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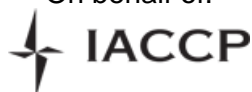
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# The Better-Than-Average Effect in Hong Kong and the United States: The Role of Personal Trait Importance and Cultural Trait Importance

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## Abstract

People tend to make self-aggrandizing social comparisons on traits that are important to the self. However, existing research on the better-than-average effect (BTAE) and trait importance does not distinguish between personal trait importance (participants' ratings of the importance of certain traits to themselves) and cultural trait importance (participants' perceptions of the importance of the traits to the cultural group to which they belong). We demonstrated the utility of this distinction by examining the joint effects of personal importance and cultural importance on the BTAE among Hong Kong Chinese and American participants. Results showed that the BTAE was more pronounced for personally important traits among both Chinese and American participants. More important, the magnitude of the BTAE was smaller on culturally important traits among Chinese participants only. Chinese participants displayed the strongest BTAE on personally important and culturally unimportant traits, and the smallest BTAE on personally unimportant and culturally important ones. American participants showed the smallest BTAE on personally and culturally unimportant traits. These findings underscore the importance of distinguishing personal trait importance and cultural trait importance in understanding the cultural effects on self-aggrandizing social comparisons. They further suggest that in cultures where people are expected to be modest in self-expression (e.g., Chinese culture), people would avoid claiming superiority on highly culturally important traits even when these traits are important to the self.

## Keywords

better-than-average-effect, culture, trait importance, intersubjective approach

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The better-than-average effect (BTAE) refers to a form of self-promoting social comparison: People compare their characteristics or behaviors favorably against a norm or standard, which is usually the average standing of their peers on the characteristics (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). This effect interests cross-cultural psychologists because although many studies have found relatively small or nonsignificant self-enhancement tendencies among Asians on other measures of self-evaluation (e.g., false uniqueness bias, self-discrepancies; see Heine & Hamamura, 2007), some studies have reported a consistent BTAE among both Asians and European Americans on personally important traits (Brown & Cai, 2010; Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, 2008; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). This has led some investigators to question whether the BTAE is a valid measure of self-enhancement (Hamamura, Heine, & Takemoto, 2007). Nonetheless, in a recent series of experiments, Guenther and Alicke (2010) reported compelling evidence that the BTAE clearly implicates self-promotion in social comparison. Thus, it seems reasonable to believe that the BTAE captures self-promoting social comparisons, although the self-enhancement process captured by this measure may differ from that captured by other measures.

The goal of the present investigation is *not* to determine whether Asians self-enhance or not.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the goal is to clarify the relationship between personal trait importance and the BTAE as a form of self-aggrandizing social comparison. There is evidence that the BTAE is indeed related to self-promoting social comparison. First, individuals display a larger BTAE in the presence of a threat to their self-worth (e.g., Beaugregard & Dunning, 1998; Brown & Gallagher, 1992). Second, the magnitude of the effect is related to having higher self-esteem (Kobayashi & Brown, 2003; Kurman, 2003) and better psychological adjustment (Gaertner et al., 2008). Last but not most important, individuals maintain a larger discrepancy between judgments of the self and others in BTA ratings in domains that are central to positive self-evaluation (Guenther & Alicke, 2010).

Given the consistent evidence that across cultural contexts, the magnitude of the BTAE is linked to personal importance of traits, our goal is to further understand the nature of this association. Specifically, drawing on the intersubjective consensus approach to culture (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010), we distinguish traits that are important to the self from traits that are perceived to be important in one's culture. We hold that maintaining this distinction is important for understanding differences in the *pattern* of self-aggrandizing social comparisons in different cultures. To flesh out this idea, we will review the literature on the relationship between trait importance and the BTAE and on the intersubjective consensus approach to culture.

## Trait Importance and the BTAE

Brown and Kobayashi (2002) proposed that self-promoting social comparisons are more pronounced for traits that are more personally important. In a series of studies they showed that Japanese students rate themselves more positively than they rate other students and other Japanese (i.e., BTA judgments), particularly on traits that are perceived to be personally important. Recent studies have replicated this positive association between the BTAE and personal trait importance. For instance, categorizing traits into individualist and collectivist groups, Sedikides, Gaertner, and Toguchi (2003) found that the Japanese and those with an interdependent self display the BTAE on collectivist traits only, whereas Americans and those with an independent self do so on individualist traits only (see also Brown & Cai, 2010). Gaertner et al. (2008) also found that in Taiwan, although different individuals may value different traits, people tend to claim that they are better than an average other on traits of high personal importance, and this tendency is particularly pronounced among participants with better psychological adjustment (e.g., lower depression, higher life satisfaction).

To explain why people display a stronger BTAE on personally important traits, Brown and Kobayashi (2002) contended that people value what is valued in the culture, and they claim to possess culturally valued (and hence personally important) traits more than others do because they want to feel good about themselves (see also Brown & Cai, 2010). In their words, "if the culture values diligence, people will claim to be industrious" (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002, p. 164). Sedikides et al. (2003) and Gaertner et al. (2008) echoed this view. They held that personal trait importance results partly from internalization of cultural values: People tactically see themselves positively on personally important traits, which are likely to be culturally important as well.

