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FlashReport

# Do people want to be flattered or understood? The cross-cultural universality of self-verification

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We assess the cultural generalizability of self-verification.
- Studies show that this motive generalizes across Americans, Indians & Taiwanese.
- Self-verification strivings may at least partially explain past evidence that has been attributed to the self-enhancement motive.

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have recently debated the cultural generalizability of the motive to promote positive, self-enhancing beliefs about the self. Here we broaden the debate to include the generalizability of the self-verification motive, which encourages people to confirm their self-views, whether negative or positive. In two studies, participants from individualist and collectivist cultures rated the accuracy of positive vs. negative evaluations. Support for positivity strivings emerged in that participants from collectivist cultures (India and Taiwan) imputed more accuracy to positive than negative evaluations; participants from an individualist culture (U.S.A.) displayed positivity strivings in Experiment 2 only. These positivity strivings, however, were qualified by participants' own self-views. In both collectivist and individualist cultures, the tendency to embrace positive evaluations was most pronounced among participants with positive self-views; indeed, in Experiment 1, participants with negative self-views rated negative evaluations as more accurate than positive evaluations. Such findings support the universality of self-verification strivings and underscore the importance of measuring self-views when attempting to identify basic self-motives.



## Introduction

Most people undoubtedly prefer to think well of themselves. The root cause of this preference, however, is the subject of debate. Whereas some researchers (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003) have recently attributed the preference for positive self-evaluations to a pancultural desire for "self-enhancement," it may at least partially reflect a desire for "self-verification" (e.g., Swann, 1983, 2012). That is, because most people have predominately positive self-views (Diener & Diener, 1995), efforts to verify these self-views will produce a preference for positive evaluations. If this preference for positivity reflects a desire for self-views that are subjectively accurate, rather than positively biased, then people with negative self-views should display the opposite preference for *negative* evaluations. We tested this self-verification prediction in two samples of individualists (Americans) and collectivists (Indians and Taiwanese).

## Self-verification and self-enhancement theory

Self-verification theory (e.g., Swann, 1983) begins with the assumption that self-views serve an important function in everyday life. Specifically, self-views enable people to make predictions about their worlds, guide behavior, and maintain a sense of continuity, place, and coherence. Stable self-views thus serve two related functions: the pragmatic function of guiding behavior and the epistemic function of affirming people's sense that things are as they should be. As such, it is not surprising that people display a preference for evaluations that confirm and stabilize their self-views.

Among people with positive self-views, self-verification strivings produce the same outcome as self-enhancement strivings: a preference for positive evaluations. Among individuals with negative self-views, however, self-verification strivings foster a preference for negative evaluations. For example, those who see themselves as unintelligent should

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prefer negative over positive evaluations of their intelligence. In such instances, self-verification strivings override positivity strivings.

In light of the competing predictions made by self-enhancement and self-verification theories, a recent meta-analysis of the literature (Kwang & Swann, 2010) examined the relative strength of the two motives. The results indicated that affective reactions to evaluations favored the self-enhancement motive while cognitive reactions favored the self-verification motive. For example, when they received positive as compared to negative evaluations, participants reported feeling better (i.e., more positive affect) even if their self-views were negative. In contrast, when participants received evaluations that confirmed rather than disconfirmed their self-views, they were more likely to display positive cognitive reactions (e.g., rate evaluations as subjectively accurate) even when the evaluations were negative. For instance, just as people with positive self-views rated positive evaluations as highly self-descriptive, those with negative self-views rated negative evaluations as highly self-descriptive (e.g., Kwang & Swann, 2010). As such, researchers interested in the cross-cultural prevalence of self-verification strivings should focus on cognitive reactions to feedback.

## Research on the cross-cultural generality of self-verification

Despite the strong interest in culture and the self over the last two decades (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), we discovered only one investigation of east–west differences in the desire for self-verifying evaluations (Chen, English, & Peng, 2006). The authors reported that Asians as well as Westerners preferred self-verifying evaluations. Nevertheless, this finding must be treated cautiously as participants were Asian-Americans rather than indigenous Asians.

To learn more about the cross-cultural generality of self-verification strivings, we compared samples of Americans with indigenous Indians (Experiment 1) and indigenous Taiwanese (Experiment 2). We employed an oft-used paradigm in the self-literature in which participants who were low or high in self-perceived social skill rated the accuracy of positive and negative evaluations of their social skill. This procedural paradigm has two significant advantages over paradigms employed in past work on culture and the self. First, collecting a measure of participants' self-views provides a means of assessing the potential role of self-verification strivings. Second, the outcome measure—participants' perceptions of the accuracy of evaluations—is a widely used and intuitively appealing index of motivation within the self literature, one that avoids some interpretative ambiguities associated with some measures of self-enhancement (e.g., Heine & Hamamura, 2007).

