

High self-esteem may be culturally universal, international study shows

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The notion that East Asians, Japanese in particular, are self-effacing and have low self-esteem compared to Americans may well describe the surface view of East Asian personality, but misses the picture revealed by recently developed measures of self-esteem, according to a new study by a team of researchers from the United States, China and Japan.

For the first time psychologists used those new measures in exactly parallel fashion to compare samples of university students from the three countries. Surveying more than 500 students, they found that implicit, or automatic, self-esteem was strongly positive among students from each of the nations. The consistency of the findings across cultures was so clearly apparent that the researchers conclude in this month's issue of the journal *Psychological Science* that high implicit self-esteem may be culturally universal.

The researchers used the Implicit Association Test (IAT) created by University of Washington psychologist Anthony Greenwald and a co-author of the study, to probe the students' positive associations with themselves. Different versions of the test have been widely used to investigate automatic attitudes and evaluations such as racial bias, and gender and age stereotypes. In this study it was used to provide an index of self-esteem.

Psychologists previously equated self-esteem with the extent to which people describe themselves as having positive characteristics. These self-descriptions are called explicit self-esteem and are measured by asking

for agreement with statements such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." No questions are asked to measure implicit self-esteem. Instead the test measures how rapidly a person can give the same response to words that are pleasant and words that refer to one's self.

To ensure that their sample was geographically diverse, the researchers recruited students from seven universities -- the University of Tokyo, Osaka University and Shinshu University in Japan; East China Normal University and Northwest Normal University in China and the UW and Harvard University -- to take the test, which was administered by computer.

Although East Asians are perceived by both others and themselves to be modest and self-effacing, the test results painted a different picture. Students from all three countries had highly positive implicit self-esteem, with the Japanese students showing especially higher self-esteem than their Chinese and American counterparts.

"Ordinary East Asians are aware that they hold strongly positive self-views. But the prevalent modesty norm prevents them from expressing it publicly," said Susumu Yamaguchi of Tokyo University and lead author of the study. "The IAT successfully unraveled East Asians' unexpressed self-esteem in our study."

The authors speculate that cross-cultural similarities in positive implicit self-esteem may arise from cross-cultural similarities in child-rearing.

"It may be that parents in all societies, especially mothers, adore their children and put them on a pedestal so that children worldwide absorb a highly positive self-concept," Greenwald said. "In Japan the culture explicitly tells you that you are not better than others. But this culturally approved explicit self-concept doesn't remove the base of adoration created by parents and other relatives since childhood. In China, where

there is pressure for having smaller families, children are perhaps more precious than they were years ago."

Mahzarin Banaji, a Harvard psychologist, co-developer of the test and co-author of the study said: "When we see cultural variation in human behavior, we understand that societies and cultures mold their members in different ways. When we see cultural invariance, as we do here in East-West self esteem, we understand that we are also all the same."

Source: University of Washington

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