Explaining self-esteem differences between Chinese and North Americans: Dialectical self (vs. self-consistency) or lack of positive self-regard

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Explaining Self-esteem Differences between Chinese and North Americans: Dialectical Self (vs. Self-consistency) or Lack of Positive Self-regard

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Past studies showed that compared to North Americans, East Asians have lower self-esteem and their self-esteem scores do not predict self-esteem-related motivations and self-perceptions. These findings have been interpreted in terms of a lack of the need for positive self-regard in East Asian contexts. We posit that the East–West difference in self-esteem may arise from the popularity of the dialectical self (the idea that one can have both a positive and negative self) in East Asia and of the internally consistent self (the notion that having a positive self implies not having a negative one, and vice versa) in North America. Consistent with this idea, we found that the Chinese American difference in self-esteem level was driven primarily by Chinese participants’ greater tendency to agree with negatively worded self-esteem items. Furthermore, because of the motivation to maintain consistent responses, North Americans’ response pattern varied depending on whether the first item in the self-esteem measure was positively or negatively worded. Finally, contrary to the lack of positive self-regard explanation, for both Chinese and North Americans, agreement with positively worded self-esteem items predicted self-esteem-related motivations and self-perceptions.

The principle of transformation through harmonization of opposite forces has had profound influence on the social philosophy in major Confucian societies (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean societies; Cheung et al., 2003). According to this principle, yin and yang, two opposing forces, manifest in various forms in Nature (e.g., the weak vs. the strong; evil vs. divine, illness vs. health, coldness vs. warmth, darkness vs. light, bad vs. good fortune), push themselves each into the place of the other, and hence changes take place. A recent survey (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001)
showed that many Chinese still believe in this principle. Compared to their North American peers, Chinese undergraduates believe more strongly that a couple who have been dating each other for two years will break up, someone who has been a chess champion for three years will lose in the next game, a student from a poor family will become rich one day, two kindergarten children who have been fighting will become friends one day, and a trend in the growth rates of the world economy or the worldwide death rate for cancer will reverse in the future (see also Peng & Nisbett, 1999).

Confucian scholars have extended this principle from metaphysics to self-development, asserting that self-development requires recognition of one’s weaknesses and strengths (Cheung et al., 2006). Recognition of one’s weaknesses provides motivation for self-improvement, whereas awareness of one’s strengths motivates the self to set and implement realistic and challenging goals. This view of the dialectical self is expressed in I-Ching, or Book of Change, one of the most widely read Chinese classics: “The superior man knows the minute and the manifested; he knows what is weak, and what is strong.” The current research examines the implications of the dialectical self in East Asian contexts for understanding how East Asians respond to measures of self-esteem.

When respondents rate themselves on certain personality dimensions, they seek to maintain consistent responses across items (Bailey, 1994). Although the consistency motivation is prevalent in both Eastern and Western cultures, evidence from cross-cultural research shows that this motivation is stronger among individualists than collectivists (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999), probably because consistency in attitudes and self-perceptions helps individualists maintain the perception of the personal self as a coherent, context-independent entity. For example, North American undergraduates who rate themselves as extroverted would not rate themselves as being introverted, and vice versa (Choi & Choi, 2002). Furthermore, North Americans tend to agree with positive self-statements and disagree with negative self-statements and to attribute much more positive than negative characteristics to the self (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004).

However, East Asians believing in the dialectical self may give seemingly inconsistent self-ratings. For example, Koreans rate themselves more extroverted when asked how extroverted they are than when asked how introverted they are (Choi & Choi, 2002). Additionally, Chinese tend to agree with positive self-statements and not to disagree with negative self-statements. They also tend to attribute similar percentages of positive and negative characteristics to the self (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). In short, whereas North Americans tend to make consistently positive evaluation of the self irrespective of whether the test items are positively or negatively worded, Chinese tend to affirm positive attributes of the self without denying their negative qualities. We believe that East–West differences in the relative prevalence of the consistency motivation and the dialectical self may explain why Easterners have lower scores on self-report measures of self-esteem.