Our analyses focused on two questions. First, would participants rate confirming evaluations as more accurate than disconfirming evaluations, supporting the universality of self-verification strivings, or would cultural differences emerge, supporting the cultural specificity of self-verification? Second, would collectivists as well as individualists be equally inclined to rate positive evaluations as more accurate than negative evaluations, as predicted by proponents of positivity strivings (Sedikides et al., 2003), or would cultural differences emerge, as predicted by cultural specificity formulations (Heine & Hamamura, 2007)?

## Experiment 1

Experiment 1 compared self-verification and positivity strivings of Americans and Indians using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an online data collection platform frequented by participants from more than 50 countries, including the U.S. and India (for reviews of the suitability of MTurk for academic research, see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010).

### Method

#### *Participants*

A total of 108 Americans (39 women, $M_{age} = 34.42$) and 108 Indians (69 women, $M_{age} = 28.94$) participated online using MTurk. Gender was included as a covariate in our initial models, but was dropped due to null effects.

All materials were written in English. Participants first completed the 16-item Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI; Helmreich, Spence, & Stapp, 1974), which measures self-perceived sociability (e.g., "I have no doubts about my social competence") on 5-point scales. Participants then considered a series of three hypothetical scenarios. In each, participants imagined that two other people (i.e., two acquaintances, two potential employers, and two friends)[1] had reviewed the participant's answers to the previous survey items and had each separately written a short evaluation of the target's sociability. The two evaluations were taken from the paradigm developed by Swann, Griffin, Predmore, and Gaines (1987). One evaluation was moderately positive (e.g., "I'd say this person probably feels comfortable and at ease around other people."). The other was moderately negative (e.g., "I get the feeling that this person doesn't seem real socially confident."). After reading the evaluations, participants rated how accurately each evaluation described them on 11-point scales (alphas for accuracy of positive and negative evaluations = .91, .94, respectively).

### Results

We submitted participants' perceived accuracy ratings of each evaluator to a repeated measures ANOVA based on the general linear model (GLM) analysis, with evaluation (positive vs. negative) as a within-subject variable, self-view (TSBI scores) as a continuous variable, and culture (American vs. Indian) as a between-subject variable. Consistent with self-verification theory, a two-way interaction between self-view and evaluation emerged, $F(1, 212) = 219.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .51$, such that participants with negative self-views were especially likely to see negative evaluations as accurate and people with positive self-views were especially likely to see positive evaluations as accurate. Nevertheless, this two way interaction was qualified by a significant three-way interaction (culture × self-view × evaluation), $F(1, 212) = 5.93$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .03$, such that the self-verification effect was stronger among Americans ($F(1, 212) = 266.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .63$) than Indians ($F(1, 212) = 53.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$).

Consistent with the presence of positivity strivings, a significant main effect of evaluation emerged, $F(1, 212) = 187.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .47$, such that participants imputed more accuracy to the positive evaluation ($M = 6.75$, $SD = 2.72$) than the negative evaluation ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 2.75$). This main effect was qualified by a significant two-way interaction (culture × evaluation), $F(1, 212) = 6.01$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .03$, such that the positivity strivings emerged among Indians ($F(1, 212) = 21.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$), but not among Americans ($F(1, 212) = 1.36$, $p = .25$, $\eta^2 < .01$).

## Experiment 2

Experiment 1 provided initial evidence that Indians as well as Americans displayed self-verification strivings. We also found unexpected evidence of stronger self-verification strivings among Americans than Indians. Experiment 2 sought to bolster the generalizability of the results of Experiment 1 using a sample of Taiwanese nationals, who are culturally distinct from Indians but similarly collectivistic (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Noting that participants in Experiment 1

[1] After Gaertner, Sedikides, and Cai (2012), we included multiple targets in an effort to increase the generality of our results. When we included target as a variable in the design, small differences emerged but none that altered our conclusions.

were web users who completed the survey in English, in Experiment 2 we had university students complete the survey in their native tongue (Mandarin Chinese). In addition, we replaced the hypothetical scenario used in Experiment 1 with one in which participants believed that they were judging the accuracy of evaluations that had actually been made of them.