The analysis just reviewed assumes that there are substantial (if not complete) overlaps between cultural trait importance and personal trait importance: A trait that is important to the culture is also important to the self and vice versa. Nonetheless, according to the intersubjective consensus approach to culture (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi et al., 2010; Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009), not all individuals endorse the values that are perceived to be important in their culture. Likewise, only some of the personally endorsed values are culturally important. Although personal importance and cultural importance of values or traits overlap to some extent, they are conceptually distinct.

Inspired by this perspective, we contend that personal trait importance and cultural trait importance are two empirically related but conceptually distinct constructs. Gaertner et al. (2008) also noted that personal values and cultural values sometimes diverge, and it is still unclear how self-aggrandizing social comparisons are related to cultural trait importance. In the present research, we address this knowledge gap by measuring cultural trait importance and personal trait importance separately and examining their joint effects on Chinese and American participants' social comparisons. We seek to shed light on the distinction between cultural importance and personal importance of traits and to explicate how this distinction can sharpen our understanding of the cultural effects on self-aggrandizing social comparisons.

## Personal Trait Importance and Cultural Trait Importance

There are some theoretical justifications for the conceptual distinction between personal trait importance and cultural trait importance. Most people belong to multiple social and cultural groups (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Wan, Chiu, Peng, & Tam, 2007) and have been exposed to influences from multiple cultures (Arnett, 2002; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004). Furthermore, individuals have their unique personal experiences, which give rise to sizable within-culture variations in preferences (Hong & Chiu, 2001). Together, values from multiple social and cultural groups and idiosyncratic personal experiences mold personal preferences. Thus, personal preferences do not always reflect what is important in a particular culture.

The intersubjective consensus perspective to culture (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi et al., 2010; Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009) further elaborates on this distinction. Traditionally, culture is conceptualized as internalized individual-level characteristics, such as the individualism-collectivism value orientations (e.g., Triandis, 1989). A common practice in cross-cultural psychology is therefore to measure respondents' personal characteristics and use these characteristics to characterize a culture (Leung & Cohen, 2011). However, the intersubjective consensus perspective contends that cultural members do not always passively internalize cultural characteristics. Sometimes they actively construct and share views of the social reality in their culture. Accordingly, culture can also be represented in its members' shared perceptions of the beliefs and values that are widespread in their culture. Methodologically, cultural characteristics can be measured by having members of a culture report their perception of what is widely believed and valued in their culture (e.g., Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi et al., 2010; Fischer, 2006; Shteyberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009; Terracciano et al., 2005).

Some studies have shown that the correlation between personal characteristics and cultural characteristics measured through the intersubjective consensus approach is small to moderate (e.g., Shteynberg et al., 2009; Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007). For instance, Wan, Chiu, Tam et al. (2007) found that for both national cultures and university cultures, some values commonly considered personally important by the cultural members are not considered important in the culture to an equal extent and vice versa. Also, Zou et al. (2009) showed that cultural differences in people's personal values and beliefs are sometimes not as strong as the differences in their perception of cultural values and beliefs. Furthermore, a number of studies have shown that cultural characteristics measured through the intersubjective consensus approach play a unique role in explaining culture-related behavior. For instance, Zou et al. (2009) have reported instances in which perceptions of cultural values and beliefs mediate cross-cultural differences in social judgment, whereas personal values and beliefs do not. Also, parents' perceptions of cultural values predict which values parents want to transmit to their children, after controlling for the parents' personal values (Tam & Lee, 2010).

Thus, we maintain that personal trait importance and cultural trait importance should be distinguished. We are not arguing that personal characteristics never reflect cultural characteristics. They do overlap to a certain extent. On the one hand, this overlap indicates that people have internalized values or beliefs from the culture; on the other hand, it suggests that cultural members' shared perceptions of their culture are grounded in information about cultural members' actual preferences (Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007). What we argue is that by distinguishing personal trait importance and cultural trait importance, we can reveal nuanced relationships between self-aggrandizing social comparison and trait importance across cultures. In addition, Gaertner et al. (2008) also pointed out that the relationship between the BTAE and cultural trait importance has not been fully examined yet. To fill this gap, in the present research, we measured both personal and cultural trait importance and examined their joint effects on the BTAE in Chinese and American cultures.

## Research Hypotheses

Sedikides and Gregg (2008) have distinguished between four different aspects of favorable self-evaluation: (a) the need to feel good about the self, (b) expressions of favorable self-evaluation in a concrete situation, (c) habitual display of favorable self-evaluation, and (d) the psychological processes implicated in favorable self-evaluation. With respect to the need for feeling good about the self, Taylor and Brown (1994) contend that having positive self-evaluation is a basic human motive essential for mental health (see also Cai, Wu, & Brown, 2009; Gaertner et al., 2008). Accordingly, individuals tend to regard themselves positively in general, particularly on personally important traits (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002). In the domain of self-aggrandizing social comparison, there is some evidence for this contention. For example, some studies have shown that across cultures, people tend to make more favorable better-than-average judgments on traits that are perceived to be important to the self (Brown & Cai, 2010; Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Gaertner et al., 2008; Sedikides et al., 2003). Gaertner et al. (2008) also reported that, among Taiwan Chinese, the tendency to claim possession of personally important attributes is associated with fewer psychological problems and higher subjective well-being. Thus, we expect to find a significant BTAE among both the Chinese and Americans. We further hypothesize that the magnitude of the BTAE is positively associated with personal trait importance in both American and Chinese cultures (Hypothesis 1).

