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Tactical Self-Enhancement in China: Is Modesty at the Service of Self-Enhancement in East Asian Culture?

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Abstract

Is self-enhancement culturally universal or relativistic? This article highlights a nuanced dynamic in East Asian culture. Modesty is a prevailing norm in China. The authors hypothesized that because of socialization practices and prohibitive cultural pressures, modesty would be associated with and lead to low explicit self-enhancement but high implicit self-enhancement, that Chinese participants would deemphasize *explicitly* the positivity of the self when high on modesty or situationally prompted to behave modestly but would capitalize on their modest disposition or situationally induced behavior to emphasize *implicitly* the positivity of the self. In support of the hypotheses, dispositionally or situationally modest Chinese participants manifested low explicit self-esteem while manifesting high implicit self-esteem. Modesty among American participants constrained explicit self-esteem but yielded no associations with implicit self-esteem. The results showcase the tactical nature of self-enhancement in Chinese culture and call for research on when and how self-enhancement is pursued tactically in different cultures.

Keywords

self-enhancement, modesty, implicit self-esteem, explicit self-esteem, tactical self-enhancement

Whether the need for positive self-regard (or, more generally, the self-enhancement motive) is culturally relative or a human universal is hotly debated. The relativistic perspective is supported by explicit measures of self-evaluation that evidence self-favoring perceptions in Western culture (e.g., the United States, Canada, Northern Europe) but not in Eastern, or East Asian, culture (e.g., China, Japan; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). The universal perspective is supported by (a) implicit measures of self-evaluation that evidence self-favoring perceptions in Western *and* Eastern cultures (Yamaguchi et al., 2007) as well as (b) explicit measures employed in studies capable of detecting the tactical nature of self-enhancement (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). Indeed, self-enhancement is expressed tactically such that the motive manifests itself in conjunction with contextual and normative considerations (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Sustenance provides an analogy. All humans need to eat. What they eat (i.e., how the need is expressed), however, varies with culture (e.g., a kosher diet precludes pork, a Jain diet is vegetarian; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Self-enhancement reveals a similar pattern. All humans need to self-enhance for the advancement of crucial psychological interests (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). Westerners, however, self-enhance on attributes relevant to the normative imperative of individualism, whereas Easterners self-enhance on attributes relevant to the normative imperative of collectivism (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, 2008; Sedikides et al., 2003; Sedikides et al., 2005, 2007a, 2007b). The pancultural tendency is to self-enhance on normatively (and, by implication, personally) important attributes.

The current research examines a novel tactical manifestation of self-enhancement with a norm emphasized in Eastern (more so than Western) culture. This is the norm of modesty (Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007). Modesty has been explored as both a

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dispositional and a situational construct. As a dispositional construct, it is reflected directly in scales that capture individual differences in the propensity toward nonboastful, self-effacing, attention-avoiding, and gracious social behavior (Chen, Bond, Chan, Tang, & Buchtel, 2009; Whetstone, Okun, & Cialdini, 1992). As a situational construct, modesty is regarded as "public under-representation of one's favorable traits and abilities" (Cialdini, Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Heszen, 1998, p. 473). Modesty is a potent and pervasive norm in Eastern culture (Shikanai, 1978), with (Japanese) children as young as 8 having internalized it (Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982). Reflecting the Confucian proverb "haughtiness invites loss while modesty brings benefits," this normative constraint on self-praise is said to facilitate social harmony and avert strife (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Chiu & Hong, 2006; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). Indeed, *explicit* measures of self-regard are negatively associated with modesty in Eastern (and Western) culture (Cai, Brown, Deng, & Oakes, 2007; Kurman, 2001, 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002; Olson, Fazio, & Hermann, 2007).