Need for Positive Self-regard Across Cultures

The notion of dialectical self seems to contradict a common characterization of the East Asian self in the research literature. In a provocative article, Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999, p. 766) maintain that “the empirical literature provides scant evidence for the need for positive self-regard among Japanese and indicates that a self-critical focus is more characteristic of Japanese.” Three findings
are often cited to support this contention. First, Japanese and Chinese do not exhibit the self-serving bias. That is, they do not attribute positive outcomes to personal dispositions and negative outcomes to situational causes (Gelfand et al., 2002; Kitayama, Takagi, & Matsumoto, 1995; Salili, 1995). However, more recent studies demonstrated that under some specific circumstances (e.g., in private settings and competitive situations; Kudo & Numazaki, 2003; Takata, 2003), East Asians also display the self-serving bias.

Second, East Asians display a self-critical bias, behaving humbly when rating or describing the self or their achievements (Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999; Bond & Cheung, 1983; Heine & Renshaw, 2002; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Oishi, Wyer, & Colcombe, 2000). However, unless awareness of one’s strengths is assumed to be incompatible with acknowledgement of one’s weaknesses, the presence of a self-critical attitude does not entail the absence of the need for positive self-regard (Chiu & Hong, 2006). The notion of dialectical self asserts that well-adjusted individuals recognize their strengths and acknowledge their weaknesses.

Third, compared to North Americans, East Asians have lower scores on standard self-esteem measures (Heine et al., 1999). Interestingly, a recent study showed that this cultural difference results in part from East Asians’ stronger belief in dialecticism, which in turn leads to stronger agreement with negatively worded self-esteem items (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004, Study 3). Consistent with this past finding, in the current research, we hypothesized that East Asians would be more likely than North Americans to admit personal inadequacies (agree with negatively worded self-esteem items). Because the dialectical self affirms the importance of recognizing one’s strengths, like their North American counterparts, East Asians should agree with positively worded self-esteem items. However, the dialectical self also prescribes acknowledgment of one’s weaknesses. Thus, compared to North Americans, East Asians would agree more with negatively worded self-esteem items.

Positive and Negative Self-esteem

The Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) is one of the mostly widely used measures of global self-esteem in cross-cultural research. The scale consists of five positively worded items (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”) and five negatively worded items (e.g., “I think I am not good at all”). Including both positively and negatively worded items allows researchers to control for the acquiescence set. However, some researchers have questioned whether agreement with positively worded items is conceptually equivalent to disagreement with the negatively worded items (Greenberger, Chen, Dmitrieva, & Farruggia, 2003). In one study, Greenberger et al. (2003) formed a revised negative version of the RSES by rephrasing the positively worded items in the original RSES into negatively worded items (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” was changed to “On the whole, I am not satisfied with myself”). They also created a revised positive version by rephrasing the negatively worded items in the original scale into positively worded items (e.g., “I feel I do not have much to be proud of” was changed to “I feel I do have much to be proud of”). Factor analysis was performed on the original version of RSES and the two alternative versions. The original version fit a two-factor (positive and negative self-esteem) model, whereas the reworded versions fit a one-factor model. This finding suggests that agreement with the positively worded items and disagreement with negatively worded items may tap two different facets of self-esteem.
Many relationships between self-esteem and self-processes are based on the assumption that individuals are motivated to enhance the positivity of their self-concept (e.g., Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Consistent with this assumption, the need to enhance a positive self has been found to: (1) be resilient in pursuing valued goal (persistence; McFarlin, Baumeister, & Blascovich, 1984); (2) have high motivation for achievement and seek intellectual challenges (challenge seeking; Baumeister & Tice, 1985); (3) believe the self to be invincible and do not expect negative events to happen to the self (perceived invulnerability; Boney-McCoy, Gibbons, & Gerrard, 1999; Gibbons, Eggleston, & Benthin, 1997; Smith, Gerrard, & Gibbons, 1997); and (4) set high but sometimes unrealistic achievement goals for the self (goal setting; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993).

