Culture and Self-Worth: Implications for Social Comparison Processes and Coping with Threats to Self-Worth

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A well-known psychological principle is that people value the integrity of the self (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). That is, people are motivated to perceive themselves as adequate, competent, good human beings. Although individuals may share this motive towards integrity universally, the way they achieve a sense of self-worth may not be the same everywhere. Given that different aspects of the social environment can shape contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), people’s sense of integrity may be based on any number of different sources – from their academic success or kind personality, to the approval and admiration of their friends and family. Humans are, at the core, truly social beings, and differences in social environments may have implications for how they see themselves and how other people, via social comparison, impact their feelings of self-worth.

Across cultures, individuals’ social worlds vary systematically, and thus, the way people gain a sense of self-worth may be impacted by the particular values and practices of their culture. Research in cultural psychology has shown that culture can shape beliefs, psychological processes and actions (e.g., Kim, 2002; Kim & Markus, 1999; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001), and even given the same situation, the cultural context can shape the way people interpret the meaning of the situation (e.g., Masuda et al., 2008; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). Given the mutual constitution of culture and the self (Kim & Markus, 1999), successful functioning at the level of the individual depends on the ability to live according to the values and practices unique to that particular culture, and likewise, successful functioning at the level of culture depends on people regulating their thoughts and behaviors in line with their communities. The specific values and practices of a culture also have implications for how the
self is related to its social surroundings, either as inherently connected to or separate from other people (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and therefore, the way people evaluate themselves in comparison to others may be impacted by culture (e.g., Ko & Kim, 2011). A cultural psychological framework may be useful for understanding systematic differences in the sources of self-worth and the process of social comparison—broadly defined as people’s assessment of their position within their social milieu. In this chapter, we will discuss how cultures differ in their prescribed sources of self-worth, and how this difference implicates the processes and consequences of social comparison. Specifically, we focus on social comparison across various communal contexts, both interpersonal and intergroup in nature, and how people cope with stress as a result of these social interactions.

*Culture and Sources of Self-Worth*

In order to examine how social comparison functions within different cultural contexts, it is important to first understand the way culture can have consequence for one’s social world, and in particular, for the self. Research in cultural psychology is fueled by the notion that culture and the psyche make each other up, and individual acts may hold different meanings depending on the particular assumptions within a cultural context (Bruner, 1990, 1996; Shweder, 1991). Culture can be defined as an organized system of beliefs, values, and practices (Kitayama, 2002), or put simply, the human-made part of the social world (Herskovits, 1948). The mind is, at the same time, the creator and the creation of culture, and thus, one cannot fully understand the psychology of the self without understanding the culture in which it exists and vice versa (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

One of the most foundational ideas in cultural psychological research is that the way people construe the self differs across cultures. That is, self-construal can vary from being more
independent to interdependent. The independent self, such as that found in North America, is bounded, unique, and separate from others and the context surrounding it (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a participant in an individualistic culture, the independent self tends to value personal agency and individual choice and freedom (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kim & Drolet, 2003; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). In particular, independence implies that actions originate primarily from personal attributes and are a consequence of being distinct from others (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006). People who are more independent tend to believe that they are in control of their own outcomes and that individual actions influence one’s circumstances (Morling et al., 2002; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984). On the other hand, the interdependent self, such as that found in collectivistic East Asia, tends to emphasize the individual’s inherent connection with others and harmony in social relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Agency in these cultures is defined more as a way of being and acting in the world that is necessarily tied to other people (Markus & Kitayama, 2003), and relational obligations are more strongly valued (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990). These different ways of construing the self may act as a framework for the findings relevant to cultural differences in the sources of self-worth.

