

# SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

## People in the U.S. Think They are Better Than They Actually Are. People in Asia Don't

Shinobu Kitayama

1453 words

15 May 2023

[Scientific American](#)

GSCA

English

© 2023 SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, A DIVISION OF SPRINGER NATURE AMERICA, INC. All Rights Reserved.

How competent are you, compared with your colleagues? When psychologists approach teams of coworkers with variations of this question, an interesting pattern emerges. If people have a truly realistic perspective of their abilities, then their self-assessments should generally fall around the middle. Instead psychologists have repeatedly found that people's self-assessments are inflated. In fact, superstars and underperformers alike tend to think they are better than they truly are.

This effect is one example of a positive illusion: a cognitive bias that makes you feel more competent, more blessed, more fortunate and better than you are. Positive illusions seem intuitive and reasonable to many people. Some scholars argue that these illusions are fundamental to our species' survival. To get by in life, they reason, you must remain optimistic, work hard, succeed, live long and leave offspring behind.

[Read more about the better-than-average bias]

Of course, some people don't experience positive illusions and have a more realistic self-assessment. Unfortunately, such self-appraisals could make them feel more inadequate when comparing themselves with many others who have a very positive self-assessment. These comparisons may be an important cause of imposter syndrome—the suspicion that one is not deserving of one's achievements. In other words, imposter syndrome may be the dark side of the societal norm toward positive selves.

But there is an important caveat to this discussion: the available evidence is based almost exclusively on a small fraction of humanity called Westerners. If positive illusions were truly essential to our species, we would expect them to be universal. But my work—and that of other research teams—suggests otherwise.

In the early 1990s my colleagues and I started our "Culture and the Self" project, exploring how the sense of the self might vary across cultures. We found no strong evidence for the better-than-average effect or other positive illusions in East Asia. In Japan, for example, when university students were asked what proportion of their peers were better than them in various traits and abilities, the average estimate fell around 50 percent.

In our newest area of research—cultural neuroscience—we find that the neural pathways that support positive illusions are absent in certain communities. In other words, a pattern that most psychologists have seen as a human universal is instead a product of culture.

The vast majority of the psychological database comes from so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) societies. Most scientists in psychology and other academic fields have a WEIRD cultural background. Therefore, the common view that positive illusions are a human universal is based on heavily skewed research.

To go beyond the limits of this WEIRD cultural perspective, my colleagues and I have directly compared responses from Westerners and East Asians to questions asking about the self. In one study published last year in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, both American and Taiwanese participants judged how good or bad they would feel when facing success or failure. Americans reported they would feel better about success than they would feel bad about failure. Meanwhile Taiwanese participants did not show this positive illusion: if anything, they reported they would feel

worse about failure than they would feel good about success. This response from Taiwanese participants may reflect another psychological tendency called the negativity bias, in which negative events typically have much stronger emotional impacts than positive ones.

We then went a step further from past research by monitoring people's brain waves as they made these judgments. Specifically, we looked at the magnitude of the "alpha wave"—a pattern of activity that appears when a person's mind wanders and engages in internally directed thoughts. We observed the alpha effect when Americans thought about themselves within a fraction of a second after learning that something good happened to them. This early attention predicted the magnitude of their positive illusions. Taiwanese participants did not show this pattern when thinking about either success or failure happening to the self, nor did they show evidence of holding positive illusions, as mentioned above.

In East Asia, modesty is culturally valued. For that reason, some Western psychologists have tried to explain the absence of positive illusions by arguing that East Asians disguise their true feelings to avoid appearing too self-focused. But our data show that this explanation is inaccurate. We saw no added brain activity, for instance, that would correlate with effortful concealment of one's true feelings among the Taiwanese people who participated in our study.

On the contrary, Westerners take an additional step to boost their good feeling when something good happens to them. They spontaneously maximize good feelings about the self through an automatic neural response. It occurs within a fraction of a second, without apparent effort, let alone any deliberation or conscious strategizing. Such a response might seem natural and inevitable, but it is not. Instead the response is cultural, having formed through years of socialization. The brain is extensively trained to produce this response because it supports attitudes that help a person fit into their individualistic culture, valuing self-promotion and initiative. East Asians show no such spontaneous or automatic response. They would seem to be more accepting of various events as those events happen to them. Other work we have done has found that while self-esteem predicts health in the West, it does not have the same consequences in East Asian societies.

When considering these results, it's important to flag that findings about a whole culture or community are nuanced. Within a given group, there can be a high degree of variation from one person to the next. As previously mentioned, some people in the West experience imposter syndrome, which could be especially problematic, given this culture's strong normative emphasis on feeling positive about the self. This example demonstrates why we cannot assume every Westerner or East Asian will follow a set pattern. But in broad terms, when we see these kinds of trends in our research, we have an opportunity to learn more about how culture shapes the brain and behavior.

We think the cultural variation in positive illusions is one example of a broader cultural difference in how the self is construed. Western societies generally regard the self as independent. Consequently, people in these societies are motivated to feel good about themselves. They work hard to identify their competence and uniqueness. In many cultures outside the West, however, people regard their selves as interdependent and embedded in social relationships. They feel protected and secure when connected to a larger social community. From that cultural perspective, there is no need to feel particularly good about one's independent, individual self.

These differences set the stage for all manner of misunderstandings. From the Western perspective, East Asians might appear excessively polite in their attention to social ties or could seem disengaged or even depressed or maladjusted in their ambivalence toward self-promotion and initiative. Our data, however, show that East Asians respond to events naturally and realistically, without extra thought. From the East Asian perspective, the Western tendency to boost good feelings about oneself could come across as futile, unnecessary or even childish because it shows how the person is failing to appreciate the relational nature of the self. But our data suggest that Americans boost their positive selves because it helps them adapt to their culture. Altogether, by adopting the cultural neuroscience approach, we may keep our cultural preconceptions and biases at bay, thereby making our science less ethnocentric.

Stepping back, this work underscores the power of culture. Humans are the only animals that have survived by creating and taking advantage of various conventions, practices, meanings and social institutions. The evolution of these things, summarily called "culture," has accelerated, especially over the past 10,000 years, forging several major cultural zones today. These zones vary greatly, and the cultural variation in positive illusion is a single instance, albeit an important one, of a more general process by which our culture shapes our ways of thinking, feeling and acting. We know what our culture is. Yet we don't appreciate its mind-shaping power enough.

Are you a scientist who specializes in neuroscience, cognitive science or psychology? And have you read a recent peer-reviewed paper that you would like to write about for Mind Matters? Please send suggestions to Scientific American's Mind Matters editor Daisy Yuhas at [pitchmindmatters@gmail.com](mailto:pitchmindmatters@gmail.com).

This is an opinion and analysis article, and the views expressed by the author or authors are not necessarily those of Scientific American.

Scientific American, Inc.

Document GSCA000020230515ej5f0005I

© 2023 Factiva, Inc. All rights reserved.