However, given that affirmation of positive self-aspects may not be psychologically equivalent to repudiation of negative self-aspects, it is unclear whether the same self-processes would also occur among individuals who are motivated to deny the negativity of their self-concept. Indeed, there is evidence linking affirmation of positive self-aspects to promotion-oriented self-processes and repudiation of negative self-aspects to prevention-oriented self-processes. For example, Higgins et al. (2000) used the Regulatory Focus Scale to measure promotion focus (concern with achieving valued goals) and prevention focus (concern with avoiding negative consequences). An example item of the promotion subscale is: “I feel like I have made progress toward being successful in my life”; and an example item of the prevention focus subscale is: “Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times” (reverse scoring). Affirmation of positive self-aspects is more strongly correlated with promotion focus than with prevention focus, and the reverse is true for repudiation of negative self-aspects (Ip, 1999). Furthermore, affirmation of positive self-aspects predicts the motivation to project favorable self-images in public situations, whereas repudiation of negative self-aspects predicts concerns over the appropriateness of one’s behaviors in social situations and the motivation to comply with social norms (Roth, Harris, & Snyder, 1988; Roth, Snyder, & Pace, 1986; Wooten & Reed, 2004).

In the context of the current study, because persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability of the self, and goal setting are promotion-oriented self-processes, they should be linked to agreement with positively worded RSES items. However, it is questionable whether individuals who disagree with the negatively worded RSES items would necessarily engage in these processes. Another objective of the current investigation was to explore this issue. Because persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability, and goal setting are primarily promotion-oriented self-processes, we hypothesized that for both North Americans and East Asians, only agreement with positively worded RSES items would predict these processes.

Consistency Motivation and the Dialectical Self

As noted, compared to East Asians, North Americans have a stronger motivation to maintain consistency of responses across the valence of the items. Out of a stronger motivation to answer all questions in a consistent manner, North Americans may make their responses to the subsequent items consistent with their response to the first item (Bailey, 1994). Because the first item in the RSES is a positively worded item (“On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”), after the participants have responded to this item, they may respond to the subsequent items in a consistent manner regardless their valence. That is, if these participants agree (disagree) with the first item, they may tend to agree (disagree) with other positively worded items.
and disagree (agree) with the negatively worded items. As a result, self-esteem scores based on the positively worded items would have relatively high correlations with those based on the negatively worded items (Bailey, 1994). Additionally, because the first item is a positively worded item, which should predict persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability, and goal setting, the consistency motivation would inflate the correlations between negatively worded items and these validity measures.

However, when North Americans respond to the revised positive and revised negative versions of the RSES in the Greenberger et al. (2003) study, responses to the two versions may show different patterns of associations with measures of persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability, and goal setting. That is, only responses to the revised positive version would predict these promotion-oriented validity measures.

Furthermore, when the first item in the original RSES is replaced with a negatively worded item, the consistency motivation would drive North Americans to keep their responses to the subsequent items consistent with their response to the first (negatively worded) item. Because negatively worded items do not predict persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability, and goal setting, under this circumstance, both the positively and negatively worded items should not predict these promotion-oriented validity measures.

In contrast, if East Asians do not see agreement with positively and negatively worded self-esteem items as incompatible responses, their responses to the two kinds of items should show the same pattern of associations with the promotion-oriented validity measures irrespective of whether the self-esteem measure being responded to is the original RSES, the revised positive version, the revised negative version, or the negatively worded item first version. In all rating conditions, only positively worded items should predict the promotion-oriented validity measures.

**Summary of Hypotheses and Implications**

In summary, we predicted that East Asians would have lower scores on the RSES than would North Americans, but the difference would be driven primarily by East Asians’ stronger agreement with the negatively worded items. If that is the case, the claim that East Asians do not have the need for positive self-regard because they have lower self-esteem scores may be overstated. Like Americans, East Asians also assert a positive self. However, unlike Americans, East Asians do not see acknowledging one’s weaknesses as being antithetical to asserting the positive self and are therefore less reluctant to admit their negative self-aspects.