Because of these differing views of the self, culture can also impact the way people evaluate and maintain the self. Much of the research on the self in mainstream social psychology, examined mostly in the West, has come to the conclusion that people generally maintain a self-enhancement motivation (but see Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987 for explanation of affective motivations towards positivity and cognitive motivations towards accuracy), meaning that they strive towards increasing positive feelings about the self (e.g., Shrauger, 1975; Taylor & Brown, 1988) and are susceptible to a whole host of positive illusions, or enhancements of the
self and the social world (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Schlenker, 1975). Specifically, research has shown that people tend to foster self-perceptions that are more positive than their perceptions of others (Brown, 1986), believe that they have more control over events than is warranted by the circumstances (Langer, 1975), and hold overly optimistic beliefs about the future (Weinstein, 1980). People also tend to maintain self-serving biases, such as a false sense of uniqueness in domains pertinent to individual ability or skill and a false sense of consensus in matters of personal opinion (Suls, Wan, & Sanders, 1988). Furthermore, these positive self-views are linked to higher performance outcomes (Feather, 1969; Felson, 1984) and greater psychological well-being (e.g., Jahoda, 1958; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

However, research in cultural psychology has shown that these well-known findings may be constrained by culture. Many of the self-enhancement effects found in North America do not generalize well to East Asia. For instance, Heine, Takata, and Lehman (2000) found that Canadian participants who received failure feedback were more reluctant to conclude that their performance was worse than average, reflecting a self-enhancement motive. Japanese participants, however, were not as reluctant to acknowledge poor performance after failure feedback compared to Canadians, and in fact, when they received success feedback, they were reluctant to conclude that their performance was better than average. Besides being reluctant to self-enhance, Japanese also do not seem to group enhance, or make overly positive evaluations of their own group over other groups.

In a field study by Snibbe, Kitayama, Markus, and Suzuki (2003), for example, European American and Japanese students evaluated their own and another university. While European American students showed the expected group enhancement effect, Japanese students did not. Self-serving biases, such as the false uniqueness effect, have also failed to replicate in East Asia.
(e.g., Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine & Lehman, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Studies conducted in the United States have shown that people tend to be particularly prone to believe that their successes are due to personal or internal causes and that their failures are a result of external factors, most likely because they expect to succeed rather than fail (Miller & Ross, 1975). However, in a review on culture and causal attributions, Kitayama, Takagi, and Matsumoto (1995) found that Japanese fail to exhibit self-serving biases such as these. Taken together, these findings and others suggest that the motive to self-enhance may be much weaker in East Asia than in North America, and furthermore, East Asians may actually hold an opposite bias to be self-critical rather than self-enhancing.

A situation sampling analysis conducted in the U.S. and Japan by Kitayama et al. (1997) nicely demonstrates how biases in self-evaluations may differ systematically by culture. In their study, they found that people in the U.S. were more likely to perceive success situations as relevant to their self-esteem compared to failure situations, whereas this pattern was reversed for people in Japan. In addition, this study showed that U.S. respondents seemed to be more sensitive to their individual accomplishments, while Japanese respondents seemed to be more sensitive to potential problems or negative characteristics of the self. Research has also shown that Japanese tend to be more critical of their own group than other groups (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Snibbe et al., 2003). Perhaps because the interdependent self is marked by an overlap with close others, criticism may extend from the self to groups. In sum, it seems that enhancement of the self or of one’s groups may not satisfy the need for self-worth across cultures.

However, does the lack of self-enhancement among East Asians imply that people in certain cultures do not feel positively about themselves at all? Research suggests that this is actually not the case. Studies using implicit indicators of self-esteem have found that East Asians
hold largely positive associations with the self (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997) and do not seem to differ from North Americans in how much they like themselves (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Kitayama & Uchida, 2003). It seems that East Asians generally do feel good about themselves; however, they are self-critical because they are more motivated towards improving the self, and such an effort might be the basis of their self-worth. Moreover, others’ esteem toward oneself may also be an important source of self-worth among East Asians (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Because East Asians tend to be more motivated by group rather than individual goals (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), they may value self-improvement in order to keep up with the group and to maintain others’ positive evaluation. Indeed, research on cultural differences in motivation demonstrates that while people from Western cultures try harder on a task after receiving success feedback, people from Eastern cultures are more motivated to persist on a task after receiving failure feedback (Heine et al., 2001). East Asians also seem to be more motivated by negative role models than positive ones (Lockwood, Marshall, & Sadler, 2005). Thus, the norm of self-criticism in East Asia may actually reflect the more collectivistic value of maintaining a positive standing within one’s social groups.