## Method

### *Participants*

Students from a university in the southwestern U.S. and another in Taiwan participated for course credit. Students completed the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) during a mass pretesting session. As in previous self-verification studies (e.g., Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990), we only analyzed participants who scored above the 75th percentile on the TSBI (i.e., the positive self-view group) and those who scored below the 25th percentile (i.e., the negative self-view group). Percentiles were computed for each cultural group separately, which generated cutoffs that deviated slightly from the 75th and 25th percentiles due to differences in the shapes of the distributions. Forty-six American students (28 women, $M_{age}$ = 18.50) and 42 Taiwanese students (22 women, $M_{age}$ = 20.69) met our inclusion criteria (i.e., fell below the 25th or above the 75th percentile on the TSBI) and agreed to participate. Two U.S. participants were excluded due to suspicion, leaving a total of 44 Americans. For the Taiwanese participants, a translator fluent in English and Chinese translated all stimuli, a second translator back-translated stimuli into English, and then two more translators compared the versions and resolved minor inconsistencies.

### *Procedure*

The procedure followed the one employed by Swann et al. (1990, Experiment 2) with minor modifications to bolster believability. Participants learned that they would be involved in a study of social interaction and that they would be taking on a "target" role. They were told that two other participants in the study ("evaluators") had examined their responses to the questionnaire they had completed earlier in the semester and formed impressions. Participants then read the two ostensible evaluations. In reality, both evaluations were based on those developed by Swann et al. (1990). The positive evaluation consisted of generally positive ratings of the target's sociability, likability and interestingness ($M$ = 8.67 across the 3 ratings on 11-point Likert scales). The negative evaluation contained markedly lower ratings ($M$ = 4.67). The evaluators indicated that they were highly certain of both the positive and negative evaluations ($M$ = 9). For the measure of perceived accuracy, participants rated the degree to which they felt understood by each individual evaluator on 11-point scales.

## Results

We submitted participants' perceived accuracy ratings of each evaluator to a 2 (American vs. Taiwanese) × 2 (positive vs. negative self-view) × 2 (positive vs. negative evaluation, a within subjects factor) mixed-design ANOVA. Consistent with self-verification theory, a two-way interaction between self-view and evaluation emerged, $F(1, 82) = 37.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$. This two way interaction was *not* qualified by the three-way interaction (culture × self-view × evaluation), $F(1, 82) = 0.07$, $p = .78$, $\eta^2 < .01$, indicating that the self-verification patterns of Americans and Asians were similar. That is, in both cultures, participants with negative self-views rated the negative evaluations as relatively more accurate, and positive evaluations as relatively less accurate, compared to participants with positive self-views.

Evidence for positivity strivings emerged in that there was a significant main effect of evaluation, $F(1, 82) = 221.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .73$, such that participants imputed more accuracy to the positive evaluation ($M$ = 7.02, $SD$ = 1.81) than the negative evaluation ($M$ = 3.19, $SD$ = 1.62). This main effect, however, was qualified by a significant two-way interaction between evaluation and culture, $F(1, 82) = 8.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. As seen in Fig. 2, the tendency for participants to impute more accuracy to the positive than the negative evaluator was stronger among the American participants, $F(1, 82) = 158.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .45$, than Taiwanese participants, $F(1, 82) = 21.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$. Unlike Experiment 1, this finding suggests that positivity strivings are stronger among people from individualist vs. collectivist cultures.

## Discussion

Are members of collectivist cultures as inclined to display self-verification strivings as are members of individualist cultures? Apparently so. All four samples displayed self-verification strivings, including Indian participants (Experiment 1), Taiwanese participants (Experiment 2) and Americans in both studies. Although the self-verification effect was stronger among Americans than Indians in Experiment 1, it was significant for both groups. Also, culture had no impact on self-verification in Experiment 2. Considered together, these data suggest that self-verification strivings are pancultural.

Evidence for positivity strivings also emerged but the patterns were somewhat less consistent. In Experiment 1, the effect was significant among collectivists (Indians) but non-significant among individualists (Americans). In Experiment 2, the effect was stronger among individualists (Americans) than collectivists (Taiwanese) but significant for both groups. This evidence of cultural differences in positivity strivings must be interpreted cautiously. One reason is that methodological differences between our experiments (most important, the feedback in Experiment 1 was verbal and the feedback in Experiment 2 was numerical) likely contributed to our effects rather than differences between Indians and Taiwanese. That is, comparison of participants in Fig. 1 vs. Fig. 2 reveals that Indians and Taiwanese

