Narcissistic Self-Enhancement in Japan: Not better-than-average but biased positively more than others

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This study examined whether narcissists engaged in self-enhancement under a cultural constraint that demands modest self-evaluations. Japanese undergraduate students ($N = 672$) recruited from introductory social psychology courses predicted their performance on the final course examination. Consistent with the Japanese cultural tendency, more than a half of the participants predicted their performance as "below 50%". Although Japanese narcissists did not show an extreme form of self-enhancement, they expressed relatively higher predictions than nonnarcissists. Further, a series of regression analyses revealed that narcissism still explained a significant proportion of the variance of self-enhancement, even when self-esteem was added to the regression equation. Discussion was focused on narcissistic self-enhancement under a cultural constraint.

Key words: cultural constraint, modesty, narcissism, self-enhancement, self-esteem

Narcissists are fascinated by self-enhancement, which is essential to sustain their expanded positive self-images. They typically express overly positive self-evaluations when given an opportunity. Previously, researchers have found narcissistic self-enhancement in a variety of dimensions such as academic performance (Robins & Beer, 2001), intelligence (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), attractiveness (Gabriel et al., 1994), and performance ratings for group discussion (John & Robins, 1994). In addition to these socially acceptable self-enhancements, they often demonstrate somewhat arrogant and socially undesirable self-enhancement. For example, narcissists may take credit from others for successful joint outcomes but blame them for failure (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000). They also present themselves positively even when accountability was required (Collins & Stukas, 2008).

It seems that a heightened drive toward aggrandizing personal self-images compel narcissists to promote improper self-enhancements. This strong tendency of narcissists toward self-enhancement leads us to raise a question: What happens to narcissists who are living in a culture that demands modest self-expression? This study's purpose was to examine whether narcissists are self-enhancing under cultural constraints concerning positive self-expression.

Although self-enhancement has been widely documented in the West, tendencies such as self-serving attribution, the better-than-average effect, or the favorable self-presentation are uncommon in the East. Indeed, a previous systematic review and meta-analysis found a

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compelling cultural effect on self-enhancement (Heine & Hamamura, 2007). However, some researchers have argued that the self-enhancement motive is pan-cultural and demonstrated Japanese's self-enhancement about collective dimensions such as agreeable, cooperative, or self-sacrificing (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003).

To address the controversy regarding the pervasiveness of self-enhancement, Kurman (2010) considered that the relative difference of self-enhancement is not a matter of existence of the self-enhancement motive, but of social norms or constraints that a specific culture demands. This suggests that the expression of positive self- evaluation by people will depend on whether the situation affords them self-enhancing opportunity. Indeed, Japanese people are willing to engage in self-enhancement under certain social situations. Takata (2003) indicated that although Japanese are self-critical in a relational context where they feel affective bonds to others, they are equally as self-enhancing as North Americans in another relational context where they have to be competitive (i.e., not caring affective relationship). This suggests that Japanese people will be self-enhancing under a situation where they are permitted to be conspicuous.

According to these arguments, whether Japanese people demonstrate self-enhancement depends on the degree to which they should consider the feelings of others. Some researchers focused on situational factors that facilitate self-enhancements in the East; however, relatively few researches were conducted on the personality factors that motivate Eastern people to express themselves in self-enhancing ways. This study focused on narcissism as an intra-individual condition that allows Japanese people to adopt self-enhancement, because researchers have regarded narcissists as having a tendency to disregard others and to attach little importance to affective interpersonal relationships (e.g., Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Thus, we regarded narcissists as people who internalize the condition for self-enhancement in Japan and hypothesized that narcissists will demonstrate higher self-enhancement than non-narcissists, even though the culture demands a modest expression concerning their academic performances.

Method

Participants

A total of 721 Japanese undergraduate students (343 males, 378 females, $M_{age} = 19.1$ years, range: 18-29 years) who took an introductory social psychology course opened between 2009 and 2011 at Niigata University served as participants with their written consent. Forty-nine participants (21 males and 28 females), who had missing data, were excluded from the data analyses.