The perspective that self-enhancement is a tactically expressed universal motive generates the counterintuitive prediction that *implicit* measures of self-regard are positively related to modesty in Eastern culture, where modesty is highly valued. In this culture, the modesty norm dictates overt self-effacement. Such modest displays, however, may provide fodder for covert self-enhancement, which will manifest in high implicit self-regard. "Deep down inside," Chinese feel good about themselves for overtly behaving modestly. They derive implicit self-worth through modest behavioral displays. Stated more formally, explicit self-evaluation (i.e., self-esteem) will decline with increased modesty in both Eastern and Western culture. Implicit self-evaluation, however, will be augmented with increased modesty only in East Asian culture.

We tested these hypotheses in three studies. We operationalized modesty as a disposition in Studies 1 and 2 and induced modesty contextually via manipulation in Study 3. We first conducted an initial study in China (Study 1) then conceptually replicated it with a cross-cultural comparison between China and the United States (Studies 2 and 3). We implemented different implicit measures across studies to ensure generalizability. We compensated Chinese participants with 5 Chinese yuan (approx. US$0.70) and U.S. participants with partial course credit. Participants completed all materials in their native language, with Chinese materials being translated and back translated by the first author and then checked by a bilingual colleague. Gender moderated none of the results and is not discussed further.

Study 1

Studies 1 and 2 operationalized modesty as a dispositional construct and assessed its association with explicit and implicit self-esteem. Study 1 was conducted in China. The study provides an initial test of the hypothesis that explicit and implicit self-regard follow opposite trajectories with modesty, in a cultural context that highly values modesty.

Method

A total of 59 (49 female) undergraduates at East China Normal University completed a measure of modesty, an explicit self-evaluation, and an implicit self-evaluation. We assessed *modesty* with the 20-item Modest Responding Scale (Whetstone et al., 1992; also see Kurman, 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002). Sample items include (a) "When someone asks me to describe a recent success, I tend to downplay what I've accomplished," (b) "Bragging on oneself in a group is always socially inappropriate," and (c) "My friends will tell you that, when I accomplish something, I'm not shy about tooting my own horn" (reverse scored). Participants responded on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We assessed *explicit self-esteem* (ESE) with the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). A sample item is "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others." Participants responded on a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). We assessed *implicit self-esteem* (ISE) with the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which we scored in the recommended d-metric (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003) and, on critical blocks, paired responses of "Good" versus "Bad" with responses of "I AM" versus "I AM NOT" to avoid the confluence of "other esteem" (Karpinski, 2004).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the scales. Tests of mean ESE and ISE against their midpoints (2.5 and 0, respectively) indicate that Chinese participants harbored positive self-esteem, both explicitly, $t(58) = 10.20$, $p = .0001$, and implicitly, $t(58) = 15.05$, $p = .0001$. Table 1 also displays the hypothesis-relevant zero-order correlations and partial correlations. As hypothesized, modesty was negatively associated with ESE and was positively associated with ISE. This initial study is consistent with the possibility that modesty serves the self-enhancement motive in Eastern cultures. Study 2 tests this possibility in comparison with a Western sample, in which modesty and ISE should be unrelated.

Study 2

Method

A total of 59 (43 female) undergraduates at Sun Yat-Sen University, 63 (31 female) undergraduates at the University of Tennessee, and 40 (32 female) undergraduates at the University of Oklahoma participated. (The U.S. samples did not differ on any measure.) Participants completed the same scales as in Study 1, with one exception. We assessed ISE with the name-liking measure (Gebauer, Riketta, Broemer, & Maio, 2008), in which participants responded on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *strongly agree*) to the question "How much do you like your name?" Gebauer et al. (2008, Study 1) reported that the name-liking measure is correlated with other implicit measures of self-esteem, such as the name-letter effect (Nuttin, 1987) and the IAT (Greenwald et al., 2003).