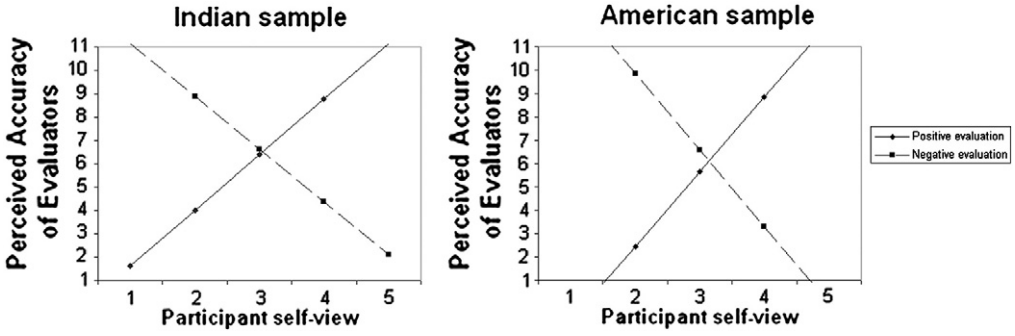


**Fig. 1.** Perceived accuracy of evaluations as a function of culture and self-views in Experiment 1. Note: Participant self-view refers to each participant's sociability score as measured with the TSBI (1 = low, 5 = high).

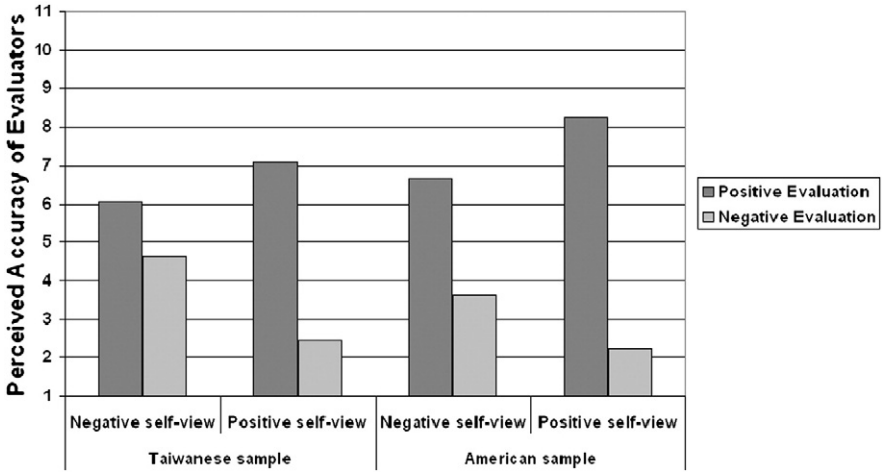


**Fig. 2.** Perceived accuracy of evaluations as a function of culture and self-views in Experiment 2.

responded similarly; the most striking difference in the two Figures is that American participants with negative self-views strongly embraced the negative feedback in Experiment 1 and strongly embraced the positive feedback in Experiment 2. We suspect this reflects the relative ambiguity inherent in the verbal feedback (Study 1) as compared to numerical feedback (Study 2), ambiguity that gave Americans in Experiment 1 license to endorse the accuracy of the negative feedback without experiencing the threat conveyed by numerical feedback. Why the Americans seemed to be more sensitive to this procedural difference than Asians is unclear.

More fundamentally, one should not take our evidence of positivity strivings as evidence for a self-enhancement motive (cf. Kwang & Swann, 2010). That is, because most people have positive self-views (due to, for example, socialization practices that encourage positive feedback and people's success in pursuing motives that lead to success and social acceptance), the tendency for our participants to impute more accuracy to positive than negative evaluations may have reflected their honest assessments of the extent to which the evaluations matched their self-views rather than a self-enhancement bias. Truly compelling support for self-enhancement would require participants to embrace feedback that exceeded their self-views according to some objective benchmark.

These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our findings make two important contributions to the literature. First, indigenous participants from two linguistically and culturally distinct collectivist countries displayed significant evidence of self-verification strivings. This is the first evidence of self-verification strivings among indigenous Asians. Second, our evidence that participants with negative self-views embraced the accuracy of negative evaluations directly contradicts self-enhancement theory, suggesting that it would behoove future researchers to explore the cultural universality of a broader range of self-motives (Swann & Bosson, 2010). In particular, researchers should consider not just self-verification but other important self-motives (e.g., agency, communion) that may complement or compete with self-enhancement. Such a broader approach should contribute to a richer, more culturally nuanced understanding of the motivational forces that regulate human social behavior.

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