Procedure

Students who agreed to participate in this research were asked to complete a personality questionnaire a week prior to the final examination of each annual course. Subsequently, at the time of the examination, they were asked to rate several items predicting their performance of

the examination after answering to all the questions.

Predicted performance and control measures. Participants' self-prediction was rated on two scales. (a) Ranking form: Participants chose one of the rank categories from "*lower 10%* (1)" to "*upper 10%* (9)." (b) Scoring form: Participants directly predicted the exam score and chose one of the score categories that fell under their prediction from "*0-9* (1)" to "*90-99* (10)".[1] Participants were also asked (c) the hours assigned for studying for the exam: from "*never* (0)" to "*8 hours and more* (9)" and (d) the perceived difficulty of the exam: from "*easy* (1)" to "*difficult* (7)."

Real exam score. The examination consisted of nine sections that were clustered with 6-14 true/false questions. Students scored points if they provided more than a specific number of correct answers within a section. For example, in the case of a section being clustered with 11 questions, students got 10 points if they give 11 correct answers (full marks). And, they got 9 points for 10 correct answers, 8 points for 9, 6 points for 8, 4 points for 7, 2 points for 6, or 0 points for below 5. The allotment of points within each section was different from section by section, but the maximum points attainable for each section were 10, so a total mark of the exam was 90. However, scores were converted into a score from zero to 100 for comparison with the predicted score.

Self-enhancement. (a) The predicted rank was regressed on the real rank and the standardized residual score of each participant was computed. These residuals are considered as an index of self-enhancement (Robins & Beer, 2001) because the positive residuals indicate that the corresponding observations were higher than the regression line (*i.e.*, self-enhancement over the predicted value) whereas the negative residuals indicate that the corresponding observations were lower than the same regression line (*i.e.*, self-effacement under the predicted value). Due to the fact that the regression line among our three samples could differ from each other, we computed the residuals at the sample base. The residual of the predicted exam score was computed as the same way. Correlation coefficients between the residuals for rank and exam score of the three samples were .64- .69. These two residuals were composed and used as a self-enhancement index.

Narcissism. A 40-item, forced-choice Japanese version[2] of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) was used. Participants were asked to choose one of two sentences that described them better for each item. The internal consistency of this scale was $\alpha = .82$.

Self-esteem. The Japanese version (Hoshino, 1970) of Rosenberg's(1965) self-esteem scale was used. Participants were asked to rate how well each item described them on a four-point scale ranging from 1 "*not at all*" to 4 "*very much*." The internal consistency was satisfactory ($\alpha = .77$).

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[1] We divided the score at every 10 points into 10 categories. Subsequently, a scale maximum value 100 remained. Although we included the maximum value in a list of answer choices as "*100* (11)," we removed it from the analyses because no participants predicted the maximum value.

[2] This version was the same as used in Fukushima and Hosoe (2011). Details should be requested to the first author of this article.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The rightmost column of Table 1 indicates that participants expressed a modest prediction as a whole. While only 16.8% of the total participants predicted their rank as "*above 50%*," more than half of the participants predicted their rank as "*below 50%*." A similar pattern was found for the prediction on the scoring form.

Table 1 also indicates cross tabulations of the participants' self-prediction by the quartile of the NPI40. For the prediction on ranking, a chi-square test, $\chi^2(6) = 12.56$, $p < .05$, revealed that among the highest narcissism significantly less participants predicted their rank as "*below 50%*" and more participants predicted "*above 50%*" than the expected value. On the contrary, among the lowest narcissism significantly more participants predicted their rank as "*below 50%*" and less participants predicted "*above 50%*" than the expected value. For the prediction on the scoring form, the significance of the chi-square test was marginal, $\chi^2(6) = 12.42$, $p < .06$, but among the highest narcissism significantly more participants predicted their exam score as "*above 70*" than the expectation.