In summary, although most people want to feel valued and live a life that is worthwhile, the way people try to achieve this sense of self-worth seems to differ across cultures. Different cultural tendencies to self-enhance versus self-criticize suggest that people may gain a sense of self-worth differently. Self-worth may be more contingent on individual success for people with more independent selves, and conversely, people with more interdependent selves may base their self-worth less on individual success and more on maintaining good relationships and securing their positive standing within a group. In both individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the processes for achieving self-worth ultimately satisfy the goal of successful functioning in a
community. Yet communal factors, such as the esteem of others and their relative successes, seem to play a larger role in collectivistic cultures than individualistic ones, and this cultural difference may have consequence for processes of social comparison.

*Cultural Differences in Sources of Self-Worth and Implications for Social Comparison*

The goals people pursue for the sake of self-worth have consequence for the way they compare themselves to others in their social spheres, and indeed, the very act of social comparison is a crucial means through which people achieve a sense of self-worth. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), there exists a natural human drive to evaluate one’s own opinions and abilities. The social nature of human beings means that the behavior of other people often provides a valuable point of reference for self-evaluations. Especially when people evaluate themselves in domains without clear, objective standards—“Am I a generous person? Do I have strong creativity?”—social comparisons can be very useful. People inevitably and quite frequently engage in comparisons with other people in their social worlds to evaluate how they are doing as individuals.

Given that most research on social comparison has been conducted in cultural contexts that promote independence, a common assumption is that people are motivated to make social comparisons in a way that enhances perceptions of the self or one’s groups. Take Tesser’s (1988) classic Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model for example. This model elegantly explains how individuals evaluate themselves in relation to other people via two main processes: *reflection* and *comparison*. In the reflection process, individuals associate themselves with successful others in domains that are not personally relevant in order to enhance their own self-evaluation. For example, the day after a big win, fans of the winning team tend to wear school colors more, “basking in the reflected glory” of their team’s success (BIRGing; Cialdini et al.,
Not everyone has the athletic ability to play on a college sports team, but it seems most people are eager to reap the psychological benefits of the win. Thus, the outcome of reflection is an increase in positive self-evaluation.

In the comparison process, individuals evaluate their own performance in personally relevant domains in direct relation to the performance of others. According to the SEM model, people should be particularly motivated to perform well when they compare themselves to someone to whom they are close. In fact, studies on this topic have revealed, somewhat counter-intuitively, that people would rather help a complete stranger on a personally relevant task than help a close friend (Tesser, 1988; but see Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008 for an explanation of different patterns in romantic partners; also Lockwood & Pincus, this volume). These findings show that people avoid being outperformed, especially when the target of comparison is a close other.

The target of comparison is a crucial determinant of the type of social comparison one draws and the potential consequences of social comparison. Comparing oneself to an outperforming other is called *upward social comparison*, while comparing oneself to an underperforming other is called *downward social comparison* (Festinger, 1954). These different types of social comparison have varying implications for our feelings of self-worth. The general finding is that people feel better about themselves following downward social comparisons and worse following upward social comparisons (e.g., Morse & Gergen, 1970; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992), although this pattern can depend on the situational context (e.g., see Lockwood & Kunda, 1997 for exceptions concerning the impact of role models). Just as the classic SEM studies (Tesser, 1988) have shown that people seem to put themselves in a positive light relative to others, subsequent research has corroborated this well-established finding. For instance, a social
comparison study conducted in the U.S. found that, especially for those with high self-esteem, people tended to make more downward than upward social comparisons in everyday life (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). The findings on social comparison are generally consistent and coherent within mainstream (i.e., North American) social psychological research, yet a careful look at social comparison research conducted outside the North American cultural context reveals a slightly different story.

The sources of self-worth are not the same across cultures, and thus, social comparison processes may also be shaped by culture. Because East Asians’ sense of self-worth hinges more heavily on maintaining good social relations and receiving positive social evaluations from others, social comparison processes should reflect these concerns. But from these differences in relational concerns emerge opposing possibilities for the emphasis on social comparison processes in different cultures. One possibility, given the East Asian cultural tendency to maintain harmony in social relationships, is that East Asians de-emphasize the importance of social comparisons compared to Westerners. Perhaps people from East Asian cultural contexts are less likely to engage in social comparison processes in order to avoid causing any discord in relational ties, especially when social comparisons are made against close others. Though a seemingly plausible prediction, this reasoning is not wholly in line with the existing evidence.

