

# The Divergences of Positive Illusions

## Face and Dignity Cultures

By Jihyun Kim

### **Abstract**

Throughout centuries the topic of self-understanding has been attributed with great psychological importance, even tracing back to the ancient Greeks. Despite traditional support for accurate self-perception, Taylor and Brown published a radical study in 1988 attesting that those who maintained positive illusions about themselves experienced higher levels of psychological well-being. This controversial paper was put to the test not long after by other psychologists who criticized the ambiguity of Taylor and Brown's methodology, and through a more polished testing found the exact opposite: higher levels of psychological disadvantage were exhibited by subjects who self-enhanced. The purpose of this review is to examine this elusive concept of positive illusions in a cross-cultural context, including the face cultures of the East and dignity cultures of the West. Furthermore, I will address a recent study accounting for the literature's inconsistencies on positive illusions and conclude with direction for future research.

## **Introduction**

The founding fathers of psychology William James and Sigmund Freud both “exalted the virtue of self knowledge, holding self-understanding to be a hallmark of psychological health” (Kim, Chiu, Zou, 2010, pg. 395). With such significance attributed to understanding oneself, the concept of positive illusions is also important to address. Positive illusions have been consistently defined as “unrealistically positive views of the self, exaggerated perceptions of personal control, and unrealistic optimism” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, pg. 194). While their definitions have shown to be consistent within literature, positive illusions have nevertheless been under much scrutiny due to their inconsistent psychological implications.

The purpose of this review is to examine the divergent manifestations of positive illusions in individuals from the face cultures of the East and the dignity cultures of the West. With regard to this divergence, I will integrate the rising controversy over the influences of positive illusions on the psychological well-being of individuals, pointing to several measurement errors found by a recent study to account for the published discrepancies. In conclusion, I will suggest future direction for the replication of studies on positive illusions in other cultural contexts.

## **Cultures of the East and West**

### *I. Dignity Cultures*

Before addressing positive illusions, it is imperative to distinguish between the norms and logics of dignity and face cultures. Dignity cultures are widely known to be present among Anglo-Americans in the United States, particularly in the northern states (Kim, Cohen, Au, 2010). Both equality and liberty stand as the dominating values of these cultures, as it is believed

that every individual is born with an “intrinsic value” only to be measured by the individual him/herself (Kim, Cohen, Au, 2010). Thus, autonomy in the context of dignity cultures can be defined as the freedom to judge oneself independently from outer constraints (Kim & Cohen, 2010; Kim, Cohen, Au, 2010). Such core values resonate deeply among individuals from these cultures, as seen across multiple studies.

One such experiment tested how Anglo-American subjects differed in their performance evaluations of tasks given in private and public conditions (Kim, Cohen, Au, 2010). Participants in the private condition were quizzed one-on-one by a confederate who deliberately chose questions difficult to answer. The same task was also given in a public condition in which a group of confederates witnessed the quizzing. After each task participants were asked to evaluate their performance; results found that the American participants exhibited consistency in their evaluations for both conditions (Kim, Cohen, Au, 2010).

This consistency among individuals from dignity cultures was also demonstrated in another study conducted by Kim, Chiu, Peng, Cai, and Tov (2010), testing the need for positive self-regard. European American participants were recruited and given two intelligence tests. For the first test all participants received the same false feedback stating, “Your performance was fair. It means that your performance was a little better than average although it was not outstanding” (Kim & Chiu et al., 2010, pg. 66). The second test was graded merely as a pass or fail, with the condition that “80 percent of the people... in the top 20 percent of the first test would pass the second test and... 80 percent [of those] in the bottom 20 percent of the first test would fail” (Kim & Chiu et al., 2010, pg. 66). Upon completion of both tests, participants were asked for their opinions in public and private rating conditions. In the private condition

participants were given a questionnaire that included three questions requiring them to rate their results on the second test (Kim & Chiu et al., 2010). The same questions were asked orally by the experimenter in the public condition. Results showed that the American participants consistently showed positive regard for themselves across both conditions (Kim & Chiu et al., 2010).