We also predicted that for both East Asians and North Americans, the revised positive version of the RSES would predict persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability, and goal setting, but the revised negative version would not. However, among North Americans, because of their consistency motivation, self-esteem scores should predict these promotion-oriented validity measures when the first item is a positively worded item, but not when it is a negatively worded one. For East Asians, regardless of whether the first item is a positively or negatively worded item, only the positively worded items in the RSES should predict the promotion-oriented validity measures. If the results support these hypotheses, it would suggest for both East Asians and North Americans, affirmation of the positive self is related to such motivations as persistence, challenge seeking, and goal setting, and to perceived invulnerability of the self.
Method

Overview

To test our hypotheses, Chinese and North American undergraduates completed one of the four versions of the RSES: (1) the original, positively worded item first version; (2) the negatively worded item first version; (3) the revised positive version; and (4) the revised negative version. The original and the negatively worded item first version each consists of five positively and five negatively worded items. The revised positive (revised negative) version consists of 10 positive (negative) items. The participants also responded to four promotion-oriented validity measures (persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability, and goal setting).

Participants

The participants were 218 undergraduates (56 men; mean age = 19.56 years) from a public university in Illinois, USA, and 215 undergraduates (124 men; mean age = 19.89 years) from a public university in Beijing, China. They received course requirement credit for their participation.

Measures

Four versions of the RSES were used. Version 1 was the original version. As mentioned, the first item in the original RSES is a positively worded item. Version 2 (the negatively worded item first version) was formed by moving the 9th item (a negatively worded item: “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure”) in the original scale to the beginning of the scale. Version 3 was the revised positive version and Version 4 was the revised negative version in the Greenberger et al. (2003) study. The participants were randomly assigned to respond to one of four versions. In all versions, the scale ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. Table 1 shows the internal reliability for each version and for each cultural sample. The reliability coefficients ranged from .80 to .95, with slightly higher reliability for the North Americans than for the Chinese in the two original versions and in the revised negative version. Among the four versions, the revised positive version had the highest internal reliability.

Next, all participants responded to four promotion-oriented validity measures: (1) Persistence: “You just took an important test and failed. Now you have one more chance to take the test. How likely would you take it, even if you may fail it again?”

| TABLE 1: Internal Reliabilities of Different Versions of the RSES |
|-------------------|-------------------|
|                   | North Americans  | Chinese  |
| Positively worded item first | .89              | .80      |
| Negatively worded item first  | .87              | .80      |
| Revised positive version     | .94              | .95      |
| Revised negative version     | .89              | .80      |
(2) Challenge seeking: “You are given the option of taking a very challenging task that only a few people will succeed. How likely would you take it?” (3) Perceived invulnerability of the self (reverse scored): “You just read a scientific article that describes the risks of getting involved in a life-threatening accident. According to the article, 1 out of 2 adults would have a life threatening accident before age 40. How likely would you have such an accident before age 40?” and (4) Goal setting: “You have taken a performance task and you have a score below the average. You have one more chance to take the test. This time, you will set your own standard, which must be not lower than your performance in the previous task. You will be rewarded based on your performance. If you set your standard at the same level as your performance in the first task and succeed, you will get a small reward. The higher the standard you set compared to your initial performance, the greater the reward you will get if you succeed. If you fail to achieve the standard you set for yourself, you will get nothing. How will you set the standard?” The participants indicated their responses to each of these questions on an 11-point scale. The scales for the first three items ranged from “very unlikely” to “very likely,” and the one for the last item ranged from “identical to initial performance” to “much higher than initial performance.”

The questionnaire was written in English and translated into Chinese and then back translated into English. Two Chinese–English bilinguals independently verified the adequacy of the translation. At the end of the study, the participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

**Results**

**Cultural Differences in Self-esteem**

First, we examined the overall self-esteem scores (mean of the 10 items with reverse scoring for the negatively worded items) derived from the original (positively worded item first) version of the RSES and from the negatively worded item first version. We performed a Culture × Item Order (positively or negatively worded item first) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the two overall self-esteem scores. There was a significant main effect of culture, $F(1, 213) = 19.24, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.08$, and the interaction was not significant ($F = 0.08$). As in previous studies, North Americans scored higher than Chinese on the original (positively worded item first) RSES ($M_{American} = 5.51, M_{Chinese} = 4.90$), $F(1, 104) = 10.81, p = .001, \eta^2_p = 0.09$. North Americans also scored higher than Chinese when the first item in the scale was a negatively worded item ($M_{American} = 5.66, M_{Chinese} = 5.12$), $F(1, 109) = 8.50, p < .005, \eta^2_p = 0.07$. Thus, the result indicated a robust American–Chinese difference in self-esteem, irrespective of whether the first item in the self-esteem measure was positively or negatively worded.

