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CULTURE AND EDUCATION REFLECTED IN PERSONAL SELF-IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

The study regarding the ways in which individuals from different cultures relate to the process of self-improvement, to the development of one's personality, has become a specific approach in the in current research.

In this paper is presented a new concept - cultural psychology – which supports the idea that the psychic processes, individual's behaviors are directly correlated with the type of culture in which they were raised and educated. Extensive studies made by American and Japanese researchers (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder, 1990) point to the significant influence of cultural spheres/ factors on personality evolution and development. The present paper aims to describe how culture models contribute to the maintenance of positive/critical self-views, that is, self-motivation for the purpose of self-improvement.

Certain self-improvement tendencies are analyzed, in correlation with different or common cultural practices in the analyzed cultures (American and Japanese), such as: intrapsychic tendency versus independence, reward for excellence in American schools versus self-reflection practices (hansa) in Japan, malleability of the self, as well as elements of incremental theories.

The paper emphasizes that cultural elements can be a useful tool for highlighting the psychological mechanisms underlying cultural differences. Intercultural comparisons allow us to test hypotheses about the types of psychological processes that would arise if social rules were different. As a result of these findings, we can say that a culturally informed psychology offers a new perspective from which human nature can be perceived and understood.

Keywords: personality, development, cultural psychology, self-improvement, cultural differences

Introduction

The field of psychology frequently uses labels such as "self-improvement" and "self-perfection" but they tend to be broad and ambiguous and can hide a variety of motivations. Self-improvement is considered to be the tendency to insist, elaborate and exaggerate certain positive aspects of the self in relation to the weaknesses of the individual. This definition is consistent with many research paradigms, such as self-respect (Rosenberg 1992), self-bias (Taylor and Brown, 1988), and maintenance of self-assessment (Tesser 1988).

By contrast, self-improvement can be defined as the tendency to insist, elaborate and exaggerate negative aspects of the self in relation to its strengths, in the desire and effort to correct perceived deficiency. This definition is consistent with research conducted in East Asian communities (Kitayama and Markus, 2000), although it is a fairly new trend in psychological research in North America. Although other definitions of the terms in question could be developed, the kind of self-improvement they explore in their study is limited to the above definition.

North American self-improvement

The opinion that people are always motivated to self-improve is perhaps the most widespread hypothesis in psychology regarding the self (Tesser, 1988). Roger Brown (1986) referred to this need as "an urge so deeply human that we can hardly imagine its absence" (p. 534). Indeed, research on the concept of self in North America reveals the most common evidence of self-improvement motivations on a variety of paradigms. First, self-esteem measurements consistently reveal that the vast majority of North Americans tend to look at themselves in unequivocal positive terms. Quite rarely, North Americans of European descent score theoretically on the scale of self-esteem (less than 7 percent of a large sample, as noted by Heine et al., 1999).

The most common opinion in the North American samples is that which is viewed distinctly positively. This tendency to exaggerate the positive aspects of the self is evident in a variety of areas, such as: assessment of traits (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), appreciation of one's own performance (Zuckerman, 1979), recollection of past events (Crary, 1966), attitudes (Campbell, 1986), assessments of the future, assessments of one's ability to control (Lewis, 1995), assessments of the group, and assessments of an individual's relationships (Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the need for self-improvement is found in studies that investigate how people respond when they are denied the opportunity to appreciate themselves positively. When faced with negative independent information, North Americans engage in a variety of tactics to restore positive self-esteem. For example, they may align with winners and

distance themselves from losers, further achieveing their own performance with a motivation that protects their self-esteem, and they can rationalize their behaviors or decisions (Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993), sabotages a friend's performance, engages in comparison with those who behave worse or have poorer results, make external attributions for their poor performance (Zuckerman, 1979) or reduce the feedback they have received (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000). When negative self-information is discovered, any aspect of the situation that can be most easily changed will thus be streamlined to reinstate the positive assessment.

The specificity of this research lies in the limited approach of the North American population, which makes us omit from the discourse the generalization "individuals", as most research on self-improvement motivations has been conducted in North America and, to a lesser extent, in other western countries. This geographical interest makes it impossible to assess whether this motivation leads us to a universal human trait or constitutes only a Western cultural product. Whether or not the reasons for self-improvement are evident in similar degrees to people from different cultures is an empirical question that can be addressed by contrasting the data obtained for these motivations in different cultural areas.