Accumulating research suggests that the lay perception of collectivistic cultures as uniformly peaceful and harmoniously relational may be somewhat misguided, as other researchers have also argued (e.g., see Adams, 2005 for explanation of enemyship in some collectivistic societies), and thus, the second and more likely possibility is that East Asians emphasize social comparisons even more than Westerners. Their concern for one’s social
standing within a community means that social comparisons may have even greater consequence for social evaluation in East Asian cultural contexts.

Collectivism, more than individualism, may encourage individuals to more cautiously navigate through their social world by being aware, not only of their social ties, but also of public evaluations of themselves. For instance, Heine, Takemoto, Moskalenko, Lasaleta, and Henrich (2008) found that East Asians are chronically more self-aware, or sensitive to public scrutiny. Using the classic mirror paradigm to prime self-awareness, European Americans were more affected by this prime, whereas East Asians were unaffected by the prime and reacted more closely to European Americans who were made self-aware. Thus, East Asians seem to behave as though they are constantly under public judgment, as if they have “mirrors in the head” (Heine et al., 2008). It may be that because East Asians’ public self is more chronically salient than it is for European Americans, East Asians may be especially aware of how their own performance compares to a close other’s performance. They may focus more on the implications of another’s performance for the way their own successes and failures are viewed by others.

Generally speaking, people from interdependent cultural contexts seem to be highly aware of the importance of social comparisons for positive social evaluations. A news article on the academic distinction of many Asian American high school students, for instance, reports that students are often pressured to excel academically through social comparison. One student noted that her father used to compare her to other people's children, noting their hard course loads and saying, “They have a 4.3 [grade-point average]. Why do you only have a 4.0?” (Becerra, 2008). Likewise, a study by Niles (1995) found that Asian students were more highly motivated than Australian students academically, and importantly, this motivation was driven more by social approval than by personal achievement. Research has also found that young Japanese boys
tended to behave more competitively than American, Greek, and Belgian boys across grades 2, 4, and 6, and the cultural differences were especially pronounced when social comparison information was given to the boys (Toda, Shinotsuka, McClintock, & Stech, 1978). It seems that communal factors, such as social scrutiny and public reputation, are important factors in one’s motivation to succeed, more so in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures.

More direct research on culture and social comparison processes has shown that the frequency and type of social comparisons people draw do indeed vary systematically by culture. East Asians tend to engage in social comparisons more often than North Americans (e.g., Toda et al., 1978; White & Lehman, 2005), and higher levels of collectivism predict a greater desire to make social comparisons, and in particular, a desire to make upward social comparisons (Chung & Mallery, 1999). A clear empirical demonstration of cultural differences in the use of different types of social comparison comes from White and Lehman (2005). In one of their studies, Asian Canadians who received failure feedback on a test preferred to look at the test of someone who did better than them; however, European Canadians did not exhibit this preference for upward social comparisons. This tendency to engage more frequently in upward social comparisons suggests that people in East Asian cultural contexts may find social comparison information particularly useful towards the goal of positive social evaluations. Due to the value they place on social relationships, they tend to be more concerned about others’ views of them. Social comparison that provides a reference point for self-criticism, and ultimately for good social evaluations, may thus be a considerably more important and common process in which they engage.

In sum, it is probably not the case that relational harmony prevents East Asians from being invested in social comparisons, but rather, people from East Asian cultural contexts seem
to be even more motivated to engage in social comparison processes than those from more Western cultural contexts. Because people with more independent selves tend to be motivated toward personal goals, social comparisons may serve the purpose of highlighting individual success for them. That people in more independent cultural contexts seem to prefer downward social comparisons (e.g., Wheeler & Miyake, 1992) and strive to outperform close others (e.g., Tesser, 1988) suggests that they may be more motivated to highlight individual success than to maintain relationship harmony in social comparison interactions. On the other hand, given that people with more interdependent selves tend to be more concerned about others’ evaluations and their social relationships, their preference for upward social comparisons may reflect the desire to keep up with the group and ultimately maintain others’ positive view of themselves. People from East Asian cultural contexts may be even more attuned to social comparisons in general because they tend to strongly value their social standing within a group. This concern for positive social evaluations can manifest itself as a care for close others and respect for group well-being, but it can also lead to greater concerns to not “rattle” relationships with others and risk negative evaluations from them (e.g., Adams, 2005; Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006). Being aware of one’s own place in a social network means not only that the individuals are working together for the group, but also that they are bound by socially contractual obligations and subject to more public scrutiny. Therefore, while people across cultures may engage in social comparison processes for communal reasons, the consequences of social comparison may vary according to one’s cultural and situational context.