A more nuanced pattern emerged when the five positively worded and the five negatively worded items in these two versions (the original version and the negatively worded item first version) were analyzed separately. A Culture × Item Valence × Item Order ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of culture, $F(1, 212) = 19.24, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.08$, which was qualified by the significant Culture × Item Valence interaction, $F(1, 213) = 4.59, p < .05, \eta^2_p = 0.02$. As shown in Figure 1, the American–Chinese difference in self-esteem was considerably bigger on the negatively worded items ($M_{American} = 5.43, M_{Chinese} = 4.69$), $F(1, 215) = 20.69,$
Analyses performed on the revised positive and revised negative versions revealed a similar pattern. North Americans had higher self-esteem scores than did Chinese when all items were negatively worded \((M_{\text{American}} = 5.76, M_{\text{Chinese}} = 5.36), F(1, 115) = 4.53, p < .05, \eta^2_p = 0.04.\) However, the two samples did not differ in their self-esteem scores when all items were positively worded \((M_{\text{American}} = 5.38, M_{\text{Chinese}} = 5.00), F(1, 97) = 1.94, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.02.\)

The results shown in Figure 1 resemble those reported in Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004, Study 1): Whereas North Americans agreed with positively worded items and disagreed with negatively worded ones (a manifestation of a consistent self), Chinese agreed with positively worded items but did not strongly disagree with negatively worded ones (manifestation of a dialectical self).

In short, as in previous studies, Chinese scored lower on the RSES than did North Americans. However, the difference was more pronounced when the self-esteem items were negatively (vs. positively) worded. This result also showed that Chinese displayed less consistent responses across positively and negatively worded items, compared to North Americans.

**Correlation of Positive and Negative Self-esteem**

If North Americans were more motivated to maintain consistent ratings across both positively and negatively worded items than were Chinese, correlations between these two types of items should be higher in the two original versions of the RSES among North Americans than Chinese. To test this prediction, we computed the interclass correlations (correlations of positively and negatively worded items) in the original (positively worded item first) RSES and those in the original, negatively worded item first RSES for the North American and Chinese samples separately. For North Americans, the mean interclass correlation (Fisher’s \(z\)-transformed and back-transformed) was 0.34 \((p < .01)\) in the original (positively worded item first) RSES and 0.24 \((p < .01)\) in the negatively worded item first RSES.
worded item first) version and 0.41 \((p < .001)\) in the negatively worded item first version. For Chinese, the mean interclass correlation was 0.28 \((p < .05)\) in the original (positively worded item first) version and 0.22 \((ns)\) in the negatively worded item first version.

We also performed a 2 (Culture) \(\times\) 2 (Version: positively or negatively worded item first) \(\times\) Positive RSES (mean centered RSES score based on agreement with positively worded items only) GLM on negative RSES (RSES scores based on disagreement with negatively worded items only). A significant Culture \(\times\) Positive RSES interaction would indicate significant cultural differences in the association between positive and negative RSES. There was a significant main effect of positive RSES, \(F(1, 209) = \frac{98.27}{p < .001}\). The predicted Culture \(\times\) Positive RSES interaction was also significant, \(F(1, 209) = 4.25, p < .05\). For both North Americans and Chinese, positive RSES predicted negative RSES, North Americans: \(B = 0.97, t(108) = 6.68, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.39\); Chinese: \(B = 0.48, t(101) = 3.72, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.25\), but the effect size was considerably larger among North Americans than Chinese. In short, the results supported the assumption that the responses across positively and negatively worded items were more consistent among North Americans than Chinese.