Japanese self-improvement

Generally, the data obtained for self-improvement motivations (as operationalized by the above definition) are weak and evasive among the Japanese samples. Intercultural studies reveal that, compared to North Americans, the Japanese have significantly less positive self-esteem, as evidenced by lower self-esteem scores and higher discrepancies in the real-ideal correlation; significantly weaker tendencies to exaggerate the positivity of their self-opinions (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) and significantly weaker tendencies to try to maintain a positive self-opinion. Standard indicators of self-improvement are less evident among the Japanese.

In conclusion, the evidence converges to the idea that the motivations for self-improvement are more pronounced in the North American samples than in the Japanese. Thus, motivations for self-improvement seem to be closely linked to Western cultural experiences. Cultural psychology argues that the whole culture and the human psyche influence each other (Shweder, 1990). Therefore, in order to understand the common psychological processes within a culture, it is important to first understand the culture which supports them. Cultural psychological explanations for differences in self-improvement tendencies highlight various common cultural practices in different cultures that seem to support them, such as: rewarding excellence in American schools and self-reflection practices (hansei) in Japan (Kitayama & Markus, 1991). The comparisons and analogies between cultural practices and psychological processes lead to surprising conclusions.

Independent *versus* interdependent self

Many researches contrasting North Americans and East Asians have focused on differences in self-concept. Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguished between independent and interdependent self-opinions in these two cultural groups. Some of the defining characteristics of the independent conception of self are that people want to consider themselves independent and separated from each other, as autonomous and self-sufficient. Such a self-orientation is cultivated through self-improvement. However, it is very difficult to feel self-sufficient, independent and complete as an individual, if there is no self-assessment. Successful realization of the cultural ideal of independence, that is, becoming the kind of person that North American culture considers normal or appropriate, seems to require a sense of self-esteem and self-respect (Heine et al. 1999).

Instead, the view of interdependence is that people have a fundamental need to give in to others, to have a sense of belonging, and to maintain interpersonal harmony (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Such a perspective seems to have very little to do with how positive one perceives oneself. Considering self-esteem important will not help improving the individual's relationships or the feeling of belonging to others. Achieving interdependence requires the cooperation and willingness of others that is gained when others appreciate the individual. In order to become the kind of person perceived as normal or appropriate in an interdependent culture, it is necessary for someone to gain the respect of others, and not just the self-respect.

In conclusion, this reasoning suggests that values related to the independent self should, in theory, be closely related to self-improvement, while values related to the interdependent self should be largely unrelated, or even negatively related to self-improvement.

Intrapsychic *versus* interpersonal concerns

Self-improvement is associated with both its benefits and its costs to the individual. Paulhus (1998) shows that these benefits and costs cover two specific areas. First, the benefits of self-improvement tend to have an intrapsychic nature. Specifically, focusing on what is good in the self tends to be associated with subjective well-being and self-efficacy and, in the same time, being negatively associated with dysphoria and depression (Taylor and Armor, 1996; Taylor and Brown, 1988). If individuals consider their strengths more often than weaknesses, they will experience positive thoughts and optimistic feelings about themselves. Indeed, positive self-opinions show clear, distinct correlations with a range of positive feelings and subjective well-being (Taylor and Brown, 1988). Therefore, we can say that an obvious benefit of self-improvement is to feel good, to have a positive opinion about yourself.

However, the intrapsychic benefits of self-improvement tend to be associated with certain interpersonal costs. Several researchers have highlighted the way in which those who improve

themselves risk attracting the contempt of those around them (Paulhus, 1998). In other words, most people do not like those who achieve new performance through self-improvement. Paulhus (1998) found that after seven weeks of interaction, self-enhancers were less likely to be viewed positively by their peers than those who did not self-improve. Godfrey, Jones, and Lord (1986) found that people trained to appear competent were less liked than those who did not receive these instructions. Tice, Butler, Muraven, and Stillwell (1995) argued that people promote themselves more to strangers than to friends, because the costs of being less pleasant are much higher to friends than to strangers. But self-improvement and self-promotion strategies can also lead to certain interpersonal benefits, such as the consideration received from others who will see them more competent. This is done at the cost of being viewed socially as unattractive. Having great confidence in personal qualities seems to have negative consequences on relationships. First, self-assessments tend not to have an absolute basis, but are made by comparisons with similar situations. Thus, for an individual, to think that he is talented implies, to some extent, the appreciation that he is more talented than the others. It is not surprising that people react negatively to someone who thinks he is better than them.

Another way to interpret the negative correlation between self-improvement and relationships with others appears in terms of the probability of depending on others. The more talented and competent someone is, the less likely he is to depend on others. Feelings of grandeur emphasize how the individual can cope on his own and therefore do not need to rely on others for guidance or support. Depending on someone increases the amount of potential rewards they can receive in a relationship, while actions, gestures that indicate that someone does not need to rely on others can be interpreted as signals that the person does not want to be too close to others (Clark & Mills, 1979).