However, an individual's self-view is socially negotiated (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). As Cooley (1902) put it, "the thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this

reflection upon another's mind" (p. 184). People gain positive self-evaluation through projecting a *culturally approved* image of the self in the mind of their significant others (Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2010). Thus, although both the Chinese and Americans have the need to feel good about the self, cultural expectations would affect the habitual tendency of displaying self-aggrandizing social comparisons in Chinese and American cultures (Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

According to the intersubjective consensus perspective to culture (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi et al., 2010), in all cultural contexts individuals are aware of the cultural consensus regarding how one's need for positive self-regard is supposed to be expressed in concrete social contexts. Specific contents of cultural consensus are evolved social knowledge for coordinating social actions—they specify the traits on which self-aggrandizing social comparisons are permitted and encouraged as well as the traits on which such comparisons are discouraged and prohibited. Because there are cultural variations in the specific contents of cultural consensus, people in different cultures may make self-aggrandizing social comparisons on different traits. Consistent with this idea, research has shown that compared with Israelis, Singaporeans display a smaller BTAE on agentic traits but not on communal traits (Kurman, 2001). Similarly, compared to European Americans, Japanese display a stronger BTAE on communal attributes and a weaker BTAE on agentic attributes (Sedikides et al., 2003). Furthermore, people from individualist cultures have a greater tendency to distort their responses to appear more skillful, competent, or attractive, whereas people from collectivist cultures have a greater tendency to distort their responses to appear more normatively appropriate (Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006; Lalwani, Shrum, & Chiu, 2009).

In the present research, we compared self-aggrandizing social comparisons in American and Chinese cultures, because these cultures differ markedly in what are consensually believed to be the proper way of expressing the self. For example, comparing Americans and Hong Kong Chinese, Bond, Leung, and Wan (1978) found that Americans tended to positively evaluate self-promotion in self-presentation, whereas Hong Kong Chinese tended to positively evaluate modesty. In a recent study, Kim, Chiu, Peng, Cai, and Tov (2010) found that Chinese participants made more favorable forecasts of their performance in private (when modesty norm was not salient) than in public (when modesty norm was salient) situations, whereas American participants made equally favorable forecasts both privately and publicly.

Given the pressure to appear modest in self-presentation, Chinese participants may hesitate to claim superiority over their peers on traits that are perceived to be important to their culture, even when these traits are of high personal importance. As an example, consider the trait *filial piety*, a highly valued trait in Chinese cultures. Chinese people may find it socially awkward to publicly claim that they are more filial sons or daughters than are their peers even if they personally consider this trait to be important. In addition, a Chinese person who claims superiority over their peers on this trait may risk losing face because such self-aggrandizing behaviors violate the cultural expectation that a person with face should always show his or her humility (Ho, 1976). Thus, we hypothesize that Chinese participants would make more modest social comparisons on culturally important traits (Hypothesis 2a).

Chinese participants would feel an urge to negotiate between fulfilling the need for positive self-perception through making self-aggrandizing social comparisons on personally important traits and meeting cultural expectations by *not* making self-aggrandizing social comparisons on culturally important traits. As a compromise, they may choose to display self-aggrandizing social comparisons on traits that are important to the self but perceived to be unimportant to the culture and *not* to make self-aggrandizing social comparisons on traits that are important to the culture but unimportant to the self (Hypothesis 3a).

In contrast, for Americans, the cultural consensus is that people should assert their positive qualities (see Chiu & Hong, 2006). As noted, Americans tend to positively evaluate individuals

who self-promote (Bond et al., 1978). Thus, there is no conflict between their need for positive self-perception and the cultural consensus regarding what constitutes appropriate self-presentation demeanor. In short, cultural trait importance should not affect Americans' BTA ratings (Hypothesis 2b). In addition, it should not moderate the effect of personal trait importance on American participants' BTA ratings. Thus, we hypothesize that for American participants, independent of the level of cultural trait importance, there would be a positive association between personal trait importance and the magnitude of the BTAE (Hypothesis 3b).

Given the pressure to appear modest in self-presentation in Chinese culture and the absence of such pressure in American culture, we hypothesize that the overall magnitude of the BTAE would be smaller among Chinese than American participants (Hypothesis 4). This hypothesis is consistent with the past findings that self-enhancement behaviors are more widespread in the West than in the East (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

As the Chinese have to balance their need for positive self-regard and meeting the cultural expectation, we hypothesize that the association between personal trait importance and the BTAE would be weaker among Chinese than European American participants (Hypothesis 5). This hypothesis is consistent with past results. In a meta-analysis, Sedikies, Gaertner, and Vevea (2005, 2007) found that the correlation between BTA judgments and personal trait importance was significant and positive across cultural contexts, although some studies have reported nonsignificant or negative associations between self-enhancement and personal trait importance among Asians (Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007a, 2007b).<sup>2</sup> In addition, only the Chinese would feel the tension between the personal need for positive self-regard and cultural expectation. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the association between cultural trait importance and the magnitude of the BTAE would be stronger among Chinese participants than European American participants (Hypothesis 6).