Culture and the Consequences of Social Comparison in Interpersonal and Intergroup Contexts

We posit that collectivistic cultures may emphasize the importance of social comparison even more than individualistic cultures because of a heightened concern for positive social
evaluation. Whether this concern manifests itself as care for close others or as a heightened concern for maintaining one’s positive social standing largely depends on differences in situational contexts. In particular, we discuss how cultural variations in the consequences of social comparison may differ according to the interpersonal versus intergroup nature of comparisons.

*Interpersonal social comparison.* Direct comparison to another individual is considered an interpersonal social comparison and should necessarily heighten individual self-awareness. Given that for people from collectivistic cultures, self-worth is more contingent on others’ actions and social evaluations (Heine et al., 1999), interpersonal comparisons should have psychological impacts that are stronger than what is “typical” in social comparisons. That is, interpersonal comparisons may be more socially diagnostic for East Asians’ assessments of their individual self-worth. For individuals from collectivistic cultural contexts, social comparison may have an even greater impact when the comparison is with a close other since these types of relationships should have more direct implications for their shared social network. However, for those from more individualistic cultures, social comparison may work differently with close others than it does for people from more collectivistic cultures. Although the SEM model makes a similar prediction regarding the impact of relationship closeness on the effect of social comparison (Tesser, 1988), those from more individualistic cultures should be relatively less concerned about others’ evaluation and one’s social standing compared to those from more collectivistic cultures, and therefore the effect might be less extreme for people from more individualistic cultures. Without the intensity of chronic social evaluation found in East Asian cultures, those from Western cultures may identify relatively less with the successes and failures
of their close others (unless this is within romantic relationships; see Lockwood & Pincus, this volume).

To look at the potential cultural differences in social comparisons with close others posed by these aforementioned discrepancies, a study was conducted with friend dyads (Ko & Kim, 2011). In this study, participants came to the lab with a close friend and were told they would first be working on two separate tasks: a cognitive task for the participant and a creativity task for the friend. Later, participants completed filler questionnaires with their friend’s creativity score “accidentally” mixed in. Their friend’s score was very high (94th percentile) in the success condition and very low (28th percentile) in the failure condition. Measures on an implicit self-esteem task (Greenwald & Banaji, 1989) showed that in the success condition, self-esteem scores were lower for those who reported having a more interdependent self-construal than those with a more independent self-construal, and the findings were reversed for those in the failure condition. Thus, when making interpersonal comparisons at the level of the individual, those with more interdependent selves reported lower self-esteem due to a close other’s success, whereas those with more independent selves reported lower self-esteem due to a close other’s failure. Given that the relative performance of close others has more consequence for one’s own social standing for people with more interdependent than independent selves, a close other’s success has more negative impacts on implicit self-esteem for those who are more interdependent.

Another study (Ko & Kim, 2011) examined how participants expected another person would feel when being compared to close others in order to examine whether these reactions to downward or upward social comparison, as shown in the study described above, are culturally shared and viewed as normative. Participants in this study read a vignette about a university
student and her family. In the success condition, participants read that the university student’s younger sister was valedictorian of her high school, and those in the failure condition read that the student’s younger sister was on academic probation at her high school. Results showed that Asian Americans who read about the relative success of the university student’s sister felt that the student would feel worse (i.e., less proud, less happy, less pleased, and less successful) than did European Americans. An opposite pattern of results was found in the failure condition (see Figure 1). This study shows a pattern consistent with the findings with the friend dyads, that people from more collectivistic cultural contexts may be more impacted by interpersonal social comparisons compared to those from more individualistic cultural contexts. Specifically, it seems that people who are more interdependent may feel even better following downward social comparisons and even worse following upward social comparisons compared to people who are more independent.

