Self-Enhancement Bias: A Literature Review

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Self-Enhancement Bias: A Literature Review

by

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts
May 2012
Abstract

When partaking in self-evaluation, individuals tend to engage self-enhancement, rating themselves higher than would be objectively called for. This work reviews the relevant literature on what self-enhancement bias is and when we engage in it. Further, it explores the controversies over the universality of self-enhancement with some contending that East Asians do not engage in self-enhancement and others proclaiming it to be a universal trait. Lastly, the adaptiveness both socially and psychologically of self-enhancement is examined.
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Self-Enhancement Bias: A Literature Review

What is Self-Enhancement?

It is a widely accepted idea that people tend to over-emphasize themselves and suggest overly positive self-evaluations regarding the self-concept, (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Heine & Hamamura, 2007) this is more commonly referred to as self-enhancement. When people cannot objectively promote themselves they can, through construal mechanisms, reinterpret the meaning of social or task feedback, misremember or reconstruct events in a self-serving way, and make excuses for poor behavior or performance (Dewhurst & Malborough, 2003). Self-enhancement is a self-maintenance mechanism that strives to preserve one's perceived level of functioning or ability (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Alicke and Sedikides (2009) define self-enhancement as "interests that people have in advancing one or more self-components or defending themselves against negative self-views". Furthermore, Alicke and Sedikides put forth that interest or skills we possess may be divided into several levels of ability or functioning, the tolerable level, the objective level of ability, the perceived level ability, and the aspiration level of ability. The authors suggest that self-enhancement keeps people motivated and encouraged by keeping individuals interests within a reasonable and defensible proximity to the aspiration level. Self-enhancement is not limited to skills alone, the social psychological use of self-enhancement motives applies to any self-related interest including social and physical traits, abilities, moral standing, beliefs and values (Epley & Whitchurch, 2008; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), the essential motivation of self-enhancement is to maintain self-worth (Dunning, 1999). Except for in extreme cases
which are rarely seen and often point to psychopathology, this does not mean that your
average fellow will think he can be Brad Pitt's stand-in but rather that he is an alright
looking guy, slightly better looking than is normal. In fact, self-enhancement includes
mundane tendencies such as thinking that one is slightly better than others, choosing to
compare one's self with worse-off others and construing events in a way that frames one's
attributes and actions in a positive light (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

**When Do We Engage in Self-Enhancement?**

Theoretically, one can engage in self-enhancement at any time for any self related
process. However, for the scope of this review, only those activities that have been
empirically supported will be discussed here.

One of the most well known and heavily researched concepts in self-enhancement
is the better-than-average effect (Alicke, 1985; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, &
Vredenburg, 1995; Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001; Pronin, Lin, & Ross,
2002; Rothermund, Bak, & Brandtstadter, 2005; Williams & Gilovich, 2008), in which
people tend to rate themselves as being better than an average person on some trait.
Alicke (1985) had a group of participants rate a number of trait adjectives for desirability
and degree of control one had over the trait. Next, another group rated themselves and an
"average college student" on the trait adjectives. The participant's self ratings for high
desirable and high control traits was higher than the average college student. Conversely,
participants self-ratings were low for those items that were viewed as either undesirable
or uncontrollable when compared to the average college student.
Further research supported these findings and expanded them. For instance, it has also been found that self-enhancement can be attenuated when people compare themselves with an individuated target than with a nonindividuated target such as the ubiquitous average college student (Alicke et al., 1995). Alicke et al. divided participants into two groups, one group that just received a list of trait adjectives and was asked to rate them for themselves and the average college student and another group who was put into a room with another individual that they did not know and then asked to rate themselves in comparison to that individual they just met on the same trait adjectives. Even the act of visualizing the comparison target while having no other information about them lead to the reduction of self-enhancement. Additionally, people will self-enhance in what is called the better-than-myself effect (Alicke et al., 2001), which occurs when people are asked to rate themselves at one point in time and then at a later date are given the "average peer's" ratings for those same traits and asked to rate themselves again. However, deception is employed in this experiment, what the participants are told is the "average peer" rating is actually their own self rating from the first phase of the experiment. During phase two of the experiment participants rated themselves higher than the ratings given presumably to the average peer, which in reality are their self-appraisals.