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Zero-Order Correlations, and Partial Correlations for Studies 1 and 2

	Descriptive statistics			Zero-order correlations		Partial correlations	
Scale	*M*	*SD*	α	ESE	ISE	ESE	ISE
Study 1 ($n = 59$ Chinese participants)							
ESE	3.06	0.42	.84	—	—	—	—
ISE	0.63	0.32	—	–.03	—	.09	—
Modesty	4.09	0.99	.91	–.39*	.29*	–.40*	.31*
Study 2							
China ($n = 58$)							
ESE	2.91	0.33	.69	—	—	—	—
ISE	6.60	1.92	—	.15	—	.28*	—
Modesty	4.06	0.82	.87	–.38*	.26*	–.44*	.35*
United States ($n = 102$)							
ESE	3.22	0.55	.89	—	—	—	—
ISE	7.50	1.67	—	.24*	—	.21*	—
Modesty	3.98	0.87	.90	–.43*	–.11	–.42*	–.00

Note: ESE = explicit self-esteem, assessed with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale for both studies; ISE = implicit self-esteem, assessed with the Implicit Association Test for Study 1 and name liking for Study 2.
* $p < .05$.

Results and Discussion

The sample was reduced by two. We excluded one American participant who skipped the ISE and one Chinese participant who responded 2 *SD* more extremely than his sample. As Table 1 displays, self-esteem was higher in the United States than in China both explicitly, $t(158) = 3.89$, $p = .0001$, and implicitly, $t(158) = 3.09$, $p = .0001$. Nonetheless, a comparison of ESE and ISE against their midpoints (2.5 and 5, respectively) indicates that members of both cultures evidenced positive self-esteem both explicitly, $t_{China}(57) = 9.38$, $p = .0001$, $t_{USA}(101) = 13.29$, $p = .0001$, and implicitly, $t_{China}(57) = 6.36$, $p = .0001$, $t_{USA}(101) = 15.12$, $p = .0001$. The cultures did not differ in self-reported modesty, $t(158) = 0.54$, $p = .59$. Of course, this should not be interpreted as suggesting that modesty is equally important to these cultures, in that ratings of self-characteristics do not invariantly reflect a culture's characteristics (Terracciano et al., 2005; Wan et al., 2007). Indeed, as the correlations in Table 1 indicate, modesty differentially functioned within cultures as predicted: Modesty (a) was negatively associated with ESE in both cultures, (b) was positively associated with ISE in China, and (c) was unrelated to ISE in the United States.

We more directly tested the cross-cultural pattern with a moderated regression analysis. We standardized all continuous measures and simultaneously regressed modesty on ESE, ISE, culture (–1 = China, 1 = United States), Culture × ESE, and Culture × ISE. The modesty–ESE association did not vary culturally as indicated by the nonsignificant Culture × ESE effect, $\beta = 0.11$, $SE = .10$, $t(154) = 1.10$, $p = .27$. Modesty was negatively associated with ESE in both China, $\beta = –.62$, $SE = .18$, $t(154) = –3.44$, $p = .0008$, and the United States, $\beta = –.40$, $SE = .08$, $t(154) = –4.74$, $p = .0001$. As predicted, the modesty–ISE association varied culturally as indicated by the Culture × ISE effect, $\beta = 0.15$, $SE = .08$, $t(154) = –2.00$, $p = .05$. Modesty and ISE were positively associated in China, $\beta = .30$, $SE = .11$, $t(154) = 2.62$, $p = .009$, and were unrelated in the United States, $\beta = .00$, $SE = .10$, $t(154) = –0.05$, $p = .96$.

Study 2 replicated Study 1 with an alternate measure of ISE, and it also demonstrated that modesty's positive association with ISE is unique to Eastern culture. The results thus far are consistent with the possibility that modest self-displays in Eastern culture provide fodder for the enhancement motive. Our theoretical proposition, however, is that causation flows from modesty to implicit self-evaluation (in Eastern culture), and our observational methods provide little confidence in such a causal inference. Thus, we employed experimental methods of inducing (im)modesty in the subsequent study.