Correlations of the Validity Measures with Positive and Negative Self-esteem

To examine whether the association between self-esteem and the four promotion-oriented validity measures is restricted to positive self-esteem, we fitted the four validity measures to a series of multivariate generalized linear models (GLM) with the pertinent self-esteem measure (mean-centered) as the predictor and the four validity measures as the dependent measures. This data analytic strategy allows us to evaluate the multivariate association between self-esteem and the validity measures without inflating the chance of committing the Type I error.

The predictor in the first analysis was the mean self-esteem score in the revised positive version of the RSES. As shown in Table 2, among North Americans, the mean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Multivariate Effect Size of RSES on the Promotion-oriented Validity Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multivariate effect size ((\eta^2_p))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Americans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded item first</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall score</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded items</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively worded items</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively worded item first</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall score</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded items</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively worded items</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised positive version</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised negative version</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(*p < .05; **p < .001.\)
self-esteem score in the revised positive version of the RSES significantly predicted the validity measures, $F(4, 41) = 6.97, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.41$. However, when the same analysis was repeated using the mean self-esteem score in the revised negative version of the RSES as predictor, the multivariate effect of self-esteem was not significant, $F(4, 55) = 1.12, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.08$. Table 3 shows the correlations of the SES measures with each of the four validity measures. This result indicates that for North Americans, only agreement with positively worded self-esteem items predicts persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability of the self, and goal setting.

A similar pattern of results was found among Chinese. The revised positive version predicted the validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 47) = 6.16, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.34$, but the revised negative version did not, multivariate $F(4, 52) = 1.44, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.10$. In short, for both Chinese and North Americans, only responses to the positively worded RSES items predicted persistence, challenge seeking, perceived invulnerability of the self, and goal setting.

### Table 3 Correlations of the Self-esteem Scales and the Promotion-oriented Validity Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Persistence</th>
<th>Challenge seeking</th>
<th>Perceived invulnerability</th>
<th>Setting challenging goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>North Americans</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded item first</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall score</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.39*</td>
<td>.47*</td>
<td>.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded items</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively worded items</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.48*</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively worded item first</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall score</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded items</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively worded items</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised positive version</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>.50*</td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised negative version</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chinese</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded item first</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Overall score</td>
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<td>.33*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively worded items</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>−.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively worded items</td>
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<td>.21</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>−.17</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>.17</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.15</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>.33*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revised positive version</td>
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<td>.29*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revised negative version</td>
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*Note: *$p < .05$. \[\]
Correlation of Self-esteem in the Original Versions of RSES with the Promotion-oriented Validity Measures

If only positive self-esteem predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures and North Americans tried to maintain response consistency by assimilating subsequent responses to their first response, we would expect the following pattern of results. First, when the first item was a positively worded item, there should be positive correlations between the validity measures and: (a) mean RSES scores based on all items; (b) mean RSES score based on positively worded items only; and (c) mean RSES score based on negatively worded items only. However, when the first item was a negatively worded item, these correlations would be insignificant.

As predicted, the overall self-esteem score derived from the original (positively worded item first) RSES predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 47) = 8.19, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.41$. Additionally, both the positively and the negatively worded items predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 47) = 5.96, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.34$, for the positively worded items, and multivariate $F(4, 47) = 6.12, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.34$, for the negatively worded items.

However, when the first item on the scale was a negatively worded item, both the positively and the negatively worded items did not predict the promotion-oriented validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 55) = 1.41, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.09$, for the positively worded items, and multivariate $F(4, 55) = 1.59, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.10$, for the negatively worded items. Moreover, the overall RSES score also failed to predict the promotion-oriented validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 55) = 1.72, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.11$. These results are consistent with the idea that North Americans attempted to maintain consistency in their responses to the RSES items. After they had made a response to the first item, they tried to make their subsequent responses consistent with their first response. Thus, when the first item was a positively worded item, responses to the subsequent items tended to cohere with the first response, and both responses to the positively and the negatively worded items predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures. However, when the first item was a negatively worded item, subsequent responses to both the positively and the negatively worded items were consistent with the response to the first negatively worded item, and are thus not predictive of the promotion-oriented validity measures.