It does not appear that people self-enhance on all traits equally but rather tend to show more self-enhancement on uncontrollable attributes, while being more prone to self-criticism in controllable attributes, which one, presumably, has the ability to improve on (Rothermund et al., 2005). Furthermore, people really do believe their own self-enhancing assessments of themselves (Williams & Gilovich, 2008) even after they are
informed that individuals can be prone to bias, in which case participants feel that others rather than themselves experience the bias (Pronin et al., 2002). In the work of Pronin et al. the first part of the study consisted of three surveys done in various venues comparing themselves to average peers dependent on survey venue, participants claimed to be less biased than the members of their relevant comparison group. In the second part of the experiment Stanford students were given 6 personality dimensions to rate themselves on as part of a larger questionnaire, immediately following this rating, on the next page, they were told about the better-than-average effect and then asked if they felt that their self-rating was accurate. Despite being told that 70-80% of individuals consistently give self-enhancing responses only 24% of the individuals admitted that their responses might have been biased. This is not to say that the better-than-average effect is without its critics, Hamamura, Heine, and Takemoto (2007) take umbrage with this approach for measuring self-enhancement, saying that it is confounded by non-motivational factors such as an individual's tendency to rate "everyone as better than average."

Self-enhancement is not confined to the better-than-average effect. Evidence of self-enhancement can also be found within the realms of dating and relationships. Preuss and Alicke (2009) had participants make a video of themselves that was going to be ostensibly used on a dating site. Then the participants were told that possible dates would be shown the videos in blocks and choose a person from the block to be their potential date. Participants saw the block in which their video would be placed and were asked to rank themselves among their dating cohort and also how they thought others would rank them. The participants ranked themselves higher than the observers did. Not only do we
engage in self-enhancement in dating, but evidence also shows, that those in happy relationships engage in a bit of partner-enhancement (Murray, 1999), as well. By seeing our partners in the best light possible, we are able to attribute their flaws to external sources and their virtues internally, which just enhances our feelings of being with a partner of worth. Additionally, people have been known to self-enhance within the realm of scientific research, typically authors cite themselves more often than other author in their works (Brysbaert & Smyth, 2011). Authors cite themselves approximately 3 to 9 times per article, depending on the total number of references, this is around 10% of all the references in an article (Brysbaert & Smyth, 2011).

Another area that seems wide open to self-enhancement is ambiguity in self-evaluation. It has been found that people provide self-serving assessments to the extent that a trait can be considered ambiguous (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). When participants were asked to list evidence and criteria for making their self-appraisals this did not change the tendency to self-enhancement. However, when the participants were asked to make self-appraisals based on a list of evidence and criteria generated by another person it lead to lower self-enhancement. Further support of this idea can be found in Kurman and Sriram (1997), whose research elucidated a trend that indicated that levels of self-enhancement increased as the level of self-evaluation became more general.

Thus far, in all of the concepts discussed, we have yet to examine a concrete operationalization of self-enhancement. It is in the concept of over-claiming that we see a concrete operationalization of self-enhancement. Over-claiming is the tendency to claim
knowledge about nonexistent items (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003). This is a different type of self-enhancement because it has to do with factual information that is easily confirmed. That notwithstanding, participants still self-enhance and claim to have knowledge on made up items, even after they were warned that some of the items were fake (Paulhus et al., 2003; Amati, Oh, Kwan, Jordan, & Keenan, 2010). Which leads one to wonder if you know that some of the items are nonexistent why would you overclaim and run the risk of being caught in a lie? Neither study on overclaiming addressed that particular question. It would be an interesting direction for future researchers to consider. Perhaps a place to start would be in the controversy over whether or not self-enhancement is an automatic reaction or if is a controllable act. Given the negative social repercussions of being labeled a liar, it would follow that self-enhancement is beyond our ability to control, but is that really the case?