Study 3

Study 3 adopted a "reverse-engineering" approach. Our argument is that in Eastern culture the injunctive norm of modesty constrains persons to self-efface overtly and that such normatively congruent behavior provides the basis for covert self-enhancement, which manifests in increased implicit self-regard. If so, these patterns could be reversed such that violation of the modesty norm via immodest explicit self-praise should lead to implicit self-effacement.

In addition to addressing whether violation of the modesty norm decreases implicit self-regard, we examined whether compliance with the modesty norm increases implicit self-regard. We induced compliance and violation with the modesty norm by instructing Chinese and American participants to adopt the persona of a modest person (modesty condition), an immodest person (immodesty condition), or neither (control condition) when rating themselves on a series of traits. We assessed ISE with the self-esteem IAT. Given that modesty is a highly valued norm in China (but not in the United States), Chinese (but not American) participants could capitalize on modest (vs. immodest) displays as evidence of their positively

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Table 2. Implicit Self-Esteem as a Function of Culture and the Modesty Manipulation in Study 3

Culture	Immodesty		Control		Modesty	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
China	0.53	0.36	0.70	0.26	0.89	0.31
United States	0.68	0.35	0.67	0.35	0.71	0.32

valued self, which would manifest in elevated ISE. Such a perspective predicts a Culture × Condition interaction such that (relative to the control condition) ISE would increase in the modesty condition and decrease in the immodesty condition for Chinese participants but would remain unchanged for American participants.

Method

A total of 86 (74 female) undergraduates from Sun Yat-Sen University and 89 (27 female) undergraduates from the University of Oklahoma participated. They sat in separate cubicles and were randomly assigned to conditions. Participants learned that they would be asked to rate themselves privately on 12 traits. Participants in the immodesty condition were instructed to conceive of themselves as an immodest person ("when rating yourself, please try to enhance yourself as much as possible"). Participants in the modesty condition were instructed to conceive of themselves as a modest person ("when rating yourself, please try to be as modest as possible"). Participants in the control condition were not instructed to conceive of themselves in any particular manner ("please rate the extent to which the traits describe you"). Next, participants rated themselves (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) on the 12 traits (agreeable, capable, competent, considerate, cooperative, friendly, loyal, original, self-reliant, sincere, talented, unique). Finally, participants completed the self-esteem IAT, as in Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Modesty manipulation check. We averaged responses to the 12 traits ($\alpha = .83$ United States, $\alpha = .83$ China) to form an index of explicit self-presentation. We entered the index into a 2 (culture) × 3 (condition) ANOVA. A condition main effect, $F(2, 169) = 86.89$, $p = .0001$, confirmed the manipulation. Participants in the control condition rated themselves *less favorably* ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 0.51$) than did participants in the immodesty condition ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 0.43$), $F(1, 169) = 44.15$, $p = .0001$, $d = 1.20$, and rated themselves *more favorably* than did participants in the modesty condition ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 0.49$), $F(1, 169) = 47.80$, $p = .0001$, $d = 1.28$. These effects were consistent between cultures as indicated by the nonsignificant Culture × Condition interaction, $F(2, 169) = 0.16$, $p = .85$. As intended, immodesty decreased, whereas modesty increased, explicit self-regard.

ISE. A 2 × 3 ANOVA of the self-esteem IAT scores revealed the predicted Culture × Condition interaction, $F(2, 169) = 3.78$, $p = .02$. As displayed in Table 2, the modesty manipulation affected the implicit self-regard of Chinese participants, $F(2, 169) = 8.62$, $p = .0003$, but not of American participants, $F(2, 169) = 0.08$, $p = .92$. Chinese participants reported lower ISE in the immodesty condition than in the control condition, $F(1, 169) = 4.05$, $p = .05$, $d = –0.53$. In addition, Chinese participants reported higher ISE in the modesty condition than in the control condition, $F(1, 169) = 4.88$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.59$, thus conceptually replicating Studies 1 and 2. Another way of interpreting the interaction is comparing cultures within levels of the modesty manipulation. Compared to the ISE of Americans, the ISE of Chinese was lower in the immodesty condition, $F(1, 169) = 3.29$, $p = .07$, $d = –0.46$, equivalent in the control condition, $F(1, 169) = 0.09$, $p = .77$, $d = 0.09$, and higher in the modesty condition, $F(1, 169) = 4.27$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.56$.