While a significant relationship between narcissism and self-prediction was observed both for the rank ($r = .15$, $p < .05$) and score ($r = .13$, $p < .05$), narcissism was not related to participants' real performance ($r = -.05$, $-.06$, *n.s.*, respectively). Similar results were obtained for self-esteem. Correlation coefficients between self-esteem and self-prediction were significant both for the rank ($r = .09$, $p < .05$) and score ($r = .10$, $p < .05$); however, self-esteem was not related to participants' real performance ($r = -.03$, $-.03$, *n.s.*, respectively). In addition, correlation coefficients between the prediction and reality were $r = .32$, $p < .05$, for the rank, and $r = .34$, $p < .05$, for the exam score.

Table 1. Performance prediction as percentage of participants within each quartile of the NPI40

	Quartile of the NPI40				
	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Total
Self-Prediction	($n = 209$)	($n = 155$)	($n = 151$)	($n = 157$)	($N = 672$)
	Rank				
Above 50%	12.4*	15.5	17.2	23.6*	16.8
50%	24.4	29.7	31.1	28.7	28.1
Below 50%	63.2*	54.8	51.7	47.8*	55.1
	Score				
Above 70	10.0	9.0	11.9	16.6*	11.8
Between 60-69	25.4	37.4*	28.5	31.8	30.4
Below 59	64.6*	53.5	59.6	51.6	57.9

Note. Self-predictions of rank were categorized to indicate whether the "better-than-average" effect is observed. Self-predictions of score were categorized to indicate how many participants predict their failure of the exam ("Below 59"). NPI40 = narcissistic personality inventory. * $p < .05$ for adjusted residuals of the cells.

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of self-enhancement

Table 2 showed correlation coefficients between each pair of the indices used in this analysis. Consistent with our expectation, the higher narcissism was related to the higher self-enhancement. Self-esteem was also positively related to self-enhancement. The more study hours and the lower perceived difficulty of the exam were related to the higher self-enhancement. A significant correlation between sex and self-enhancement represents that male participants were more self-enhancing than females.

To examine the amount of unique variance of self-enhancement explained by narcissism, we conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses. First, study hours, difficulty of the exam, and sex were entered as control variables in step 1. Then, we tested two models to examine how much variance can be explained by adding narcissism or self-esteem as independent variables. In Model 1, narcissism was entered in step 2, then self-esteem was entered in step 3, whereas, in Model 2, self-esteem was entered in step 2, then narcissism was entered in step 3. These models were applied for assessment of the incremental validity of narcissism or self-esteem to explain the variance of self-enhancement.

The results are indicated Table 3. All control variables were significant. The higher number of study hours and the lower perceived difficulty of the exam were related to higher self-enhancement. A significant coefficient of sex indicated that male participants were more self-enhancing than females. Most importantly, when narcissism was entered prior to self-esteem in Model 1, it explained a significant amount of the variance of self-enhancement whereas self-esteem did not significantly increase the variance explained when it was entered at step 3. Model 2 also indicated a weaker effect of self-esteem than narcissism. Self-esteem certainly explained a significant amount of the variance of self-enhancement in step 2, but there remained an additional amount of the variance that was significantly explained by narcissism in step 3.

Table 2. Correlation coefficient of indices for regression analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-enhancement	-					
2. NPI40	.19*	-				
3. RSE	.12*	.38*	-			
4. Study hours	.18*	.01	-.06	-		
5. Difficulty	-.27*	.00	-.04	-.03	-	
6. Sex	-.13*	-.14*	-.08*	.19*	-.05	-
M	.00	9.05	23.57	3.73	5.49	.48
SD	.91	5.55	4.56	1.99	1.04	.50

Note. NPI40 = narcissistic personality inventory; RSE = Rosenberg self-esteem scale. Sex was a dummy variable; male ($n = 322$) =1, female ($n = 350$) = 0. * $p < .05$

Table 3.　Hierarchical multiple regression analyses of self-enhancement

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.13*		.13*	
Study hours		.21*		.21*
Difficulty		-.27*		-.27*
Sex		.19*		.19
Step 2	.03*		.01*	
NPI40 (Model 1)		.17*		-
RSE (Model 2)		-		.11*
Step 3	.00		.02*	
RSE (Model 1)		.06		-
NPI40 (Model 2)		-		.14*

Note. *n* = 672. NPI40 = narcissistic personality inventory; RSE = Rosenberg self-esteem. * *p* < .05.

