

SHORT NOTE

Evaluating the evidence for pancultural self-enhancement

Constantine Sedikides,¹ Lowell Gaertner² and Jack L. Vevea³¹University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; ²University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee and ³University of California, Santa Cruz, California, USA

We do not regard the better-than-average effect as ‘the only acceptable measure of self-enhancement’ (Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007b). Rather, we object to meta-analytical inclusion of effects that are incapable of testing the tactical self-enhancement hypothesis. In Investigation 1 of Sedikides, Gaertner, and Vevea (2007a), 12 of the 24 effects involved attributes that were unvalidated for domain (collectivistic *vs* individualistic): these effects are uninformative. The 12 domain-validated effects supported the hypothesis. In Investigation 2 of Sedikides *et al.* (2007a), 12 of the 29 effects were deemed irrelevant. None of these effects involved a correlation between: (a) a participant’s rating of self and his/her rating of another person; and (b) idiographic importance rating of the comparison attributes. These effects, then, cannot test whether the self–other comparison varies with the personal importance of the comparison attributes. The 17 relevant effects supported the hypothesis. The weight of the evidence points to the panculturality of self-enhancement.

Key words: pancultural self-enhancement, self-enhancement, tactical self-enhancement.

Sedikides, Gaertner, and Toguchi (2003) proposed the tactical self-enhancement hypothesis. It advocates the panculturality of self-enhancement, as it states that both Easterners and Westerners self-enhance on attributes (e.g. traits, behaviours) that are personally important to them. Easterners value and self-enhance on collectivistic attributes, whereas Westerners value and self-enhance on individualistic attributes. The hypothesis presupposes that the attribute domain is empirically validated as either collectivistic or individualistic. Unvalidated domains lack the capacity to test the hypothesis, because they are undifferentiated or non-diagnostic. Furthermore, the hypothesis presupposes that the personal importance of the collectivistic or individualistic domain be empirically assessed. Lack of such assessment yields effects that are irrelevant to hypothesis testing.

The tactical self-enhancement hypothesis received empirical support (Sedikides *et al.*, 2003), but was challenged in a commentary by Heine (2005). A meta-analytical response (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005) added to the empirical basis of the hypothesis. Since then, two additional meta-analyses (Heine, Kitayama & Hamamura, 2007a; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2007) have debated the hypothesis. In their rebuttal to the Sedikides *et al.* (2007) meta-analysis, Heine, Kitayama, and Hamamura

(2007b) raise several issues that we would like to address.

Heine *et al.* (2007b) state that, ‘According to their inclusion criteria, the only acceptable measures of self-enhancement are those studies that “provide a measure of self versus other perception”’. We wish to clarify that we do not deem the measure of self versus other perception (i.e. the better-than-average effect) as the only acceptable measure of self-enhancement, and we have published articles in which we reviewed scores of self-enhancement measures (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Gaertner, Sedikides, & Graetz, 1999; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007). In the context of this debate, though, we argue that self-enhancement measures need to be theory-relevant. Indeed, we take issue with the inclusion of effects that are incapable of testing the tactical self-enhancement hypothesis or of differentiating between this hypothesis and its alternative (i.e. Westerners self-enhance but Easterners do not; Heine, 2005).

Let us elaborate. Twelve of the 24 effects included in Investigation 1 of Sedikides *et al.* (2007, table 1) involved attributes that were domain-unvalidated. These 12 unvalidated effects cannot test the tactical self-enhancement hypothesis, as the presence or absence of cultural effects is uninformative. Crucially, the moderator analysis (Sedikides *et al.*, 2007, table 2) demonstrated that the pattern of self–other comparison varies systematically as a function of whether the effects were derived from studies that validated (*vs* did not validate) the attributes. The 12 validated effects converge on a pattern that confirms the tactical

Correspondence: Constantine Sedikides, Centre for Research on Self and Identity, School of Psychology, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK. Email: cs2@soton.ac.uk
Received 11 April 2007; accepted 8 May 2007.

self-enhancement hypothesis. In particular, Westerners self-enhance more strongly on individualistic than collectivistic attributes, whereas Easterners self-enhance more strongly on collectivistic than individualistic attributes. However, the 12 unvalidated effects show no cultural differences. Readers are welcome to accept Heine *et al.*'s invitation to consider these unvalidated effects. However, readers should also keep in mind that the meaning of those effects is elusive: there is no way to tell whether the effects involved individualistic or collectivistic attributes. In contrast, the effects involving validated attributes can be interpreted with certainty: It is clear which ones involve individualistic and which involve collectivistic attributes. These effects reveal compelling evidence for the universal nature of tactical-self enhancement.

Next, we turn to the 12 of the 29 effects from Investigation 2 of Sedikides *et al.* (2007, table 3). We consider these 12 effects irrelevant to the issue of pancultural self-enhancement, because they cannot address the question of whether self–other comparison varies with the personal importance of the comparison attributes. On the contrary, the 17 relevant effects Sedikides *et al.* (2007, table 4) converge on a pattern that confirms the tactical self-enhancement hypothesis: Both Easterners and Westerners evidence a positive and significant correlation between self-enhancement and attribute importance.