The results of the two studies reinforce the notion that dignity cultures emphasize independence from social conference in developing self-perception, as demonstrated by the consistency shown in the private and public evaluations of the American participants in both studies. Not only is it important to secure that autonomy of self-judgment, but it is also imperative to maintain coherence in self-perception, another characteristic shown by the ratings by American subjects. Moreover, research has also shown that North American individuals from dignity cultures have high tendencies to “agree with positive self-statements and disagree with negative self-statements and to attribute much more positive than negative characteristics to the self” (Kim et al., 2008, pg. 114). Thus, this additional finding presents to us a possible affiliation between consistency and positive self-regard that is found within dignity cultures, which ultimately provides a fertile breeding ground for positive illusions.

## *II. Face Cultures*

Unlike dignity cultures, face cultures are more prominent in the East, and especially in East-Asian countries. Being hierarchical, the norms of face cultures require individuals to cooperate in sustaining harmony within society by claiming only enough “face” as allocated to them by others (Kim, Chiu, Zou, 2010; Kim & Cohen, 2010). Thus, “worth is socially conferred... with others judging the adequacy of one’s performance... [and] one’s own self-

assessment is not particularly relevant because one cannot effectively claim more face than others are willing to grant” (Kim, Cohen, Au, 2010, pg. 904). Modesty is consequently much more strictly enforced in these cultures as well (Kim & Chiu et al., 2010).

Research has shown that individuals from such face cultures act in ways consistent with their cultural logics. In the first study described above, Asian participants were also given quizzes in both public and private conditions. Yet, in contrast to their American counterparts, the Asian subjects differed in the way they evaluated their performance in the public and private conditions, judging themselves much more harshly in the public task performance (Kim, Cohen, Au, 2010). Moreover, the second study described above also had Asian participants who were given identical intelligence tests and the same types of feedback as the American subjects. Nevertheless, these individuals demonstrated inconsistencies in their evaluations, as they made more “favorable performance forecasts in the private condition than in the public condition” (Kim & Chiu et al., 2010, pg. 67).

These two studies not only confirm the idea that face cultures enforce modesty and social conference in the development of self-perception, but it also reveals another interesting phenomenon: “...when normative self-presentation pressure is relaxed [as in the private conditions, Asian participants are also] comfortable making favorable self-presentations” (Kim & Chiu et al., 2010, pg. 67). This is found consistently across the two studies described, in which evaluations in the private condition are more positive than those in the public conditions. Other additional studies have also found that individuals from face cultures tend to carry less of a need to express positive self-regard, unlike those from dignity cultures, because they concede to their negative self-aspects (Kim et al., 2008). Face cultures of the East promote the “dialectical self,”

which is defined as a balanced recognition of one's weaknesses and strengths (Kim et al., 2008). Thus, although East Asians also "assert a positive self like Americans [they] do not see acknowledging one's weaknesses as being antithetical to asserting the positive self and therefore [are] less reluctant to admit their negative self-aspects" (Kim et al., 2008, pg. 117). These findings ultimately demonstrate that although positive illusions may not be as prominent in face cultures as they are in dignity cultures, they are not completely obsolete either, and that individuals from these two cultures are not as different as commonly perceived.

## **Theories of Positive Illusions and Psychological Well-Being**

### *I. Positive Implications*

Despite traditional views having long established the perspective that well-adapted individuals are the ones possessing accurate self-perceptions, Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown published a radical paper in 1988 claiming that positive illusions were "normal" and also promoted mental health. In their research, Taylor and Brown (1988) pointed out several domains in human tendencies which render positive views as illusory:

1. More attention to favorable aspects of self than weaknesses and faults
2. Higher evaluations of self in comparison to the average person
3. Overly hopeful and confident views for the future

In making each of these claims, the authors also included that evidence suggested individuals who had low self-esteem and were mildly depressed were the ones who possessed more balanced perceptions of themselves (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

In establishing this viewpoint, Taylor and Brown (1988) further explained that positive illusions were also correlated with psychological well-being. Evidence showed that "positive

illusions... promote the capacity for creative, productive work [by facilitating] intellectually creative functioning... [and enhancing] motivation, persistence, and performance” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, pg. 198). Thus, according to Taylor and Brown (1988), individuals with positive illusions would be more assiduous even when circumstances are unfavorable. Additionally, viewing oneself as a “competent, efficacious actor behaving in the world with a generally positive future” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, pg. 201) may possibly help individuals overcome negative feedback, slumps, and losses of hope for a better future.