Discussion

The more participants were narcissistic, the more they predicted their academic performance in a self-enhancing manner. However, the predictions expressed by narcissistic Japanese students were not like a form of "better-than-average." They predicted relatively higher performance than other Japanese students who generally expressed a modest self-prediction. These results are somewhat ambiguous in comparison to the robust findings among narcissistic self-enhancement literature (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011), but they are interpretable or even meaningful in terms of cultural view of self-enhancement if we suppose that two possible psychological effects were involved in this study.

First, Japanese narcissists may be unable to express a self-enhancing prediction like narcissists in the West. Individuals living in a specific culture usually act in accordance with the cultural behavioral standard so as not to deviate overly from it; otherwise, they would be punished. Some Japanese researchers have presented views that modesty is a socially shared norm (Ishiguro & Murakami, 2007) or a default behavioral principle (Suzuki & Yamagishi, 2004) in Japan. These views suggest that Japanese narcissists may suppress self-enhancement reluctantly. Specifically, cultural constraints are responsible for low self-enhancement behavior in East Asian countries (Kurman, 2010). These cultural properties might compel narcissists to engage in self-enhancement that is only slightly (albeit significantly) above the cultural standard of Japanese people. This study appears to reveal that narcissists are not immune to the influence of social or cultural pressure even when given the opportunity to aggrandize their positive self-view by a self-prediction of academic performance. Consistent with this argument, a recent cultural analysis of self-enhancement suggests that people will choose self-enhancement or self-effacement strategically according to cultural demand (Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2011). It seems to be plausible that even narcissists may try to act in accordance with cultural demands, which sustain their social life.

Second, Japanese narcissists demonstrated lower self-enhancement than our expectation; however, they were self-enhancing in comparison to other participants' predictions. This suggests that a desire for aggrandizing favorable views of the self, which narcissists generally hold, can work even under cultural constraints on the favorable expression about the self. Considering that the modesty of Japanese people is based on their concern for other individuals, we can presume that the reason why Japanese narcissists indicated a relative self-enhancement in this study is that they, as narcissists, have careless attitudes toward other people (Campbell, Foster, et al., 2002). Thus, narcissistic participants were exposed to two sources of influence on their self-enhancement. The first is the cultural factor that affected their self-prediction of performance in a suppressive way, and the other is the personality factor that worked as a driver for self-enhancement.

In comparison to narcissism, self-esteem demonstrated a weaker effect. A series of hierarchical regression analyses revealed that the coefficient of self-esteem was significant only when it was entered into the equation without narcissism. More importantly, if narcissism had been entered previously into the equation, the variance explained did not increase at all when self-esteem was entered into the equation. These results suggest that self-esteem has lesser power than narcissism to explain the variance of self-enhancement in Japan.

However, there remains a possibility that this restricted effect of self-esteem was due to the attribute that we asked participants to predict. In comparison to narcissists, individuals with high self-esteem tended to display lower self-enhancement on agentic attributes such as intelligence or extraversion; however, they enhanced themselves on communal or more socially oriented attributes such as morality or agreeableness (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Because of being asked to predict about an agentic attribute, participants who are high in self-esteem hesitated to report their predictions in self-enhancing manner. Thus, the effect of self-esteem on self-enhancement might be stronger than as indicated in this study if we asked participants to predict their morality or agreeableness.

Finally, this study's limitation should be considered. Our methodology involved some aspects which may produce biased results. First, participants predicted their performance in the presence of other students who took the exam. Some of them were friends or acquaintances whom the participants could individuate if asked. This may suppress participants' self-enhancement due to an individuation effect (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995). Second, participants predicted their performance immediately following the exam. This means that the participants might have clear information to predict their performed at the exam. Considering that ambiguity of a trait dimension makes people more self-enhancing (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), clear information of the performance might weaken narcissists' self-enhancement tendency. In addition, there is a limitation to generalize the results of this study because participants predicted their performance only for a specific subject (*i.e.*, introductory social psychology). We cannot deny the possibility that they could show a different pattern of the prediction if they were asked to report about another subject.

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