## Pretests

To establish that the traits we used are clearly positive (see Heine, 2005; Sedikides et al., 2003 on the methodological importance of this procedure), we conducted a pretest in Hong Kong and another in the United States to ensure that only positive traits were included. In the Hong Kong pretest, the participants were 35 Chinese undergraduates (9 males and 26 females, average age = 21.03 years) who had resided in Hong Kong for over 10 years. These participants did not take part in the main study. They rated the positivity of 74 traits (see appendix) on an 11-point scale (from -5 = *extremely negative* to 5 = *extremely positive*).

The traits included those used in past research (Schwartz, 1992; Sedikides et al., 2003). Past BTAE and trait importance studies have focused on agentic/individualist traits and communal/collectivist traits (e.g., Kurman, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2003), assuming that agentic traits are more personally important to East Asians and communal traits are more personally important to European Americans (e.g., Brown & Cai, 2010). We chose not to be restricted by this assumption, because some traits (e.g., hardworking) could be classified as both agentic and collectivist (see Gaertner et al., 2008), and both types of traits can coexist in a culture (Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007). Furthermore, we included traits that fall outside the individualism/collectivism dichotomy (e.g., physically attractive, patient, mature) to provide a more representative coverage of different types of traits. One-sample *t* tests revealed that the Chinese participants considered these traits to be positive (mean ratings of these traits were significantly larger than 0, the midpoint of the scale).

The American pretest participants were 65 Caucasian American undergraduates (28 males and 36 females, 1 unreported, average age = 18.91 years) from the Midwest who had resided in the United States for over 10 years. These participants completed the same pretest measure used

in the Hong Kong pretest along with the main study. One-sample  $t$  tests revealed that the mean ratings of all the traits but two (willing to follow social orders, conforming) were considered to be positive. The two nonpositive traits were excluded from the analyses in the U.S. main study.

## Study 1: BTAE of Hong Kong Participants

### Method

The participants were 85 Chinese undergraduates (24 males and 61 females, average age = 19.93 years) who had resided in Hong Kong for over 10 years. They compared themselves with their peers on 74 traits. All items began with the same sentence stem: "Compared to people of my gender, age, and background, I am . . ." and participants then indicated their self-ratings on a 7-point scale. Corresponding changes were made to the anchors of the scale to depict the different traits asked. For example, for the trait *outstanding*, the scale was anchored at  $-3$  by "much less *outstanding* than them," 0 by "as *outstanding* as them," and 3 by "much more *outstanding* than them."

Participants also indicated how important to themselves these 74 traits were and how most Hong Kong Chinese would rate the importance of these 74 traits. They responded on a 9-point scale (0 = *completely unimportant* to 8 = *very important*).

### Results and Discussion

**Overall BTAE.** For each participant, the mean BTA rating across the traits was computed. A one-sample  $t$  test revealed that the overall BTAE was significant ( $M = 0.58 > 0$ ),  $t(84) = 10.56$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants generally rated themselves as better than their peers on the positive traits. However, caution should be exercised when interpreting this result pertinent to the overall BTAE in this and the next study, as overall BTAE might have been inflated by a positive response bias (see General Discussion).

**Differentiation between personal trait importance and cultural trait importance.** We examined the extent of overlap between personal importance and cultural importance of the traits in two ways. First, for each trait, we computed its mean level of personal trait importance and that of cultural trait importance. Next, we examined the correlation between personal and cultural trait importance across traits. This correlation was significant but moderate ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Second, within each participant, we examined the correlation between personal trait importance and cultural trait importance across traits. The average correlation was .25. These results showed that traits that were perceived to be culturally important tended to be personally important. However, the small to moderate correlation between the two constructs indicated only a partial overlap between them.

**Individual-level analysis.** Within each participant, using traits as the unit of analysis, we regressed the BTA ratings on personal trait importance (mean-centered), cultural trait importance (mean-centered), and their interaction. An intercept and the  $\beta$ s of the three predictors were obtained. Next, we performed one-sample  $t$  test to test if these  $\beta$ s significantly differed from 0 in the sample. The mean  $\beta$  for personal importance was significantly positive (0.26),  $t(84) = 15.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants showed a stronger BTAE on traits that were perceived to be more personally important. The mean  $\beta$  for cultural importance was significantly negative ( $-0.09$ ),  $t(84) = -5.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, participants displayed a smaller BTAE on traits that were perceived to be more culturally important. Finally, the mean  $\beta$  for the interaction ( $-0.02$ ) was also significantly negative,  $t(84) = -2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 3a, the negative average  $\beta$  for the interaction indicates that the BTAE were more pronounced when a trait was culturally less important *and* personally more important.