## *II. Negative Implications*

As radical as Taylor and Brown’s findings were, much re-evaluation was conducted with their study. Colvin, Block, and Funder (1995) criticized Taylor and Brown’s methods and rendered their conclusions immature, producing a study of their own. They retested positive illusions using more objective and valid measures to make up for the “vaguely defined dimensions” of Taylor and Brown’s 1988 research. Their study looked at both long-term and immediate effects of maintaining positive illusions about the self, which they term self-enhancement, and they utilized assessments completed by the participants themselves and by trained professionals (Colvin et al., 1995). Their longitudinal study proceeded with systematic assessments of a group of subjects at ages 14, 18, and 23, and also included peer assessments in two of the three evaluations.

Results found that self-enhancing men were “described as guileful and deceitful, distrustful of people, and as having a brittle ego-defense system... while [those] with lesser tendencies toward self-enhancement were... relatively straightforward and forthright, possessing high intellect, and having an internally consistent personality” (Colvin et al., 1995, pg. 1154-

1155). The same negative pattern was found among female participants. Those who self-enhanced were described as narcissistic and in denial of “unpleasant thoughts and conflicts,” while those who did not self-enhance demonstrated introspection and intelligence (Colvin et al., 1995).

Another experiment focusing on the short-term consequences of positive illusions videotaped two congenial interactions and a final debate between two college-level participants of different gender with no prior contact. Results from this study paralleled with those from the longitudinal study, as both male and female participants who self-enhanced were more likely to act in ways that would be “immediately detrimental to their social interactions” (Colvin et al., 1995, pg. 1159). The results of this study not only contradicted the findings of Taylor and Brown, but created a hiatus in the research on the psychological implications of positive illusions.

## **Confounds: Perceiver and Target Effects**

In light of the inconsistent findings on the psychological effects of positive illusions, Virginia Kwan, Oliver John, Richard Robins, and Lu Lu Kuang (2008) attempted “to resolve this debate.... [by proposing] that a componential approach [held] promise for understanding the divergent mental health correlates of self-enhancement” (pg. 1062). In their research Kwan, John, Robins, and Kuang (2008) clarified the definition of self-perception as “a form of interpersonal perception in which the same person, the self, is both the perceiver and the target” (pg. 1063). Thus, self-perception is the internalization of both how an individual perceives him/herself in comparison to others, as outlined in Festinger’s social-comparison theory, and also how one is viewed by others, a concept addressed by Allport (Kwan et al., 2008). Self-enhancers in this context would be those who “perceive themselves more positively than they perceive

others... [and] more positively than they are perceived by others” (Kwan et al., 2008, pg. 1063). From this comprehensive definition of self-perception, Kwan et. al (2008) pointed out and tested two confounds which they believed may explain the differences in the results of previous studies: the perceiver effect and target effect. In context high perceiver effect indicates “a tendency to evaluate people positively or leniently, whereas a low perceiver effect implies a tendency to evaluate people negatively or harshly” (Kwan et. al, 2008, pg. 1063). Furthermore, high target effect indicates that the individual is generally perceived positively by others while low target effect means that the individual is seen negatively by others. According to Kwan et al. (2008), the perceiver and target effects impose different levels of variance on different trait domains, which ultimately may lead to inconsistent data.

Using two types of self-evaluations, the social comparison index and self-insight index, Kwan et al. (2008) tested their hypothesis that “extraversion traits [like talkativeness] have more target variance than do agreeableness traits and that agreeableness traits [such as friendliness] have more perceiver variance than do extraversion traits” (pg. 1064). Results adhered to their hypothesis, as the social comparison index showed minimal confounding for traits such as agreeableness, which generally has low target variance and high perceiver variance and showed more confounding for traits like extraversion which has a high level of target variance and low perceiver variance (Kwan et al., 2008). The self-insight index, on the other hand, demonstrated the total opposite of the social comparison index. There was more confounding with high perceiver variance traits like agreeableness and less confounding with high target variance traits like extraversion (Kwan et al., 2008). In finding such variance in their results, the researchers concluded that there was a need to conduct a new study on positive illusions which takes into

account both perceiver and target effects in the evaluation methods and also in the statistical analysis. Through such considerations, more accurate depictions of the psychological implications of positive illusions could be derived.

