized above, demonstrate that the self-effacing tendency considered to be unique to East Asians emerges only when no reason for making and reporting a self-assessment is provided (albeit under strict anonymity). For East Asians living in collectivist social settings in which minimizing the cost of being disliked and potentially excluded from current relationships is prudent, “always be modest unless it is clear that modesty is no longer required” is the best error management strategy. Assurance of anonymity is not sufficient to convince those who have adopted the modesty principle as their default strategy that such a strategy is no longer needed, in the same manner as citizens living under a strict dictatorship typically do not express their true opinions even in their responses to an anonymous questionnaire. One does not earn any benefit by expressing one’s true opinion on an anonymous questionnaire when the costs associated with such responses becoming known or revealed as public information is potentially very serious. The balance in the situations tips in favor of not expressing true opinions that might upset others. Suzuki and Yamagishi argued that the self-effacing tendency observed in the control condition in their experiment was a reflection of this default strategy of being modest. However, the results were reversed when the benefit of expressing true opinions was made salient – through the offer of a financial bonus for making correct judgments. The implication of this finding is that a majority of the Japanese participants truly judged themselves as being above the school average – a clear self-enhancing tendency. It is further suggested that the cross-cultural difference often observed in self-enhancement and self-effacement will disappear in the bonus condition. This is exactly the prediction we tested in the study reported here.

**The Experiment**

To test the prediction that the bonus condition will eliminate the often observed cross-cultural differences in self-enhancement and self-effacement, we replicated Suzuki and Yamagishi’s (2004) study in the United States with American participants, and compared the results with those from Suzuki and Yamagishi (2004).
Method

Participants and the design. Only American participants, sixty-one students (28 females and 33 males) from a private west-coast university, participated in this study. Following Suzuki and Yamagishi’s (2004) experimental design, 29 participants were randomly assigned to the control condition, and 32 participants to the bonus condition.

Procedure. Procedures were identical to the ones used by Suzuki and Yamagishi (2004). The computerized bogus intelligence test was translated into English by a team of Japanese and American researchers including the first and the third authors. Upon arrival at the laboratory participants were given an ID number and were instructed that they would be identified by this ID number throughout the experiment to protect anonymity. Then, they were escorted to a private cubicle equipped with a PC where they took the “Integrated Cognitive Ability Test” on the PC. When the test was over, they were asked to fill out a post-experimental questionnaire displayed on the computer screen. They were asked to judge whether their own performance was above or below the average performance in their own school. In the bonus condition, we added that they would be paid an extra dollar, in addition to the basic payment of $15.00, if their judgment was accurate.

We will now examine whether you can make a correct estimate of your own performance on the ICAT. In particular, please make a judgment of whether your overall performance is above or below the average performance level of the students at this university who have taken this test. We will pay you base pay of $15.00 plus a bonus for a correct judgment to motivate you on this task. If your judgment (about whether your overall performance is above or below the average performance level on campus) is correct, we will pay you a bonus of $1.00.

In the control condition, no information about the bonus was provided, as in Suzuki and Yamagishi’s (2004) study.

Results

As we predicted no cultural difference in the proportion of participants who judged their performance to be above the school average emerged in the bonus condition. About two-thirds (65.6% or 21 of 32) of the American participants in this condition judged their performance as falling above the school average, and this figure was almost identical to the Japanese data (69.2% or 36 of 52). On the other hand, a clear cultural difference did emerge in the control condition where 51.7% (15 of 29) of the American participants
judged their performance to be above the school average, which was significantly higher than the proportion of the Japanese participants who made the same judgment (28.2%, 31 of 110). This difference in the control condition between the Japanese and Americans was significant at the .05 level [$\chi^2(1) = 5.74, p < .05$]. In addition, the interaction between the participant’s nationality and the experimental condition in a logistic regression was marginally significant, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.32, p < .07$. The main effect of the experimental condition was significant in this logistic regression, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 13.12, p < .001$, but the main effect of the participant’s nationality was not, Wald $\chi^2 (1) = 1.71, p < .19$. These results support our prediction that the cultural difference in self-enhancement/effacement will emerge in the control condition in which no reason for making the self-assessment is provided, whereas no cultural difference will emerge in the bonus condition in which participants are given an explicit reason for making the assessment.