**Trait-level analysis.** Using traits as the unit of analysis, we regressed sample mean BTA ratings on sample mean personal trait importance (mean-centered), sample mean cultural trait importance (mean-centered), and their interaction. The regression model explained 46.7% of variances,  $F(3, 70) = 20.41, p < .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 1, traits that were personally more important were associated with more pronounced BTAE,  $\beta = 0.31, t(73) = 6.98, p < .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, traits that were culturally less important were associated with more pronounced BTAE,  $\beta = -0.26, t(73) = -4.93, p < .001$ . The interaction was also significant,  $\beta = -0.16, t(73) = -3.24, p < .01$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 3a, the negative  $\beta$  indicates that the BTAE was more pronounced on traits that were culturally less important and personally more important. Figure 1 depicts the estimated size of the BTAE at different levels of personal and cultural importance. Traits that were personally important and culturally unimportant elicited the most pronounced BTAE, while those that were personally unimportant and culturally important elicited the smallest BTAE.

In summary, Study 1 results provide consistent support to our hypotheses. Among Hong Kong Chinese participants, personal trait importance was positively associated with the magnitude of the BTAE, supporting Hypothesis 1. In addition, cultural trait importance was negatively associated with the magnitude of the BTAE, supporting Hypothesis 2a. Finally, the magnitude of the BTAE was smallest on traits that were culturally important and personally unimportant and most pronounced on traits that were culturally unimportant and personally important, supporting Hypothesis 3a.

## Study 2: BTAE of American Participants

### Method

The 65 participants who completed the pretest measure also completed the main study. The measures of the BTAE and personal trait importance were the same as those used in Study 1. The cultural trait importance measure was similar to that used in Study 1, except that we replaced the reference group with “most Caucasian Americans.”

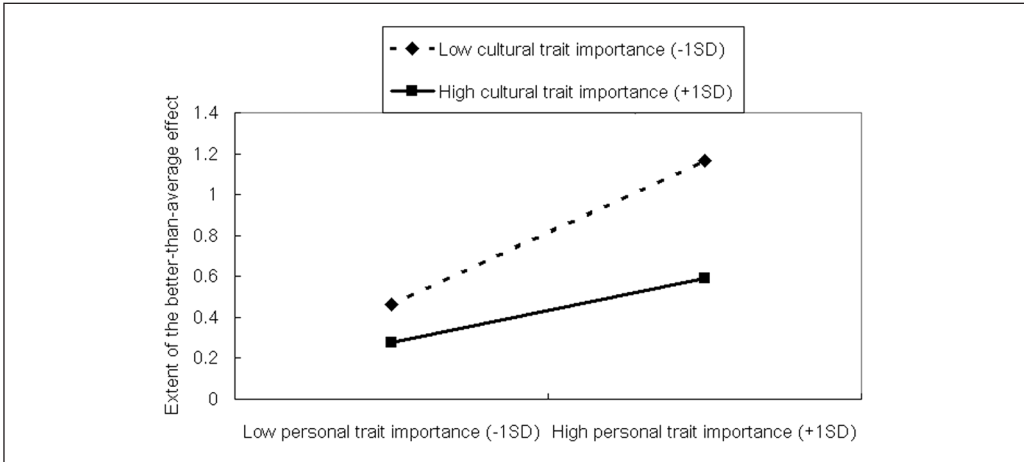
### Results and Discussion

**Overall BTAE.** For each participant, the mean BTA rating across the traits was computed. A one-sample  $t$  test revealed that the overall BTAE was significantly positive ( $M = 0.89 > 0$ ),  $t(64) = 16.03, p < .001$ . Participants generally rated themselves as better than their peers on the positive traits.

**Differentiation between personal trait importance and cultural trait importance.** Again, there was a significant but small to moderate association between cultural and personal trait importance. The correlation across traits between mean personal trait importance and mean cultural trait importance was .45 ( $p < .0001$ ). We also examined the correlation between personal trait importance and cultural trait importance within each participant, and the average correlation was .24. These results again confirm the distinction between personal trait importance and cultural trait importance.

**Individual-level analysis.** Again, within each participant, using traits as the unit of analysis, we regressed the BTA ratings on personal trait importance (mean-centered), cultural trait importance (mean-centered), and their interaction. The mean  $\beta$  for personal importance was significantly positive (0.38),  $t(63) = 18.32, p < .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants displayed stronger BTAE on traits that were more personally important. Consistent with Hypothesis 2b, the mean  $\beta$  for cultural importance was not different from 0,  $t(63) = .91, ns$ . Interestingly, the mean  $\beta$  for the interaction ( $-0.04$ ) was significantly negative,  $t(63) = -2.98, p < .01$ .<sup>3</sup>

**Trait-level analysis.** Again, using traits as the unit of analysis, we regressed sample mean BTA ratings on sample mean personal trait importance (mean-centered), sample mean cultural trait



**Figure 1.** The Joint Effects of Personal Trait Importance and Cultural Trait Importance in Predicting the BTAE (Study 1)