Consistent with past research showing that people from collectivistic cultures engage in social comparisons with others more frequently (White & Lehman, 2005) and may be more competitive than people from individualistic cultures (Toda et al., 1978), these studies show that people who are more interdependent may be more impacted by social comparisons, particularly when the relationship is close. These results may seem counter-intuitive given the common assumption that those from more collectivistic cultures hold more communal relationships. However, when the comparison is at the interpersonal level, between the self and another individual, it appears that comparison information carries greater social significance in the larger communal context of the social network for them, and thus, the information implicates the self in a seemingly more “individualistic” manner.
Intergroup social comparison. The meaning of community shifts when the social comparison context changes. For instance, what happens when the judgment moves from the interpersonal to the intergroup context? Comparison between groups should minimize the awareness of the individual self. Therefore, unlike interpersonal comparisons, intergroup comparisons should reduce or even reverse the typical psychological impact of social comparisons with an ingroup member, especially among those from more collectivistic cultures (see Blanton, Burkley, & Burkley, this volume; Hogg & Gaffney, this volume).

For those from collectivistic cultures, there is a stronger emphasis on “mutual face”—the dynamic communication process in which an individual protects one’s own face, and the communication partner is aware of the face-protection needs of the other (Ting-Toomey & Cocroft, 1994; Leung & Cohen, 2011). When a group comparison is salient, individuals from more collectivistic cultures attempt to save mutual face, even at the expense of their own face. Thus, we might expect opposite effects in the intergroup comparison context from what we found with close others in the interpersonal social comparison. That is, as the unit of comparison shifts from interpersonal to intergroup comparisons, Asians should feel worse about their group failing due to an ingroup member’s failure than European Americans because Asians tend to be more concerned about mutual face than European Americans.

Ko and Kim (2011) looked at the effect of social comparisons on self-esteem in an intergroup context. To create an intergroup comparison situation, participants were partnered in the classic minimal group paradigm (Tajfel, 1970) with a confederate who was in their ingroup. Participants were told that if their team scored higher on a computer creativity task against another team, they would be entered into a raffle to win a prize. In actuality, there was no opposing team, and the individual and team scores were predetermined. In all cases, the
participant’s score was higher than the partner’s score, and their team’s score was lower than the opposing team’s score. Participant state self-esteem ratings were measured following this information. Based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; see also Tesser, 1988; Wills, 1981), individuals should have higher self-esteem scores when they see that their score is higher than their partner’s. However, if their group outcome has a greater impact than their personal outcome, participants’ self-esteem scores should be lower when their team failed, particularly among people from more collectivistic cultures. Consistent with our predictions, results showed that Asian Americans reported lower state self-esteem when their team failed compared to European Americans (Ko & Kim, 2011). Similarly, White, Lehman, & Cohen (2006) found that Asian-Canadian participants and those with more interdependent self-construals reported less positive affect when another psychology student (i.e., an anonymous ingroup member) was unsuccessful versus successful, whereas European-Canadian participants and those with more independent self-construals reported more positive affect when an anonymous ingroup member was unsuccessful rather than successful.

These findings clearly underscore the importance of considering cultural differences in how people are motivated to protect and maintain their standing in their social network. That collectivistic Asians were more impacted by social comparison in interpersonal situations than individualistic European Americans might seem counter to common expectations regarding these cultures. These findings become clearer when considering that collectivistic concerns regarding relationships are multifaceted and complex. Relationships are like a double-edged sword in more collectivistic cultures in that they can be both an empowering resource and a source of caution, unlike in more individualistic cultures in which relationships are viewed, by and large, as benevolent (Adams, 2005). A further understanding of these cultural differences in how
individuals from different cultures may navigate through their social network in order to maintain their sense of self-worth may come from examining patterns of interpersonal transactions in social support use.

*Culture and Coping with Threats to Self-Worth*

The cultural differences in concerns for social evaluation have implications for how individuals interact with others and maintain their social relationships. One type of social transaction that manifests this difference in models of relationships is the use of social support, which is one of the most commonly used and important ways to cope with life stressors. The most typically assumed form of enacted social support involves specific transactions of seeking and receiving help through tangible assistance, informational support, or emotional support (Cohen, 1988; Wills, 1991) through processes involving disclosure of personal distress and needs. Social support has long been known to alleviate the experience of stress, reduce the severity of illness, and speed recovery from health disorders when they do occur (Seeman, 1996; Taylor, 2007). However, especially within the tight-knit social network of collectivistic East Asian cultures, social evaluative concerns that might be associated with the inevitable disclosure of personal stressors to others are more salient than within European American cultural contexts. Thus, their motivation to seek social support from close others may differ.