However, if only positive self-esteem predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures and Chinese did not seek to maintain consistency between their responses to the positively and the negatively worded items, the item order manipulation should not affect their response pattern. For both the positively worded item first version and the negatively worded item first version, significant associations should be found between the promotion-oriented validity measures and the self-esteem scores based on positively worded items only.

Consistent with this prediction, for the original (positively worded item first) version, the overall self-esteem score did not predict the promotion-oriented validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 47) = 2.38, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.17$. However, the positively worded items in this version predicted the validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 47) = 3.30, p < .05, \eta^2_p = 0.22$, but the negatively worded items did not, multivariate $F(4, 47) = 1.10, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.09$. Similarly, for the negatively worded item first version, the overall self-esteem score did not predict the validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 46) = 0.96, p > .05, \eta^2_p = 0.08$. Again, the positively worded items
of this version predicted the validity measures, multivariate $F(4, 46) = 3.20$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = 0.22$, and the negatively worded items did not, multivariate $F(4, 46) = 0.68$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2_p = 0.06$. Thus, regardless of whether the first item was positively or negatively worded, only responses to the positively worded items predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures.

**Discussion**

As in previous studies (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004), North Americans tended to agree with positively worded items and disagree with negatively worded ones, and Chinese tended to agree with both kinds of items. More important, our results extend previous findings by illustrating the implications of this cultural difference for the internal consistency of a widely used self-esteem scale. Our results also illustrate how a subtle change in item order could impact the relationship between self-esteem scores and some validity measures differently in North American and Chinese contexts. Furthermore, as we will elaborate presently, our results shed light on a current debate in the psychology of culture and self: Do the relatively low self-esteem scores and weak associations between self-esteem scores and promotion-oriented validity measures in Chinese context imply that Chinese do not need positive self-regard?

Using the RSES, past research has revealed marked East–West differences in both self-esteem levels and the psychological importance of self-esteem (see Heine et al., 1999). Compared to North Americans, East Asians have lower self-esteem scores. Additionally, among North Americans, self-esteem is related to promotion-oriented self-perceptions and self-regulatory processes (see Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, for East Asians, such associations are either considerably weaker or do not exist. The result of the current study does not contradict these past findings. When responding to the original RSES, Chinese undergraduates had lower self-esteem scores than did North American undergraduates. Moreover, the overall self-esteem score (based on all 10 items) predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures only among North American undergraduates.

Despite this, our results challenge the claim that East Asians do not have the need for positive self-regard. First, the self-esteem difference between Chinese and North Americans was driven primarily by the Chinese participants’ greater tendency to agree with negatively worded self-esteem items. Compared to North Americans, Chinese also agreed less with the positively worded self-esteem items, but the effect size was small, and not always significant. Furthermore, among the Chinese participants, the mean rating on the positively worded self-esteem items was consistently above 5 on a scale that ranged from 1 to 7. It appears that the Chinese participants had fairly high positive self-regard.

Second, although for Chinese, the overall RSES score (based on all 10 items) did not predict the promotion-oriented validity measures, their responses to the positively worded items did. This result indicates that for Chinese, agreement with positively worded self-esteem items predicted persistence, challenge seeking, goal setting, and perceived invulnerability of the self, whereas disagreement with negatively worded self-esteem items did not. This pattern was also found when we analyzed the negatively worded item first version of the RSES. Furthermore, whereas the revised positive version predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures, the revised negative version did not. Taken together, these findings illustrate that for Chinese, having positive self-regard is related to both promotion motivations and perceived invincibility of the self.
The dissociation between the affirmation of positive self-aspects and repudiation of negative self-aspects was also found among the North Americans. For North Americans, the revised positive version of the RSES predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures, but the revised negative version did not. Thus, our result suggests that for both Chinese and North Americans, only affirmation of the positive self is related to persistence, challenge seeking, goal setting, and perceived invulnerability of the self.

Interestingly, when North Americans responded to the original RSES, both responses to the positively and the negatively worded items predicted the promotion-oriented validity measures. We believed that this was due to the American participants’ consistency motivation. After having made their response to the first item, they made their responses to the subsequent items consistent with their first response. Because the first item in the RSES is a positively worded item, the consistency motivation rendered responses to negatively worded items in the scale predictive of the promotion-oriented validity measures.