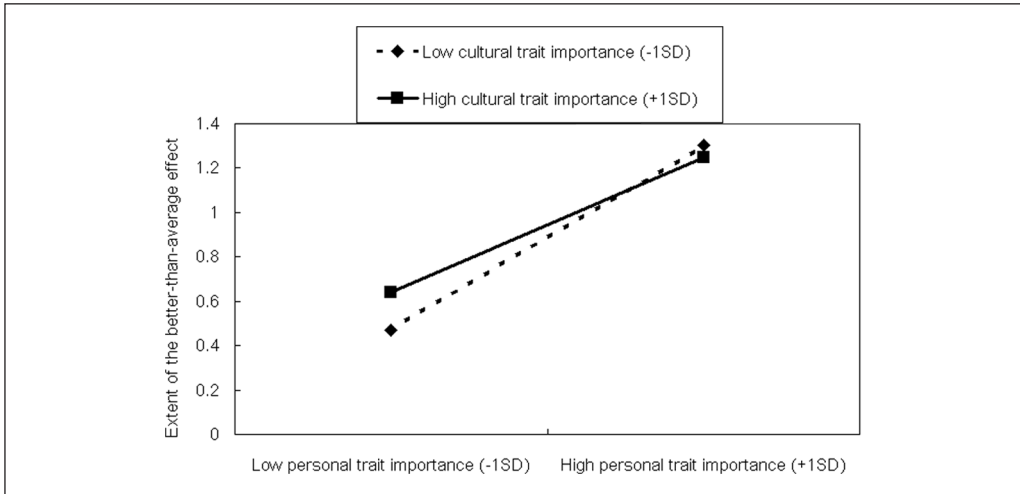
importance (mean-centered), and their interaction. The regression model explained 59.5% of variances,  $F(3, 68) = 33.33, p < .001$ . Again, sample mean personal trait importance was positively related to sample mean BTAE,  $\beta = .76, t(71) = 8.31, p < .001$ ; stronger BTAE was observed on personally more important traits, supporting Hypothesis 1. Again, consistent with Hypothesis 2b, sample mean cultural trait importance was not related to sample mean BTAE,  $t(71) = 0.53, ns$ . The interaction was marginally significant,  $\beta = -0.15, t(71) = -1.70, p = .06$ . Figure 2 depicts the estimated size of the BTAE at different levels of personal and cultural trait importance. Consistent with Hypothesis 3b, stronger BTAEs were observed on more personally important traits, and this was the case both when cultural trait importance was high and when it was low. The interaction was driven primarily by traits that were low on both personal and cultural importance. That is, American participants were particularly unlikely to display the BTAE on traits that were low on both personal and cultural importance. This result is consistent with our general expectation that American participants make self-aggrandizing social comparisons primarily for the sake of enhancing their positive self-image.

Study 2 again shows support for our hypotheses. Among American participants, personal trait importance was positively associated with a stronger BTAE, supporting Hypothesis 1. Cultural importance itself was not associated with the magnitude of the BTAE, supporting Hypothesis 2b. Finally, traits that were personally unimportant and culturally unimportant elicited the smallest BTAE.

## Further Analyses on Cross-Cultural Differences

Hypothesis 4 states that Chinese participants would on average show a smaller BTAE than do American participants because of the greater emphasis on modesty in Chinese culture. An independent sample  $t$  test showed that the overall BTAE of American participants ( $M = 0.89$ ) was larger than that of Chinese participants ( $M = 0.58$ ),  $t(148) = 3.81, p < .001$ , supporting Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 5 states that personal trait importance would be a better predictor of the BTAE among American participants than Chinese participants. Because we used different arrays of traits across the two cultural samples (two traits were excluded in the American sample), we could not carry out multilevel model analysis with culture as a Level 2 variable. As a compromise, we performed an independent sample  $t$  test comparing the  $\beta$ s of personal importance



**Figure 2.** The Joint Effects of Personal Trait Importance and Cultural Trait Importance in Predicting the BTAE (Study 2)

(obtained from the individual-level analysis) across the two cultures. The result revealed that personal importance was a better predictor of the BTAE among American participants than Chinese participants,  $t(198) = 4.46, p < .001$ , supporting Hypothesis 5.

We also compared the  $\beta$ s of cultural importance across the two cultural samples. An independent sample  $t$  test revealed that cultural importance was a better predictor of the BTAE among Chinese participants than American participants,  $t(198) = 4.46, p < .05$ , supporting Hypothesis 6.

## General Discussion

Our studies were the first to demonstrate the theoretical and empirical utility of the distinction between personal and cultural trait importance in understanding self-promoting social comparisons. Past studies often assumed that personal trait importance mirrors cultural trait importance. The present research challenges this assumption by showing that the correlation between the two constructs is significant but small to moderate only. This indicates that (a) at the group level, only some culturally important traits are personally important and vice versa and (b) each individual considers only some of his or her personally important traits to be culturally important and vice versa. Moreover, personal trait importance and cultural trait importance bear different predictive relationships with the BTAE in the two cultural contexts under investigation. These results add to the intersubjective consensus perspective to culture (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi et al., 2010) by demonstrating the potential contributions of incorporating both personal and cultural characteristics to deepen our understanding of cultural processes (e.g., Leung & Cohen, 2011; Tam & Lee, 2010; Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009).