General Discussion

The cultural universality versus relativism of self-enhancement has been intensely debated. This article contributes to the debate by highlighting a nuanced and culture-linked form of tactical self-enhancement. Modesty is a potent and prevailing norm in Eastern culture (China, in particular). We hypothesized that, because of strong socialization practices and prohibitive, if not punitive, cultural pressures, modesty would be associated with and lead to low explicit self-enhancement *but high implicit* self-enhancement. Chinese would partake in the cultural drama by deemphasizing the positivity of the self at an explicit level when high on modesty or when situationally induced to behave modestly; however, they would paradoxically benefit from their modest disposition or situationally induced behavior by implicitly harvesting an enhanced self. Dispositionally or situationally modest Chinese participants would manifest low ESE and rate themselves less favorably on various traits while concurrently manifesting high ISE. However, such a tactical association between modesty and ISE would be absent in Western culture (the United States, in particular) where modesty is not a highly valued cultural norm. Modesty (when dispositionally or contextually salient) certainly constrains explicit self-praise (as in the East). Given that modesty lacks high cultural significance in the West, modest self-displays do not provide a basis of implicit self-enhancement (unlike in the East).

We obtained support for these ideas in three studies. Studies 1 and 2 were correlational; Study 3 was experimental. Studies 1 and 2 operationalized overt self-enhancement in terms of ESE, Study 3 in terms of trait self-ratings. In addition, the studies used two measures of ISE: IAT (Studies 1 and 3) and name liking (Studies 2). The research produced a converging results pattern. Dispositionally modest Chinese participants showed low ESE but high ISE (Studies 1 and 2). Situationally immodest Chinese participants showed high ESE *but low ISE*, whereas situationally modest Chinese participants showed low ESE *but high ISE* (Study 3). American participants, in contrast, showed

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no systematic associations between modesty (dispositional or situational) and ISE (Studies 2 and 3). Modesty among Americans only constrained ESE without increasing ISE.

Note that, in Study 3, participants rated themselves on 12 traits, some of which were individualistic and some collectivistic (Sedikides et al., 2003; Sedikides et al., 2005). We had made no hypotheses as to whether ISE would vary on individualistic and collectivistic traits as a function of modesty versus immodesty. Regardless, the current methodology is not conducive to such a test because the modesty manipulation (as intended) directly constrained the explicit trait ratings. Such a test will be a task for future research.

This set of studies makes important contributions to the debate on culture and self. First, the studies further show that cross-cultural differences in explicit self-enhancement measures may result from differences in cultural norms rather than the need for positive self-regard. Second, the studies demonstrate that the modesty norm has a different meaning in different cultures; that is, the expression of modesty is self-enhancing in Chinese culture but is not self-enhancing in American culture. Third, the studies show that modesty, albeit negatively related to explicit self-ratings in both Chinese and American cultures, is positively related to ISE only in Chinese culture.

These results add to the burgeoning literature illustrating the tactical nature of self-enhancement in Eastern cultures (Brown, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Wan et al., 2007) and also provide an explanation for why Easterners exhibit low ESE but harbor high ISE (Yamaguchi et al., 2007). More relevant to this article, Wakimoto (2006) showed that Japanese use the modesty norm as a resource to boost the self. Participants relieved the negative impacts of heightened mortality salience by strengthening adherence to the modesty imperative (and perhaps elevating ISE). The time has come for researchers to move beyond the issue of whether self-enhancement is universal and instead consider *when* and *how* self-enhancement is pursued tactically in Eastern and Western cultures (Chiu & Hong, 2006; Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, in press; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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