The result from the item order manipulation supports our interpretation. When we moved a negatively worded item to the beginning of the original RSES scale, for North Americans, both responses to the positively and the negatively worded items did not predict the promotion-oriented validity measures. This happened probably because the participants responding to this measure had assimilated their subsequent responses to their first response, which was made to a negatively worded item.

In contrast, possibly because of their belief in a dialectical self, Chinese participants did not view agreement with negatively worded self-esteem items as being incompatible with agreement with positively worded items. Thus, they did not attempt to make their responses to the positively and the negatively worded items consistent with each other. As a result, the inter-class correlations for the positively and negatively worded items were relatively low. Furthermore, the item order manipulation did not influence Chinese participants’ response pattern. The belief in a dialectical self also explains why Chinese participants who agreed with positively worded items were not reluctant to agree with the negatively worded items. This result is consistent with the previous finding that East Asians often display seemingly contradictory responses to personality measures (e.g., rate themselves as being both extroverted and introverted; Choi & Choi, 2002).

In summary, based on the finding that East Asians self-efface in self-presentation (Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999; Kanagawa et al., 2001), some researchers infer that East Asians do not have the need for positive self-regard. We believe that this inference may result from applying a North American model of an internally consistent self to understanding self-conception in East Asian cultural contexts—if East Asians admit having negative self-aspects, they do not need positive self-regard. However, if East Asians subscribe to the notion of dialectical self, they could display both self-effacement and self-enhancement. Indeed, in response to the claim that East Asians do not self-enhance and do not need positive self-regard, some East Asian social psychologists have argued with convincing evidence that East Asians also self-enhance despite their self-critical tendency (Kobayashi & Brown, 2003; Kudo & Numazaki, 2003; Muramoto, 2003; Takata, 2003). All these findings suggest that culture-characteristic motivations and self-construals could influence the way self-ratings are made. Hence, a cultural analysis is an indispensable tool for decoding the subtle cultural meanings of responses to psychological measures.
Limitations, Caveats, and Conclusions

The current investigation did not include prevention-oriented validity measures (e.g., increased vigilance, norm adherence, obligation fulfillment). Given the previously demonstrated links between repudiation of negative self-aspects and prevention-oriented self-processes, we hypothesized that for both North Americans and East Asians, disagreement with negatively worded RSES items would predict the prevention-oriented validity measures. Moreover, only for North Americans, item order of the original RSES would influence the correlations between self-esteem scores and the prevention-oriented validity measures, with stronger correlations when the first item is a negatively (vs. positively) worded item. These hypotheses merit future investigation.

Although we found evidence that Chinese also need positive self-regard, our results do not suggest that Chinese and North Americans are equally driven to express their need for positive self-regard in all situations and on all measures of positive self-regard. In fact, there is clear evidence that expressions of positive self-regard are more tightly regulated in East Asian than North American contexts (Kurman, 2001, 2003). Also, display of self-enhancement behaviors has higher situational variability in East Asian (vs. North American) contexts (see Chiu & Hong, 2006). Thus, future research should strive to go beyond the debate of whether East Asians have the need for positive self-regard and start to examine when overt expressions of the need for self-regard are culturally permissible and even approved in East Asian contexts. Along this direction, it has been found that East Asians tend to self-enhance on collectivist self-aspects (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Furthermore, although both East Asians and North Americans have the need for positive self-regard, there may still be marked cultural variations in its sources, manifestations, and normative display rules (Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Kitayama & Uchida, 2003). Cultural analysis should be a useful tool for understanding the relationship between society, context, and positive self-regard. We believe that the notion of the dialectical self may provide a useful theoretical framework for advancing this kind of analysis.

Note

1. Although Figure 1 indicates that for both North Americans and Chinese, self-esteem scores based on positively worded items were higher than those based on negatively worded items, the difference was driven primarily by Chinese participants’ responses (difference = 0.32 for North Americans and 0.63 for Chinese). Additionally, when comparing the results from the revised positive and revised negative versions, self-esteem scores based on positively worded items were lower than those based on negatively worded items.

References