### Cultural Similarities and Differences in the BTAE

Following Gaertner et al. (2008), we assessed the effect of personal importance ideographically. Our results replicated past findings (e.g., Brown & Cai, 2010; Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2003), showing that the BTAE is positively related to personal trait importance among both American and Chinese participants.

Nonetheless, cultural trait importance has different relationships with the magnitude of the BTAE across the two cultural samples. Only the Chinese participants showed a relatively small BTAE on culturally important traits. Furthermore, the Hong Kong Chinese feel a need to balance the desire for positive social comparisons on personally important traits and the cultural expectations that proscribe bragging of one's positive qualities, particularly those that are perceived to be culturally important. They do so by adopting a pattern of socially wise social comparison tactics: They engage in self-promoting social comparison on personally important traits that are not seen to be culturally important. They also display an attenuated BTAE on personally unimportant and culturally important traits.

Claiming to be better than others on traits that are personally important and culturally unimportant may not be considered self-promoting in all cultural contexts. In American contexts, this self-presentation strategy may be perceived to be a display of one's idiosyncrasy rather than competitiveness. Nonetheless, in a culture that prescribes humility and proscribes boastfulness, the individuals would feel the need to balance the desires to present a favorable image to the self and to the external audience. One self-presentation tactic that has evolved in such cultural contexts to meet this need is to deny possession of negative personal qualities without attributing positive attributes to the self (Kim et al., 2010; Kim, Peng, & Chiu, 2008). When the individuals feel compelled to affirm possession of some personally important positive attributes, they tactfully choose those that are not culturally important to avoid being seen as overly boastful. Through these tactics, these individuals can meet cultural expectations without thwarting their need for positive social comparison.

### *Levels of Analysis in the BTAE*

Previous studies have found that people from individualist cultures have a greater tendency to display the BTAE on agentic or individualist traits, and people from collectivist cultures have a greater tendency to make favorable self-evaluation on communal or collectivist traits (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Kurman, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2003). These results suggest that people from both individualist and collectivist cultures tend to show the BTAE on culturally important traits.

However, a different pattern emerges when we examine within-culture variations in the BTAE. We observed a smaller BTAE on traits that are higher on cultural importance among Hong Kong Chinese. Among Americans, the BTAE was smaller when the traits were low in both cultural and personal importance. These two sets of findings are not contradictory to each other. Instead, they suggest different psychological processes at different levels of analysis pertaining to between- and within-culture variations. Again, take *filial piety* as an example. This trait has high cultural importance in Chinese culture but is not a culturally important trait in the United States. Thus, when examining *between-culture* variations in the BTAE, relative to Americans, Chinese would have a stronger motivation to see themselves more favorably than their peers on this trait. This would lead to a positive effect of cultural trait importance on between-groups differences in the BTAE: A trait that is more important in Culture A than Culture B would show a stronger BTAE in Culture A.

When examining *within-culture* variations in the BTAE, however, the key issue is how the individual actor negotiates his or her self-image in the culture given the consensual expectations regarding what constitutes the proper self-expression demeanor. As shown in the current studies, in a Chinese society, where the consensual expectations emphasize humility, it would be culturally inappropriate to claim superiority over one's peers on culturally important traits. Thus, we found a negative relationship between perceived cultural importance and the magnitude of the BTAE in Chinese culture. In contrast, in American societies, the cultural consensus emphasizes self-assertiveness, and it is deemed culturally permissible to claim superiority over one's peers on positively appraised traits. As shown in our data, the traits that Americans are least willing to claim superiority over their peers are those with low personal *and* cultural importance. In short,

our results underscore the importance of distinguishing between (a) personal and cultural trait importance and (b) between-culture and within-culture variations in the BTAE.

### Methodological Considerations

Some researchers doubted whether the BTAE measure is a valid measure of self-promoting social comparison (e.g., Heine & Hamamura, 2007). Past research (e.g., Klar & Giladi, 1997) has found a positive response bias when individuals compared a singular target (e.g., self) against generalized collective ones (e.g., others). Based on this result, Heine and Hamamura (2007) argued that the BTAE measure might not capture people's self-promoting social comparison well. Although this response bias might have elevated the *overall mean* of the BTAE measure, there is clear evidence for the validity of the *relative levels* of the BTAE measure as a measure of self-promoting social comparison across situations and traits. For instance, the BTAE is accentuated at the presence of a self-esteem threat (e.g., Beaugregard & Dunning, 1998) and predicts psychological adjustment and well-being (e.g., Gaertner et al., 2008). There is also direct evidence that the self-enhancement motive is implicated in the BTAE (Guenther & Alicke, 2010). It is important to emphasize that our key analysis concerns the relative levels of the BTAE across traits, rather than the overall mean of the BTAE. Although the response bias discussed above might have elevated the overall level of the BTAE, the elevation cannot explain why the BTAE was systematically related to personal trait importance and cultural trait importance and why the patterns of relationships vary across cultures.