Epley and Whitchurch's (2008) work supports the notion that self-enhancement is an automatic process. Participant's faces were made more or less attractive by a morphing procedure, self-enhancement evidenced itself in that the participants recognized the more attractive version of their face as their own more quickly. The self-enhancement in this study was correlated with implicit measures of self-worth but not explicit measures of self-worth, suggesting that participants are not aware that self-enhancement is occurring. Another study, by Gramzow and Willard (2006), showed that exaggerations on current performance, in this case GPA, was motivated by self-enhancement but that it could be temporarily curtailed via self-affirmation. For the self-affirmation manipulation, the participants were directed to choose one of six pre-determined values that they considered the most important and were instructed to write
about why this value was important. After the students performed the self-affirmation exercise they engaged in less self-enhancement than those in the control condition. This study suggests that while self-enhancement may indeed be an automatic process, we engage in it strategically, on an as needed basis. As the participants just performed a self-affirmation exercise they did not need self-enhance to maintain feelings of self-worth, thereby giving more objective answers about their GPAs. Finally, Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, and Dardis (2002) showed that when individuals had to justify their self-assigned grades to an audience self-enhancement was reduced. Their study revealed that this reduction in self-enhancement bias was a combination of the participant's identifiability, evaluation expectancy and focus on one's own weakness. Taken together, it would seem that self-enhancement is an automatic process much like breathing, we automatically adjust the amount of breathe we take in to fit our cardiovascular needs just as we adjust the amount of self-enhancement to maintain our feelings of self-worth. Also like breathing, it seems that if you take this automatic process and focus on it or in this case focus on your weaknesses, the equivalent of holding one's breath, you can make an automatic process into a controlled conscious process.

Is Self-Enhancement a Universal Trait?

There is some disagreement among researchers as to the universality and adaptiveness of self-enhancement bias. Hamamura, Heine and Takemoto (2007) argue that East Asians do not self-enhance and that it is a Western phenomena. It may be that this is the result of sample bias as in the study of psychology, and especially in the field
of personality studies, Western research has been the main focus (Heine & Buchtel, 2009; Kobayashi & Brown, 2003). For example, recently Heine and Buchtel (2009) found that 92% of publications in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* are from authors at North American institutions, and 99% are from authors at Western schools. The cultural narrowness of the sample raises the question of whether self-enhancement can be universally accepted as basic human motivation or is it something that is culturally derived and purely a Western trait?

Recent cross-cultural research shows that people in collectivistic cultures, mainly East Asians, appear to demonstrate weaker motivation for self-enhancement compared with those from individualistic cultures, predominantly Westerners (Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999; Heine, 2001; Heine & Buchtel, 2009; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Takata and Lehman, 2000; Kobayashi & Brown, 2003). For example, Japanese tend to employ euphemisms, avoid direct communication, display acute sensitivity to the attitudes of others, and show restraint in their behaviors. These behaviors are known to disguise their feelings and to avoid undesirable responses (Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999). Moreover, it is found that self-critical tendencies or self-effacement among East Asians are evident even when responses are solicited in private (Heine, Takata & Lehman, 2000).

Differences in self-enhancement behavior between East Asians and Westerners may have originated from the differences in cultural norms. East Asians, mainly represented by Chinese, Japanese and Koreans, share a number of cultural elements that provide meaningful distinctions between North American independent selves. The East Asian self is typically described as being interdependent, which means that the
relationship with in-group members has the significant role in the construction of the self (Heine, 2001). Further evidence for the interdependent self can be found in fMRI research, where a study on the cultural differences of the neural correlates of self indicated that Chinese participants showed MPFC activation for both self and mother judgments, as opposed to Westerners who used it exclusively for self-evaluation (Zhu, Zhang, Fan, & Han, 2007). Therefore, East Asians tend to focus more on whether they are meeting other people’s standards of competence, whereas, Westerners attend to meeting their own internal standards. For instance, one of the important cultural norms of East Asia is modesty, which plays a crucial role in forming self-effacement behavior. Modesty may allow one to avoid offense and thereby maintain a sense of social or collectivistic harmony (Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999).

There is much empirical evidence that North Americans view themselves in positive terms compared to East Asians (Heine 2001; Heine & Buchtel, 2009). For example, American students tend to evaluate themselves more positively than they are evaluated by others whereas Japanese students rate themselves significantly less positively than they are viewed by others (Heine & Renshaw, 2002). Indeed, a concern with maintaining “face” leads East Asians to attend more to the standards of others when evaluating themselves (Heine & Buchtel, 2009). Face can be understood as the amount of public worth that one has associated with one’s roles, and losing face is potentially more threatening for East Asians than losing self-esteem (Heine, 2001). When taking the collectivist culture of East Asians into consideration research has shown that Japanese will tend not to self-enhance when the situation is not explicitly competitive or if it is competitive with someone with whom they have a close affective bond with, an Uchi
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(inner) relationship, but they will engage in self-enhancement when in a competitive situation with someone with whom they do not have an affective relationship with or with whom they have an *Soto* (outer) relationship (Takata, 2003).