The costs and benefits of self-improvement in these two approaches suggest that, to the extent that a person focuses more on intrapsychic development than on interpersonal orientation, self-improvement becomes a beneficial strategy. The positive feelings arising from self-improvement will be seen as a reward for the effort made, while the price paid will consist in the phenomenon of alienation from others. Instead, to the extent that individuals are more concerned with their interpersonal relationships than with their intrapsychic rewards, they will benefit more from self-criticism but also from self-improvement at the same time. The benefits of deepening relationships with others outweigh the costs of negative feelings associated with self-criticism and self-improvement. This logic can be extended to a wide variety of cultures. Those cultures that place more emphasis on the need to feel good should make self-improvement a beneficial strategy, while cultures that give a relatively greater importance in maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships should benefit more from self-criticism and self-improvement.

There is considerable evidence that the Japanese and North Americans differ in the way they emphasize intrapsychic and interpersonal concerns. There is evidence that North Americans

report having more positive feelings than the Japanese (Mesquita and Karasawa, 2002). One way to understand this difference is that North Americans tend to develop the positivity of their feelings because they are more relevant to a successful life. Suh et al. (1998) consider that the experience of positive feelings is more closely related to the subjective well-being of North Americans than to the Japanese (and among people from individualistic cultures, in general), while fulfilling role expectations is more closely related to human well-being, from collectivist cultures. Thus, intrapsychic concerns are largely analyzed by North Americans in their studies.

Instead, the greater importance given to maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships in East Asia compared to North America has been discussed in a variety of areas. These concerns are justified in the search for less compromising bargaining strategies, such as negotiation and mediation, and in favor of a seniority-based reward system, for a meritocratic system (Clark, 1979), being associated with less competition between colleagues.

Several researchers have commented on the importance of *amae* in Japanese culture (Niiya, Yamaguchi, Murakami, & Harihara, 2000). Amae is the term for emotion, which refers to the indulgence of one individual over the well-being of other. It is the freedom to maintain the subjective experience of dependence on each other. Two (1971) describes amae as the mortar that holds Japanese society together and strengthens the group's solidarity. The amae experience is compromised if people focus on their own competence and self-sufficiency. Indeed, the Japanese sociologist Chie Nakane, (1970) argues that it is best if a Japanese manager is not very competent, because if so, then he would no longer depend on his employees, which would make them lose much of their sense of collaboration and mutual dependence. Therefore, some evidence suggests that the Japanese tend to appreciate more the interpersonal concerns, and less the intrapsychic concerns, and thus the cost-benefit ratio of self-improvement is no longer as favorable for them as compared to North Americans.

Internal *versus* external frames of reference

Another mechanism related to self-improvement, which differs between the cultures of East Asia and North America, can be observed in the tendencies to seek an external frame of reference: more precisely, to participate and to try to adapt their behavior in accordance with the standards of the society shared with significant people in everyone's life. To the extent that the standards of others are considered more relevant to the assessment of the individual than one's own standards, self-deception strategies will be lower and less functional. Self-deceptive tactics, such as self-esteem in unrealistic positive terms, can only work well to convince the individual to act accordingly; however, it is a completely different matter to deceive others about one's performance against a consensual standard. Typical self-improvement tactics, such as favoring positive over negative memories, internalizing one's successes and outsourcing one's failures (Zuckerman, 1979), or exaggerating one's success (Taylor and Brown, 1988), will not improve the way others view that individual. Rather, most likely, others would see the individual

positively if he / she respects the standards that others agree with and even tries to reach one of their higher level. The most favorable situation is when the individual adopts a preventive perspective (Higgins, 1999) and considers that his action does not fall within the consensual standards for his role. Therefore, an external frame of reference should encourage a self-improvement orientation.

Conversely, if an individual adopts more of an internal frame of reference, self-improvement should be beneficial. When individuals are free to determine the performance standards by which they are satisfied with themselves, they should be able to increase the positivity of their opinions. And an emphasis on what is positive about the individual should be associated with feelings of self-efficacy and positive self-feelings in general (Taylor & Armor, 1996). Thus, when individuals meet their own standards, they should have more benefits of self-improvement.