Note that in our BTAE measure, the question stem reads "Compared to people of my gender, age, and background, I am. . . ." One may argue that participants confused valuing a trait with possessing it. This may explain the negative association of cultural importance with the BTAE among Chinese participants: They considered some traits to be more important to others in society than to themselves and therefore assumed that others in society possessed these traits to a greater extent than they themselves did. This alternative account also predicts that the Chinese would display the smallest BTAE when cultural importance is high and personal importance is low ("Others value this trait more and I value it less, therefore I do not possess this trait more than others"). This alternative account, however, does not explain why the negative association between cultural importance and the BTAE was not significant among the Americans, unless we add the assumption that only Chinese had this confusion.

Because the present research focuses on the BTAE, future research should evaluate the generality of our results to other measures of self-promoting social comparisons. Given the strong evidence that the BTAE implicates self-promotion in social comparison (Guenther & Alicke, 2010), we expect to find a similar interactive role of personal and cultural importance in cross-cultural differences along with other measures of self-enhancing social comparisons.

Another methodological concern is about the measures of personal and cultural trait importance. All our participants rated personal trait importance before rating cultural trait importance. This procedure might have led the participants to deliberately contrast cultural importance against personal importance, rendering the differentiation between two measures of perceived importance a methodological artifact. Findings from two studies mute this concern. First, in an ongoing study (Tam, 2011), Hong Kong participants rated the personal importance and cultural importance of the 56 values in the Schwartz Value Inventory (Schwartz, 1992), with the order of the measures counterbalanced. There was no order effect in any of the 56 values, indicating that people report similar cultural importance perception regardless of whether they have just rated the personal importance of the values. Second, in another study (Wan, Chiu, Peng et al., 2007, Study 3), participants' personal endorsement of values predicts cultural identification when these values are considered to be culturally important by a separate sample. That is, theoretically meaningful interaction between personal importance and cultural importance on cultural

identification is obtained even when cultural importance ratings are collected from a separate sample. In short, the present research joined many other past studies that used the same measurement procedure (e.g., Tam & Lee, 2010; Wan, Chiu, Tam et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009) to establish the psychological significance of differentiating personal and cultural importance in the prediction of culturally patterned responses.

## Conclusion

The present research demonstrates that personally important traits are conceptually different from culturally important ones. Although both Americans and the Chinese display a stronger BTAE on traits with higher personal importance, interesting cultural differences emerged when we consider personal and cultural importance of traits concurrently. Among the Chinese, the strongest BTAE was observed on traits that are high on personal importance and low on cultural importance. Indeed, the Chinese actually avoid claiming superiority over others on culturally valued traits. In contrast, among Americans, the strongest BTAE was observed on traits that are high on both personal importance and cultural importance. We believe that continuing to exploit the theoretical distinction of personal importance and cultural importance will better our understanding of the nuanced transactions between culture and the self.

## Appendix

### *Traits Used in the Present Research*

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Active	Forgiving	Patriotic
Amiable	Happy	Physically attractive
Approachable	Having good taste	Positive
Aspiring	Having leadership qualities	Respectful to elders
Authoritative	Having wisdom	Respectful to seniors
Autonomous	Healthy	Responsible
Being a good listener	Honest	Reverent
Broad-minded	Humble	Rich
Capable	Humorous	Self-confident
Carefree	Independent	Self-disciplined
Caring for family	Influential	Self-reliant
Caring for the environment	Intelligent	Sincere
Clean and tidy	Just	Successful
Clear-headed	Kind	Sympathetic
Conforming*	Loyal	Unconstrained
Considerate	Mature	Unique
Cooperative	Moderate	Willing to compromise
Courteous	Modest	Willing to follow traditions*
Creative	Morally upright	Willing to follow social orders
Curious	Obliging	Willing to go my own way
Daring	Open to trying new things	Willing to return favors
Democratic	Optimistic	Willing to self-sacrifice
Devout	Original	Willing to show filial
Diligent	Outstanding	obedience for parents
Emotionally outspoken	Patient	Willing to take challenges

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Traits are presented in alphabetical order here, whereas they were presented in a random order in the pretests and the main studies. Traits with an asterisk were not included in the analyses in Study 2 because the pretest results revealed that they were not considered positive by American participants.

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## Notes

1. Whether Asians self-enhance or not on measures other than the BTAE is still an issue of contention (see Heine, 2005; Heine et al., 2007a, 2007b; Sedikides et al., 2005, 2007).
2. In the studies that did not find a significant positive association between self-enhancement and personal importance among Asians (see Heine et al., 2007a), the self-enhancement measures used do not involve social comparison. Also, these studies did not consider cultural trait importance. Whether these studies are relevant to the investigation of the role of trait importance in self-enhancement is still a contestable issue in an ongoing debate (see Heine et al., 2007b; Sedikides et al., 2007).
3. The distribution of  $\beta$ s for this interaction term was significantly different from a normal distribution, Kolmogorov-Siminov test statistic = .16,  $p < .001$ . Because the normality assumption was violated, Wilcoxon one-sample rank sum test was performed as well. The test revealed that the mean  $\beta$  of the interaction was significantly different from 0,  $V = 488.50$ ,  $p < .01$ . This is consistent with the one-sample  $t$  test result.

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