Studies have shown that European Americans are more likely to ask and receive social support than Asians and Asian Americans to cope with stressful events (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Shin, 2002; Taylor et al., 2004). A series of studies (Taylor et al., 2004) demonstrated that Asians/Asian Americans and European Americans differ in their willingness to use social coping to deal with stressors. Although the two groups did not differ from each other in their use of individual efforts to deal with stressors, Asians/Asian Americans reported
using social coping to help them cope with stress significantly less than European Americans, and this pattern was especially true for the Asian national and immigrant students with less exposure to American culture. Research has identified that this more explicit form of social support is underused and discouraged among Asians and Asian Americans because they are particularly concerned about the effect that the disclosure of distress would have on their relationships, such as losing face, worrying others, and disturbing the harmony of their group (Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004).

Subsequent studies (Kim et al., 2006) specifically examined the effect of making close relationships salient by priming various goals (i.e., goals of the self, an in-group, or an out-group) on the willingness to seek social support. The results were highly consistent with the findings regarding cultural differences in social comparisons in that Asian Americans were more cautious in social support seeking when they were primed to think of their close others than of any other relationship. After being primed to think about their personal goals or the goals of an out-group with whom they do not have any meaningful relationships, Asian American participants were more willing to seek social support than after being primed with in-group goals. In contrast, European Americans’ responses were impervious to goal priming. These results show that the decision to disclose one’s distress is greatly influenced by the specific nature of relationships for Asian Americans, but not so for European Americans.

Given that the hesitation to disclose and discuss one’s stressful experiences is prevalent in Asian cultural contexts, those from these cultures utilize social support for coping with stress in culturally appropriate ways that are different from the Western model of social support transactions. Instead of the Western model of social support that involves disclosure of stress, Asians and Asian Americans might be more inclined to use social support that does not risk
one’s relationships. Not only should this type of social support be sought out more by those from more collectivistic cultures, it should also be more beneficial in effectively coping with stress. Social support use *without* actual disclosure of the stressor, thus without the concern for negatively implicating social relationships, is more culturally appropriate and therefore more effective as a way of coping as it would not pose a threat to self-worth in these cultural contexts (Kim et al., 2008; Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007).

Studies have examined the effect of using two different types of social support: explicit and implicit. Explicit social support is defined as “specific recruitment and use of one’s social networks in response to specific stressful events that involve the elicitation of advice, instrumental aid, or emotional comfort,” whereas implicit social support is defined as “being in the company of close others or thinking about close others without disclosing or discussing one’s problems vis à vis specific stressful events” (Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2007). Using both daily diary methods (Kim et al., 2009) and experimental methods examining biological and psychological responses to an acute lab stressor task (Taylor et al., 2007), studies have found that while European Americans use more explicit social support than Asian Americans do, they use implicit support similarly. Moreover, European Americans benefit only from using explicit social support, whereas Asian Americans more reliably benefit from implicit social support.

Even when individuals use social support or help from others, its effect depends on how this transaction is conducted. For instance, a study (Mojaverian & Kim, 2011) comparing the effect of solicited versus unsolicited social support use on stress and self-esteem shows that help provided in response to one’s active seeking led to better psychological outcomes (i.e., higher self-esteem and less stress) than help received without one asking among European Americans. Among Asian Americans, the pattern was the opposite in that they experienced higher self-
esteem and less stress when the other person provided help without them having to ask for it than when they had to. Moreover, unsolicited social support led participants from both cultures to feel closer to the support provider, but this greater sense of social affiliation was linked to higher self-esteem only among Asian Americans. Thus, the culturally specific type of support provided and the manner in which it is given can directly impact how one copes with stress and also how one evaluates his or her own feelings of self-worth.

Cultural differences exist not only in how people directly utilize and benefit from social coping, but also in how they benefit from other coping strategies, such as the use of religion. Although not everyone identifies as religious, research has found that religious involvement may be linked to mostly positive mental and physical health outcomes (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; see George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000 for review), and religious coping may be one pathway of benefit (Pargament, 1997). That is, through various means, religion may predict health benefits because it helps people to cope with the stressors in their lives. One way in which religion may help people to cope is by increasing a sense of control in difficult situations (e.g., George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002; Weisz et al., 1984). There is also evidence to suggest that religion may facilitate social affiliation such as spending time and interacting with others in a community (e.g., George et al., 2002; Seybold & Hill, 2001). But although religion may universally help people to cope, the way people use religion may be shaped by culture.