There is much evidence consistent with the idea that Asians tend to give more importance to external standards compared to North Americans. Eshun Hamaguchi states that the Japanese self "is an object seen from the point of view of its partner" (p. 312, 1985). Theoretical discussions in this regard can best be identified in the literature on the concept of "face" (mentsu in Japanese or mien-tzu in Chinese) in East Asia. Ho (1976) defines the face as “the opinion that a person can claim from others by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is considered to have functioned properly in that position” (p. 883). The face is not owned by individuals, as much as it is earned from others. However, the face seems to be a concept that is not very elaborate and is not fully understood among North Americans. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the phrase "losing one's face" first entered English language in the second half of the 19th century as a direct translation from Chinese. Dienstbier, Murphy-Berman & Berman (2003) found that Americans did not distinguish between situations of loss of face or embarrassment, while the Japanese saw a clear distinction between these two states. The face seems to be a more important and socially relevant construction among East Asians, although there is little empirical research to investigate it so far.

Particular concern for the face makes Asians extremely sensitive to insults and negative sanctions from others. If one has complied with consensual standards, individuals should be motivated to present to the public an impeccable, self-defective formal self that could jeopardize a positive appreciation. Indeed, Japanese culture has been characterized by assuming various isolating rituals (rules for posture, gestures, etc.), serving to prevent exposure of possible defects of the individual (Hendry, 1993).

Empirical research confirms this theoretical difference between East Asia and North America. For example, Leuers and Sonoda (1999) compared the way individuals presented themselves in photographs in Japan and the United States. The Japanese tended to present themselves quite arranged, posing nicely in front of the camera, in a way that would ensure a favorable impression in front of others. The Americans were rather indifferent to their own shortcomings and did not

hesitate to reveal their "warts and all," making minimal efforts to ensure a positive self-presentation.

Cohen and Gunz (2002) believe that a consequence of adopting an external frame of reference will make Asians experience the world more from the perspective of those around them. That is, Asians should see themselves as consistent with how they are seen by others. This "outside perspective" has quite profound consequences on psychological experience. Cohen and Gunz find that, for example, Canadians in Asia are more likely to experience third-person memories than first-person memories for situations in which they have been in the spotlight. That is, their memories of past experiences include many images of how they appeared in the "eyes of the world" at the time - images that were never directly accessible to them. Their increased sensitivity to a certain audience permeates their memories. In contrast, the self-memories of Euro-Canadians showed significantly less of these images of a third person. Their memories of experiences when they were in the spotlight had more images compatible with how they initially saw the event.

It would seem that, to the extent that East Asians are aware of an audience and adapt their behaviors to that audience, they should probably be in a more active state of objective awareness than North Americans. If this is the case, then stimuli that increase objective self-awareness (for example, seeing yourself in front of a mirror) should have little effect on East Asians. Even without a mirror present, they should be somewhat aware of how they appear to others. An intercultural study confirms this hypothesis: it was found that while Americans showed a decrease in self-esteem and an increase in self-discrepancies when they saw their reflection in a mirror (Duval and Wicklund, 1972), Japanese evaluations were not affected by the presence of the mirror. Moreover, the discrepancies and the American self-esteem were at similar levels to the Japanese ones, in front of a mirror, but they were much more positive when the mirror was absent. One of the reasons why self-assessments tend to be much more positive for North Americans than for the Japanese may be that North Americans are less likely to consider how they appear to others. When individuals are oriented to look at themselves in more objective terms, either by looking at themselves in a mirror or by considering the way others look at them, they are not as free to engage in the process of self-deception. Objectivity constrains the ability to improve.

Theories of skills development

The usefulness of self-improvement will also be based on the perceived malleability of skills. One way to consider abilities is to see them as deriving from a set of internal attributes, relatively fixed, unchangeable and consistent. Dweck and colleagues called this secular understanding of abilities the theory of the self as an entity (Dweck, Hong, and Chiu 1993). If one accepts the theory that abilities are largely the result of innate, stable factors, then it becomes more

functional to visualize the self and its component characteristics in a positive light. Having a positive self-assessment should be a central concern in your efforts to work to become a better self. Once the self is largely considered immutable, any attempt at improvement should offer small rewards.

Instead, at the other end of the continuum, skills can be seen as fluid and malleable, able to be improved through continuous effort. Dweck and his colleagues believe that the self is capable of evolution and improvement, thus caught in an incremental theory (of growth, improvement) of the self. To the extent that the view is supported by the idea that achievement is primarily based on effort and therefore is changeable, then a motivation for self-improvement increases its importance. It would be much more beneficial to deal with areas where there is room for improvement than areas where someone is already competent (Duval, S. & Wicklund, R., 1972). By maintaining a self-critical perspective and making appropriate efforts to address the shortcomings observed, people with more flexible visions of themselves should experience increased performance and feelings of efficiency. Therefore, individuals who have different approaches to the self are more concerned with becoming a better self than with evaluating the self in a positive way: a positive self-assessment is relatively uninformative and inconsequential if the self is considered fluid and changeable. Beliefs in self-malleability should therefore be associated with more self-improvement.