Conversely, there is much evidence that East Asians do self-enhance, challenging the idea that it is predominately a Western phenomena (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, 2008; Kurman & Sriram, 1997; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; O'Mara, Gaertner, Sedikides, Zhou, & Liu, 2012; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2007b; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2007a). Gaertner, Sedikides and Chang (2008) have recently put forth that self-enhancement is indeed a universal trait, but sensitive to cultural norms and personal importance. Consequently, they theorized that East Asians would self-enhance on attributes that are favorable in their collectivist culture such as compliance and modesty. Gaertner et al. found that East Asians do self-enhance on, and assign more personal importance to collectivist attributes. The more personal importance assigned to a trait, the greater the self-enhancement was on that trait.

Furthermore, A meta-analysis of 266 studies found self-serving attributional bias to be pervasive in the general population but have variability across age, culture and psychopathology, with East Asians self-enhancing less than their Western counterparts and those suffering from depression and anxiety self-enhancing the least of all populations (Mezulis et al., 2004). Yamagishi, Hashimoto, and Schung (2008) elucidated the possibility of an interesting concept in East Asian culture that could help to explain the large variation in results when measuring self-enhancement, their research indicated that the preference for conformity among East Asians is actually a default strategy to
avoid the accrual of negative reputation. This default strategy is relied upon in any situation where the possibility for negative evaluations is ambiguous, once the possibility for negative evaluation is clearly defined, such that, you will not be negatively evaluated, the cultural differences in the tendency for uniqueness disappeared (Yamagishi et al., 2008).

A new and interesting approach has been taken to the question of why do some cultures self-enhance more than others. Loughnan et al. (2011) did a meta-analysis including information from many diverse nations in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe and Oceania and looked at levels of self-enhancement. They uncovered evidence for self-enhancement across all nations but like other researchers they too found variations across cultures. However, Loughnan et al. (2011) puts forth that it is not an artifact of a culture being individualistic or collectivistic that makes for the best predictor of self-enhancement but rather income disparity. For example, Venezuelans who have a highly collectivist culture but also a large amount of income inequality self-enhance more than Japanese who have a highly collectivist culture but a low amount of income inequality. More work needs to be done to investigate these findings as they can have broad implications in how we think about self-enhancement motivations and cultures on the whole.

**Self-Enhancement, Mental Health and Social Costs**

Taylor and Brown’s (1988) seminal paper declared that positive illusions about the self were not only normal but also an important component of mental well-being. Taylor and Brown theorized that these positive illusions allow us to filter negative feedback in a way that is as nonthreatening as possible allowing our positive self-views to
stay intact. Taylor and Brown further expound this concept suggesting that self-enhancement promotes caring for others, the ability to be happy and the ability to engage in productive or creative work. Self-enhancement has also been positively related to psychological well-being and self-esteem in both Israel and Singapore (Kurman & Sriram, 1997), increased well-being in the United States and China (O'Mara et al., 2012), increased psychological health in Taiwanese (Gaertner et al., 2008), and to correlate with multiple measures of mental health (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). Furthermore, self-enhancement has been linked to reduced neuroendocrine (cortisol) and psychological stress responses (Creswell, Welch, Taylor, Sherman, Gruenewald, & Mann, 2005). There has even been a report linking pet-enhancement to self-enhancement and well-being (El-Alayli, Lystad, Webb, Hollingsworth, & Ciolli, 2006) for a sub-group of participants who would not sell their pet for any amount of money, pet-enhancement, which was positively correlated with self-enhancement, was linked to psychological well-being.