As described previously, people from more individualistic cultural contexts tend to be motivated to maintain self-focused agency or control as these serve as the basis of one’s self-worth. With this form of agency comes the belief that individual successes hinge primarily on one’s own abilities and actions (Markus & Kitayama, 2003), and thus, whether by influencing
the environment or trying to accept one’s circumstances, the use of control ultimately centers on
the individual (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2003). The independent self may be more
driven to cope by appealing to a sense of agency or control. However, people from more
interdependent cultural contexts tend to be less focused on issues of individual success and
agency and more motivated towards group goals and harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).
Research has shown that East Asians prefer to receive, but not seek, more social support rather
than seek personal control in certain cases (e.g., Morling et al., 2003). Therefore, people who
hold a more interdependent self-construal may prefer to cope in a way that promotes harmony in
relationships.

According to recent research on religion and culture, the way that even the same religion
impacts people may not be the same across cultures. In a laboratory experiment, Sasaki and Kim
(2011) showed that European Americans primed with religion were less likely to express
discontent in a mildly distressing situation, suggesting that they were more likely to accept the
circumstance, compared to European Americans who were not primed with religion.
Asian/Asian American participants primed with religion, though, did not vary in their expressed
discontent in the situation from those who were not primed with religion. It seems that religion
impacted a sense of control for European Americans, but not Asians/Asian Americans. Similarly,
results from a daily diary study showed that use of religious coping to deal with daily stressors
predicted increased acceptance of the situation on a day and across days for European Americans
but not Koreans (Sasaki & Kim, 2011). This study also showed that religious coping predicted
more social affiliation on a day and across days for both cultural groups, though perhaps slightly
more for Koreans than European Americans. Likewise, a content analysis of mission statements
on church websites showed that U.S. mission statements contained more themes of secondary
control (e.g., spiritual or personal growth and acceptance) compared to Korean mission statements, while Korean mission statements contained more social affiliation themes (e.g., the importance of having close social relationships in the church) compared to U.S. mission statements (Sasaki & Kim, 2011).

Taken together, these findings on culture and coping show that, for European Americans, sharing personal needs and emotional distress is something that they do in a relatively uninhibited manner, leading to more positive outcomes, such as more positive emotions, less stress, and higher life satisfaction. Also, one of the main goals of coping—social or non-social—might be to enhance a sense of control and ultimately self-esteem among European Americans. In contrast, Asians and Asian Americans view disclosure of personal needs and emotional distress with relatively high cautiousness and as a potential threat to social bonds, especially when the social bonds are strong. Thus, they tend to seek social support in a less direct and explicit way in order to minimize its impact on social relationships. Social belongingness may be an important need for everyone, but especially for those from more collectivistic cultures such as East Asians, for whom one of the key goals of coping might be to affirm social relationships in order to foster a sense of self-worth in their cultural context.

**Conclusion**

In every culture, people are motivated to read and react to the norms and values of their unique community. Yet there are meaningful differences in how people think, feel, and behave in relation to others depending on their cultural background. People build a sense of self-worth atop different values and experiences, collecting and treasuring personal achievements, or maintaining harmonious social relationships and an admirable status within a group. Certain cultures may more strongly emphasize the goals of the group over the individual, and this difference in values
has consequence for the way social comparison functions in different communities. The purpose of social comparisons may hinge on different cultural motivations toward self-enhancement or social standing and relationship maintenance, and thus, individuals from these different cultures may have different tendencies to engage in upward or downward social comparisons, to be impacted by the social comparison processes, and to anticipate different social consequences of their actions. The way people feel as a result of comparisons may not be the same, just as the way they cope with threats to self-worth may also vary across cultures. However, what does remain the same is that people all strive for self-integrity, for a sense that they are living up to the standards of their culture, whatever those standards may be.
References


Figure 1. Cultural differences in how proud participants rated the main character in reaction to a close other’s success or failure.

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$. 