Besides the cultural difference in the control condition, we found a gender difference we had not predicted (Figure 1). When the participant’s gender and interaction terms associated with gender were added to the logistic regression presented above, none of the interaction effects involving gender turned out to be significant. We thus dropped these interaction terms from the analysis. The main effect of participant’s gender was highly significant, Wald $\chi^2 (1) = 9.14, p < .01$. Also, the main effect of the experimental condition remained highly significant, Wald $\chi^2 (1) = 13.93, p < .001$. The main effect of the participant’s nationality was only marginally significant, Wald $\chi^2 (1) = 2.83, p < .10$, and so was the interaction between participant’s nationality and the experimental condition, Wald $\chi^2 (1) = 3.41, p < .07$. The participant’s gender did not interact with the participant’s nationality or the experimental condition, and the pattern supporting our prediction was maintained for both male and female participants (see Figure 1). That is, for either male or female participants, no cultural difference emerged between the American and Japanese participants in the bonus condition, whereas the proportion of participants rating themselves as “above average” was higher among the American than among Japanese participants in the control condition.

**Discussion**

The pattern shown in Figure 1 illustrates clearly the nature of the presence and absence of cultural differences in self-enhancement/effacement that have characterized
the current debates between cultural psychologists and “universalists.” On the one hand, the current results support the view that self-enhancement is culturally universal. In the bonus condition in which participants are induced to make accurate assessments concerning their own performance, the Japanese participants revealed the almost identical level of self-enhancement as did their American counterparts. The same pattern was observed for both male and female participants. On the other hand, the cultural difference expected by cultural psychologists did emerge in the control condition. In that condition, Japanese participants exhibited the self-effacing tendency, whereas American participants, especially males, exhibited a self-enhancing tendency. While female Americans exhibited a self-effacing tendency as shown in Figure 1, the tendency was not as strong as it was for Japanese females. The overall conclusion we draw is that the cultural mandate among the Japanese to not upset people around them induced them to present themselves, even in anonymous responses to a questionnaire, to be more modest. The Japanese students who participated in Suzuki and Yamagishi’s (2004) study were responding to this cultural mandate requiring them to be modest, by adopting a “do-not-offend-the-other” strategy (Yamagishi et al., 2008) as a default response strategy. The default use of this strategy induced them to judge and present themselves in their responses on a questionnaire as modest, and yet, they privately viewed themselves in a more positive light. This explains why East Asians are frequently found to engage in self-enhancement when implicit measures are used (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Kitayama & Uchida, 2003; Yamaguchi, et al., 2007).

Gender differences found in this study may be a simple reflection of the fact that the bogus intelligence test, ICAT, consisted mainly of space manipulation tasks, at which men are generally considered to perform better than women. The gender differences might not have emerged when we asked male and female participants to compare their performance to a gender-specific average instead of the overall school average. With this possibility in mind, we pursue alternative interpretations of these differences. While gender differences in self-enhancement have been reported elsewhere, these differences have been attributed to differences in self-construal processes between men and women (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kashima, et al., 1995; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). It has been suggested that men tend to have a more independent self-construal than women, and therefore, that men exhibit a stronger self-enhancement tendency than do women.

The perspective we offer in this article might provide a related, but different
account of this gender difference. That is, women typically face a more collectivistic social environment than do men, and thus women are under a stronger social mandate than men are to be modest and to avoid being excluded from their current social relationships. The self-construal account and the default strategy account presented here share the core idea that shared beliefs about human nature underlie the gender differences as well as the cultural differences in self-enhancement/effacement tendencies. On the other hand, the default strategy approach differs from the self-construal approach in that it emphasizes the malleability of culturally specific behavior including self-enhancement/effacement as a function of the need to use a particular behavioral strategy under varying circumstances. The findings that the gender differences in self-enhancement/effacement, as well as the cultural difference, are much smaller in the bonus condition (a 12.4 percentage point difference among the Japanese, and 10.6 percentage point difference among the Americans) than in the control condition (a 21.2 percentage point difference among the Japanese, and a 38 percentage point difference among the Americans) provide partial support for the default strategy account of this gender differential. To examine whether and when gender differences in culture-related cognitions and behaviors can be explained as reflections of the employment of such a default strategy constitutes an important research agenda for future study.

How cultural mandates affect the way people behave has received increasing attention in recent developments in cultural psychology (Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, & Uskul, 2009; Na, et al., 2010; Varnum, Grossmann, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2010). The current study suggests an important pathway through which cultural mandates affect people’s behavior. That is, cultural mandates take the form of beliefs about how others would respond to one’s behavior, and thus, people adjust their behavior to the anticipated responses of others, as many have discovered in previous research in other arenas on the effects of expectations.
References


Figure 1. Proportion of the Japanese and the American participants who answered “above average” concerning their performance in the control and the bonus conditions broken down by the participant’s gender.