Cultures seem to show a lot of variability in the belief that the self is fluid or stable. In particular, there has been a lot of literature consistent with the idea that the Japanese consider themselves and their abilities in more balanced terms, more than North Americans. First, this distinction is evident in the ways in which efforts have been moralized in Japanese culture (T. Doi, 1971). For example, the terms gambari, doryoku and gaman have remarkably positive connotations compared to their English equivalents of perseverance, effort and endurance. Indeed, doryoku and gambari have been identified as the two most appreciated words in Japanese, and the cultivation of gaman has been seen as an important aspect of education (Duke, 1986). Similarly, the tendencies to identify one's own shortcomings were institutionalized in the school system in the practice of hanse (literally, self-reflection). Many classes have time at the end of the day to analyze what mistakes have been made and how they can be improved (Lewis, 1995). Moreover, the malleability of the Japanese self is evident in a diverse ethnographic literature that focuses on the importance of adjusting the self to different situations.

Much evidence for greater self-fluency among the Japanese also comes from the psychological literature. For example, East Asians have been shown to have a more malleable sense of self than North Americans, in the sense that (a) they are more likely to relate differently to themselves in situations; (b) are more likely to see the achievements as a product of the efforts; (c) are less likely to perform temporary duties; (d) are more likely to perform unstable tasks regarding their performance; (e) are more likely to try to change themselves than to change their environment;

and (f) are less likely to see others as having innate differences in abilities. The intensity of the belief that skills can be improved is quite clear from the research that required subjects to appreciate how much of their intelligence is due to their efforts. European Americans estimated that 36% of their intelligence came from efforts, Asian Americans estimated 45%, and the Japanese 55% (Heine et al., 2001).

Culture has an impact on the perceived malleability of the self. There is also evidence that greater self-malleability is linked to cultural differences in self-improvement. While previous research finds that North Americans tend to have a greater motivation to persist in a task after doing it well than after doing it badly, research with East Asians finds the opposite pattern: after failure, East Asians show more motivation to work on a task than they do if they succeed. Awareness of weaknesses seems to be directly linked to efforts to correct perceived shortcomings (M. Zuckerman, 1979).

More, trends in persistence after failure are significantly correlated with data provided by incremental theories (Heine et al., 2000) for members of East Asian and North American cultures. Moreover, experimental manipulations of incremental skills theories corroborate cultural differences. When participants are instructed to believe that the experimental task measures innate and stable skills: the Japanese persist significantly less after failure (indicating that this is new information for them), while the persistence of Americans is not affected by this information (which suggests that they already possessed this faith). Being sensitive to weaknesses and working to correct them is only a beneficial strategy if it is considered that the weakness can be corrected.

Conclusions

As mentioned above, there are some items that seem to diminish the usefulness of self-improvement: interdependent personality, the ratio of interpersonal to intrapsychic concerns, maintaining an external focus of awareness, and the belief that skills are malleable and capable of improvement. Individuals adopt strategies that are perceived as functional in their cultural environment.

The analysis of these concepts reveals some important links. The interdependent self, as opposed to the independent self, places greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships with other significant people (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To the extent that those with interdependent opinions about themselves are particularly sensitive to maintaining the harmony of their interpersonal relationships, it turns out that they should appreciate more the interpersonal concerns than people with independent-self opinions. Moreover, those with interdependent abilities should also be more sensitive to how their actions might impact others, thus giving an external emphasis of awareness and concern for the face, throughout their behavior. When individuals are concerned about how others view them, they will likely adjust their behavior to

meet the expectations of others. When a person's behavior needs to be adjusted to meet consensual standards shared by others, it is necessary for the individual to see that his or her abilities are flexible enough to meet those standards. Therefore, the items analyzed above seem to be connected.

Cultural psychology can not only help to reveal how different cultural systems support characteristic psychological processes, but can also become a tool for identifying the psychological mechanisms underlying cultural differences. Understanding another culture can give us multiple pieces of information about our own culture. Knowing as much as possible about the cultural differences that appear in self-improvement, we can consider the relevant psychological mechanisms that differ between cultures. Cultural differences allow us to test hypotheses of specific costs and benefits associated with various psychological processes.

Indeed, it is unlikely that the processes associated with self-improvement explored in this article would have been obvious if research from outside North America had not been taken into account. In this sense, such research can be extended to new cultural areas, which can provide important data to complete the descriptive picture of the human personality, existing and interacting in various cultural settings. A culturally informed psychology will provide a new perspective from which human nature can be viewed and understood.

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