## **Conclusion**

The ancient Greek aphorism “Know thyself” remains engraved in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, encouraging visitors to explore themselves deeply in all aspects (Kim, Chiu, Zou, 2010). Tracing centuries back, the understanding of the self has been characterized with much significance. Moreover, “the culture and the self [continues to be] one of the most widely researched topics in cross cultural [psychology]” (Chiu & Kim, 2011, pg. 518). At a general level, individuals from dignity cultures of the West and face cultures of the East do not differ at all. Research has shown that Asians, like Americans, assert positive images of themselves. Ultimately, “self-enhancing and self improving motivations reflect a similar underlying motivation; that is, a desire to be a good person... that individuals desire to be viewed as appropriate, good, and significant, in their own culture” (Heine & Hamamura, 2007, pg. 5). It is at this specific level that the distinctive cultural logics and norms of face and dignity cultures begin to define the ideal images of the self, in which individualistic American societies emphasize “pursuit of self esteem” and interdependent Asian environments reinforce “maintenance of face” (Heine & Hamamura, 2007).

As a growing number of East Asian countries invite Western influences into their culture, it is crucial for further research to be conducted on positive illusions to reveal their true psychological implications, especially considering how prominent self-enhancement is in the West. With the discovery of perceiver and target confounds, there are now higher possibilities of

obtaining more prestigious findings with regard to how positive illusions may affect the well-being of an individual.

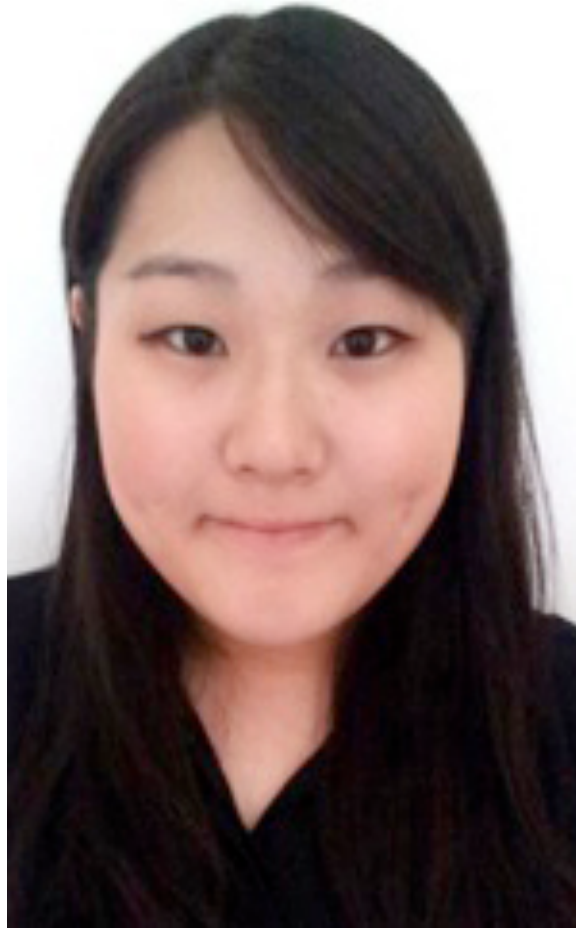
Not only is this topic of positive illusions highly elusive, but it is also just as pervasive in various fields, an important one being education. A recent study found that inaccurate feedback increases “the likelihood of practicing self-handicapping [acts such as deliberately adding distractions or withdrawing in preparatory effort]” (Kim, Chiu, Zou, 2010, pg. 406). Moreover, those students who tended to misperceive their performance (through overly positive views) also had lower grade point averages than those who judged their performances accurately (Kim, Chiu, Zou, 2010). Despite such evidence, dignity cultures of the West continue to encourage self-enhancing views and consistent positive self-regard, a now seemingly dangerous practice adopted by many Western educators. Thus, in the midst of findings such as the one above, I find it imperative that future research begin by exploring the true psychological implications of positive illusions specifically in the context of dignity cultures of the West, so that such studies may be replicated thereafter in the face cultures of the East with appropriate consideration given to the different cultural logics.

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