Thus far, it has been speculated that self-enhancement's purpose is to help maintain one's feelings of self-worth and there does seem to be some evidence to support a relationship between self-enhancement and mental health, but what about when individuals are faced with extremely adverse events? Will self-enhancement still act as buffer and insulate individuals against the possible negative outcomes of going through traumatic events? Bonanno, Field, Kovacevic, and Kaltman (2002) conducted two studies that have looked at the adjustment of self-enhancers in two different but very powerful life stressors: the civil war in Bosnia (study 1) and the premature death of a spouse in the United States (study 2). Bonanno et al. predicted that self-enhancing
individuals would be rated by mental health experts as relatively healthier than other individuals. Also, expected is that self-enhancers would evoke relatively negative social impressions in an independent group of untrained observers. Another, expectation is that the relationship between self-enhancement and psychological adjustment will be stronger the more adverse the situation is, therefore it is predicted that self-enhancement will be inversely associated to PTSD symptoms in those whose spouses died a violent versus a natural death. The results of their research give credence to their hypotheses. Those individuals who self-enhanced were also rated by mental health experts as relatively healthier than other individuals. However, to non-mental healthcare experts these self-enhancing individuals gave a negative impression. Conversely, the non-mental healthcare workers gave the highest favorability ratings to those participants with greater grief and PTSD symptoms. The authors speculate that the low rating for the self-enhancers may have to do with expectancy violations. The expectation is for a recently bereaved individual is to have a large amount of grief and in the case of those who lost their spouses violently, PTSD symptoms, yet those individuals who partake in self-enhancement evidenced less of both of those symptoms then perhaps would be the norm, thereby giving the judges a negative impression about the participants as their reactions are not what the observers expected. Additionally, self-enhancers were better able to deal with the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks better, having reduced symptoms and greater positive affect (Bonanno, Rennicke, & Dekel, 2005). However, at 18 months post September 11th friends and family members rated self-enhancers as decreasing in social adjustment and as being less honest. Bonanno et al. (2005) puts forth that self-enhancement not only helps self-enhancers deal with traumatic events but it also helps
them ignore the social costs that can be associated with that tendency. Goorin and Bonanno (2009) replicated Bonanno et al.'s (2005) results and concluded that self-enhancement is associated with genuine social benefits but self-enhancers tend to misperceive how others see them.

Just as there are those who espouse the virtues of self-enhancement it has its detractors too. Self-enhancement has been linked to narcissism (John & Robins, 1994), poor social skills and psychological maladjustment across time (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995), positive affect initially but decreasing levels of self-esteem and well-being over time (Robins & Beer, 2001). In the workplace self-enhancement actually interferes with empowerment practices such as delegation and self-management teams because managers perceive work they are more self-involved in to be of higher quality than identical work they were not directly involved in (Pfeffer, Cialdini, Hana, & Knopoff, 1998). The link between self-enhancement and narcissists seems to take place at the extreme end of the spectrum with Narcissists exhibiting self-enhancement to their social detriment in situations where nonnarcissists refrained from engaging in self-enhancement (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000) and narcissists showing more pronounced self-enhancement even after controlling for self-esteem (Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007).

Yet another take on self-enhancement can be found in O'Mara, McNulty, and Karney's (2011) assertion that positive biases are not inherently positive or negative but rather the context in which they occur dictates their health costs or benefits. In their research O'Mara et al. found that when people make positively biased appraisals of controllable but severe experiences they suffer health costs in the form of decreased
affect, even possibly depression. The authors, suggest this might have to do with ignoring situations which would be best dealt with from a psychological point of view. Conversely, those individuals who make positive appraisals of controllable but less severe negative experiences, insulate themselves from any possible fallout having to do with the negative situation and allowing them to move on from a minor problem which is not risky to ignore, thus promoting mental health (O'Mara et al., 2011).

**Conclusion**

Given the research reviewed in this work, it appears that the evidence for the existence of self-enhancement and furthermore, it's being an universal trait that varies greatly across individuals is strong. Perhaps the discrepancy between the various works of Heine et al. and Sedikides et al. as to whether or not East Asians self-enhance lies in the cultures that they are examining. All of the cultures in their studies are collectivist cultures to be sure, but what if one were to reexamine the data using Loughnan et al.'s (2011) paradigm of examining income inequality in addition to self-enhancement measures? It would be an interesting and informative analysis to make. Future studies on the cultural variations of self-enhancement should look to elucidate new ways to parse out the data as the literature with the exception of Loughnan et al. (2011) appears to be blinding pursuing collectivism and individualism as the mediators for self-enhancement differences when the evidence on that is far from conclusive. It would stand to reason that there could be some other factor as of yet to be explored that would provide a parsimonious explanation. As to self-enhancement's effects on mental health the evidence that some self-enhancement promotes good mental health is also somewhat strong. Self-enhancement appears to be like any other trait in that one extreme is better
than the other but neither extreme is considered the optimal amount. Those people whose trait self-enhancement is at either extreme may show signs of psychopathology namely Narcissism or depression. Thus, it seems that self-enhancement does indeed function to help maintain one's feelings of self-worth and we engage in it strategically, when we need a buffer to deal with something negative and when it would not prove socially detrimental. Though only speculative in nature, the thought occurs, that self-enhancement may have evolved with concurrent advances in affective and cooperative abilities.
References


