My Culture, My Self

Western notions of the mind may not translate to other cultures

By BRUCE BOWER

Upon leaving the United States for several months of study at a Japanese university, Leo got a crash course in culture shock. Activities that the undergraduate had enjoyed in his native land, such as playing a match of volleyball with friends, suddenly felt strange and unnatural. Casual volleyball games back home featured a relaxed, cheerful atmosphere and good-humored competitiveness. In Japan, players adopted a grim, no-nonsense manner suited to the application of "ganbaru," a dogged determination to persevere and keep trying until the end of a task.

Leo's Japanese volleyball experience was, to use a culinary analogy, like biting into a cheeseburger and getting a mouthful of sushi. Something about Japanese life changed the flavor of even the most innocuous items on his menu of customary pursuits. Leo quickly learned to put on a Japanese-style "game face" when he played volleyball, but he just did not feel like himself.

Culture clashes such as this accentuate the fact that largely unspoken, collective assumptions about appropriate social behavior vary greatly from one country or geographic region to another, says Japanese psychologist Shinobu Kitayama of Kyoto University. Moreover, the goals, values, ideas, and behaviors that a person learns and uses as a member of a cultural group have far-reaching effects on mental life, Kitayama argues.

The cherished Western concept of a sovereign self provides a case in point. Consider Leo, whose passport to Japan probably should have been stamped with this brief warning: Bearer comes from culture that treats individuals as independent operators, each of whom must emphasize personal strengths and pump up self-esteem to succeed in life.

In contrast, Japanese culture views individuals as part of an interconnected social web, Kitayama contends. A sense of self develops as a person discerns the expectations of others concerning right and wrong behavior in particular situations. Self-improvement requires an unflagging commitment to confronting one's shortcomings and mistakes; their correction fosters harmony in one's family, at work, and in other pivotal social groups.

This cultural perspective appears in various forms throughout East Asia. Its adherents tend to write off the European-American pursuit of self-esteem as an immature disregard for the relationships that nurture self-identity, Kitayama says.

A growing body of research explores the ways in which cultural perspectives, such as an emphasis on personal independence or social interdependence, shape psychological tendencies, as seen in strivings for self-enhancement or self-criticism. Proponents of this approach, who call themselves cultural psychologists, argue that many seemingly natural mental tendencies detected by research in Western nations vanish or change drastically in other cultures.

Cultural mentalities: American self-enhancement and Japanese self-criticism.

"The cultural underpinnings of self-enhancement and other mental phenomena have eluded the attention of many North American researchers," Kitayama contends. "Humans have evolved to live a social life in groups. By arranging social life in different ways, cultures affect psychological processes."

Richard A. Shweder, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, sees culture as a prominent shaper of minds. A culture, in his view, serves as a flexible learning system that transforms basic biological capacities into meaningful thoughts and behaviors shared by its members. Even disillusioned souls who rebel against the social norm make a point of thumbing their noses only at their own cultural practices.

In Japan, Shweder notes, parents and teachers encourage youngsters from infancy onward to seek out other people and to modify their behavior according to social rules and expectations. The importance of adjusting to social feedback is expressed in the Japanese word for self, "jibun," which means "my share of the shared space between us."

Self-improvement thus hinges on finding and repairing personal failures to advance the social enterprise rather than basking in one's unique advantages over others. For the Japanese, Shweder says, it is usually a relief to know that one is "hitonami," average as a person; in the United States, people who achieve this insight run in anguish to psychotherapists and self-help gurus.

Two studies published in the June JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY delve into the different manifestations of self that arise in Japan and the United States.

One investigation, directed by Kitayama, identifies a penchant for self-enhancement in U.S. college students and an affinity for self-criticism in Japanese college students. The researchers first asked 90 Japanese and 65 U.S. students to describe as many situations as possible in which their own self-esteem either increased or decreased. From these responses, the researchers developed a list of 400 situations, half from each country. The number of esteem-enhancing, or success, incidents on the list equaled the number of esteem depressors, or failure situations.

A second set of U.S. students then read the list and rated more of the success than of the failure situations as likely to affect their own self-esteem. They also said that their self-esteem rose more

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sharply after successes than it dropped after failures. In contrast, a second group of Japanese students reported tendencies to focus on failure situations when evaluating their own self-esteem and to modulate self-esteem more strongly after experiencing a failure.

Japanese-style self-criticism appeared in a slightly weaker form in a group of Japanese students temporarily studying at a U.S. university. Self-critical attitudes inculcated in Japan appear largely immune to brief forays into Western culture, the scientists hold.

The same cross-cultural disparity emerged when Japanese and U.S. students read the list of 400 situations and described how each incident would influence the self-esteem of a typical undergraduate at their respective schools. Failure situations loomed large for the Japanese, whereas Americans focused on successes that would boost the confidence and satisfaction of their academic compatriot.

The ready assignment of self-criticism to a hypothetical student by Japanese volunteers suggests that they regard it as a completely natural attitude, akin to a guiding sense of humility, Kitayama argues. This observation counters the view of researchers who contend that the Japanese criticize themselves in a self-deprecating way intended to mask their inner desire for personal success.