As Heine *et al.* (2007b) point out, the irrelevant effects suggest the following pattern: Westerners evidence a positive and significant correlation, Easterners a negative and significant correlation. However, there is a big problem here: Neither cultural pattern is interpretable. This is because the cultural patterns aggregate across effects whose only commonality is the lack of a correlation between self-enhancement and attribute importance. To highlight this problem, we will proceed with interpreting the average positive Western correlation and negative Eastern correlation from the perspective of the methodology or study underlying each irrelevant effect.

- (a) Interpretation from the perspective of Heine *et al.* (2001, Study 1 & 2), which provided four of the 12 irrelevant effects. Westerners considered tasks to be more important following success than failure. Easterners considered tasks to be more important following failure than success.
- (b) Interpretation from the perspective of Heine and Lehman (1999), which provided two of the 12 irrelevant effects. Westerners reported a decreasing discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves, as the comparison attribute became more important. Easterners reported an increasing discrepancy between their actual and ideal self, as the comparison attribute became more important.
- (c) Interpretation from the perspective of Heine and Renshaw (2002), which provided two of the 12 irrelevant effects.

Westerners rated themselves more favourably than they were rated by others, to the extent that the comparison attribute was deemed important by a third group of raters. Easterners rated themselves less favourably than they were rated by others, to the extent that the comparison attribute was deemed important by a third group of raters.

- (d) Interpretation from the perspective of Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto and Norasakkun (1997, Study 1), which provided two of the 12 irrelevant effects. Westerners reported that their self-esteem would be more likely to increase than decrease in typically American situations than in typically Japanese situations. Easterners reported that their self-esteem would be more likely to decrease than increase in typically Japanese than in typically American situations.
- (e) Interpretation via Kitayama *et al.* (1997, Study 2), which provided two of the 12 irrelevant effects. Westerners reported that the self-esteem of a typical American undergraduate would be more likely to increase than decrease in typically American situations than in typically Japanese situations. Easterners reported that the self-esteem of a typical American undergraduate would be more likely to decrease than increase in typically Japanese than in typically American situations.

We note that none of those 12 irrelevant effect sizes from the latter four articles (i.e. Kitayama *et al.*, 1997; Heine & Lehman, 1999; Heine *et al.*, 2001; Heine & Renshaw, 2002) involved a correlation between (a) a participant's rating of self and his/her rating of another person; and (b) idiographic importance rating of the comparison attributes. Each study used a different methodology, and the average effect size has no single unambiguous interpretation. However, each of the 17 relevant effect sizes involved the same basic methodology, and their average effect size is directly interpretable and consistent with the tactical self-enhancement hypothesis: Westerners and Easterners increasingly rate self more favourably than they rate others, as the comparison attribute becomes increasingly personally important. On the basis of existing evidence, we conclude that self-enhancement is pancultural.

References

- Gaertner, L., Sedikides, C., & Graetz, K. (1999). In search of self-definition: Motivational primacy of the individual self, motivational primacy of the collective self, or contextual primacy? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 5–18.
- Heine, S. J. (2005). Where is the evidence for pancultural self-enhancement?: A reply to Sedikides, Gaertner, and Toguchi

- (2003). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 531–538.
- Heine, S. J., Kitayama, S. & Hamamura, T. (2007a). 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., Kitayama, S. & Hamamura, T. (2007b). Which studies test whether self-enhancement is pancultural? A reply to Sedikides, Gaertner, and Vevea, 2007. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-839X.2007.00226.x
- Heine, S. J., Kitayama, S., Lehman, D. R., et al. (2001). Divergent consequences of success and failure in Japan and North America: An investigation of self-improving motivations and malleable selves. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 599–615.
- Heine, S. J. & Lehman, D. R. (1999). Culture, self-discrepancies, and self-satisfaction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 915–925.
- Heine, S. J. & Renshaw, K. (2002). Interjudge agreement, self-enhancement, and liking: Cross-cultural divergences. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 578–587.
- Kitayama, S., Markus, H. R., Matsumoto, H. & Norasakkunkit, V. (1997). Individual and collective processes in the construction of the self: Self-enhancement in the United States and self-criticism in Japan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1245–1267.
- Sedikides, C. (1993). Assessment, enhancement, and verification determinants of the self-evaluation process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 317–338.
- Sedikides, C., Gaertner, L. & Toguchi, Y. (2003). Pancultural self-enhancement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 60–70.
- Sedikides, C., Gaertner, L. & Vevea, J. L. (2005). Pancultural self-enhancement reloaded: A meta-analytic reply to Heine (2005). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 539–551.
- Sedikides, C., Gaertner, L. & Vevea, J. L. (2007). Inclusion of theory-relevant moderators yield the same conclusions as Sedikides, Gaertner, and Vevea (2005): A meta-analytical reply to Heine, Kitayama, and Hamamura (2007). *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 59–67.
- Sedikides, C. & Gregg, A. P. (2003). Portraits of the self. In: M. A. Hogg & J. Cooper, eds. *Sage Handbook of Social Psychology*, pp. 110–138. London: Sage Publications.
- Sedikides, C., Gregg, A. P. & Hart, C. M. (2007). The importance of being modest. In: C. Sedikides & S. Spencer, eds. *The Self: Frontiers in Social Psychology*, pp. 285–324. New York: Psychology Press.
- Sedikides, C. & Strube, M. J. (1997). Self-evaluation: To thine own self be good, to thine own self be sure, to thine own self be true, and to thine own self be better. In: M. P. Zanna, ed. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 29, pp. 209–269. New York: Academic Press.