North American college students also emphasize the positive qualities of groups to which they belong far more than their Japanese counterparts do, the second investigation finds. Asked to evaluate both a close family member and their own schools, students at two top-ranked Canadian universities gave more favorable ratings than did students attending two highly regarded Japanese universities, report Steven J. Heine of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and Darrin R. Lehman of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Volunteers selected a family member and then rated the extent to which he or she possessed 10 traits, including attractiveness, intelligence, cooperativeness, and dependability. They also ranked characteristics of their own educational institution, such as its academic reputation and the accomplishments of its graduates, as well as attributes of a typical student at the school.

Although the Japanese people report pride and happiness at being associated with a top-flight school or other social unit, they refrain from making unrealistically positive appraisals of their groups, Heine asserts.

"Japanese do not just say that they are no better than average, they truly seem to believe it," he says.

A related study by Heine and Lehman, now submitted for publication, indicates that the personal goals to which individuals aspire lie further out of reach for Japanese students than for Canadian students, at least according to their own accounts. Even so, the Canadians more often report feeling depressed and dissatisfied about their failures to measure up to personal ideals.

"People have a need to view themselves as good and meaningful citizens of their cultures," Heine remarks. "Thinking highly of yourself does not seem to be particularly important in Japan, where people want to secure a sense of belonging to social groups and ensure that others are satisfied with their contributions to those groups."

Cultural psychologists hope to do more than challenge Western psychology's focus on self-esteem. For example, based on other recent experiments submitted for publication, Kitayama and Kyoto University colleague Takahiko Masuda argue that Japanese volunteers often do not assume that another person's behavior corresponds to his or her private attitudes.

A "correspondence bias" that equates behavior with internal attitudes or personality traits appears in numerous studies conducted in Western countries. Researchers have theorized that it demands more of a social thinker to consider the situational influences on another's behavior than simply to assume that behavior reflects an internal attitude.

In one classic U.S. study, participants assumed that the writer of an essay arguing in favor of Fidel Castro's regime held fairly strong pro-Castro views. It mattered little whether they had been told that the writer had chosen to express pro-Castro views or had done so on instruction by a professor.

Japanese college students pay close attention to information about social inducements to behavior, such as a professor's instructions to express a certain political opinion, Kitayama and Masuda find. Japanese volunteers expressed a correspondence bias only if they had no access to information about social influences on the essay writer.

Japanese participants also tended to assume that other people's attitudes about a sensitive political issue (keeping or closing a U.S. military base on Okinawa) might differ from their own. This contrasts with data showing that U.S. volunteers generally believe that others agree with their views.

Moreover, in the April PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY BULLETIN, Heine and Lehman reported that U.S., but not Japanese, students substantially changed their opinions of pieces of music in an attempt to imitate more socially competent people. The U.S. students revised their ratings of popular compact disc recordings after being told that they scored lower than most of their peers on an inventory of positive personal attributes. In this situation, the Japanese students felt no need to qualify their musical attitudes.

U.S. students felt psychologically threatened by evidence of their personal shortcomings, as assessed on the inventory, and changed their musical ratings in the hope of demonstrating a similarity to high-scoring peers, the researchers hold.

This kind of response to inconsistencies between personal attitudes and behaviors, a phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance, has been studied in North America for 40 years. Further work will address the subtleties of cognitive dissonance and other psychological phenomena across East Asian cultures, Heine and Lehman say.

Cultural psychologists' skepticism about the universality of mental responses studied in the Western world has garnered mixed reviews. Some scientists, such as psychologist Daniel T. Gilbert of Harvard University, view the results to date as too preliminary to challenge the cross-cultural existence of the correspondence bias and other much-studied effects.

"There have got to be some cultural differences in what psychologists study, but much more research is needed to prove the fascinating hypotheses of cultural psychologists," Gilbert remarks.

Phoebe C. Ellsworth of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor sees a deeper lesson in the studies conducted so far. "We've been awfully provincial in assuming that our findings in social psychology reflect human nature," she argues.

In unpublished research related to the Japanese results, Ellsworth and a colleague find that Chinese undergraduates have no difficulty in describing how a group of cartoon fish feels in various situations, such as assuming that the group is angry when one fish departs. Their U.S. counterparts generally get flustered or confused by this task and often want to know which individual fish they're being asked about.

Despite a shared emphasis in China and Japan on the social interdependence of individuals, cultures in these two countries probably differ in ways that markedly influence how people view themselves, Ellsworth adds.

Individuals everywhere maintain a sense of self on three levels, theorizes Marilynn B. Brewer of Ohio State University in Columbus. These consist of a personal identity, identities tied to membership in various groups, and social identities that arise when interacting with others. For example, a woman assumes an identity as a mother when she is out in public with her children.

Different cultures encourage people to develop distinctive blends of these identities, Brewer suggests.

"What's important about research such as Kitayama's is that it implies that cultures create situations that support the definition of the self," she says. □