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Brief report

Universal biases in self-perception: Better and more human than average

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There is a well-established tendency for people to see themselves as better than average (self-enhancement), although the universality of this phenomenon is contested. Much less well-known is the tendency for people to see themselves as more human than average (self-humanizing). We examined these biases in six diverse nations: Australia, Germany, Israel, Japan, Singapore, and the USA. Both biases were found in all nations. The self-humanizing effect was obtained independent of self-enhancement, and was stronger than self-enhancement in two nations (Germany and Japan). Self-humanizing was not specific to Western or English-speaking cultures and its magnitude was less cross-culturally variable than self-enhancement. Implications of these findings for research on the self and its biases are discussed.

People are often biased in their self-perceptions, failing to assess themselves accurately. The most well-known and thoroughly researched bias is self-enhancement (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), which is best illustrated by the tendency for people to believe that they are better than the average person (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). This bias is pervasive and has important implications for physical, emotional, and social well-being (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2001).

Whether or not biases in self-perception reflect a universal aspect of human psychology has been the subject of heated debate. The existence of cultural variability in self-conception has become accepted wisdom in psychology. Since Markus and Kitayama (1991) and Triandis (1989), two decades of research has documented cultural differences in perceptions of the self (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Oyserman, Coon,

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& Kemmelmeier, 2002). Several fundamental cultural differences in self-perception have been proposed, such as the tendency for East Asians to view the self as more interdependent than Western Europeans (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and for Western Europeans to emphasize personal distinctiveness from the collective more than East Asians (Triandis, 1989). Consistent with this 'relativity' hypothesis, Heine and colleagues have argued that 'the need for positive regard … is not universal, but rather is rooted in significant aspects of North American culture' (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999, p. 766). In contrast, Sedikides, Gaertner, and Vevea (2005) defend a 'universality' hypothesis according to which 'self-enhancement is a universal human motivation' (p. 540). Sedikides and colleagues argue that people universally engage in positively biased self-appraisals, but do so only on culturally valued dimensions. Despite being the topic of over 30 cross-cultural studies, the relativity–universality debate is ongoing (e.g., Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2007).

Whereas the self-enhancement bias has received considerable empirical scrutiny, another bias in self-perception has gone largely unstudied. In addition to seeing themselves as better than average, people tend to rate themselves higher than the average person on traits that they perceive to be 'human' (Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005). This effect appears limited to one sense of humanness: human nature. People distinguish human nature (attributes core to being human) from human uniqueness (attributes which separate humans from animals; Haslam, 2006; Haslam *et al.*, 2005). Human nature consists of positive and negative emotionality, vivacity, and liveliness, whereas human uniqueness consists of civility, intelligence, morality, and refined emotionality (Haslam, 2006; Leyens *et al.*, 2001). For instance, curiosity may be seen as central to being human (human nature), despite the fact that we share it with other animals (not uniquely human). By contrast, politeness may not be considered core to being human (not human nature), but may separate humans from animals (uniquely human). People use both human nature and human uniqueness when comparing groups (Bain, Park, Kwok, & Haslam, 2009; Leyens *et al.*, 2000; Loughnan, Haslam, & Kashima, 2009), but there is no evidence that people rate themselves higher than others on uniquely human traits (Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Leyens, 2005). This finding of self-humanizing using human nature, but not human uniqueness, has been replicated in five separate studies (Haslam & Bain, 2007; Haslam *et al.*, 2005). In short, people see themselves as embodying human nature more than others.

Although both self-humanizing and self-enhancement reflect biases in the way people view the self, they are distinct at both a conceptual and at a statistical level. Conceptually, people consider human nature to be comprised of both positive and negative characteristics (Haslam, 2006; Haslam *et al.*, 2005). In seeing the self as more human than others, people acknowledge both their human strengths and weaknesses. In self-enhancement, our self-perception is rose-tinted, so that relative to others our virtues loom large and our flaws are barely visible, whereas in self-humanizing our self-perception is deeper, so that we possess greater humanity than others. Statistically, the association between self-ratings and human nature judgments remains significant when controlling for trait desirability (Haslam & Bain, 2007; Haslam *et al.*, 2005).

Although there is currently no conclusive explanation of why people self-humanize, there is evidence that self-humanizing may in part result from the attribution of greater depth to the self. Haslam *et al.* (2005) found that the extent to which traits were

considered deep-seated or essence-like mediated their attribution to the self. This finding helps to explain why people do not attribute more uniquely human traits to the self, as these traits are not essentialized (Haslam *et al.*, 2005). Another mechanism appears to be the tendency to view the 'average person' in an abstract manner. Haslam and Bain (2007) found that presenting the other in a concrete or individuated manner reduces the tendency to self-humanize. It appears that self-humanizing may in part reflect an egocentric perceptual tendency to see the self as deeper than others, although the phenomenon may also have a motivational component.

Given the disagreement over the universality of self-enhancement, we might ask whether the tendency to self-humanize is cross-culturally robust. The relativity view would suggest that the tendency to think of the self as more human than others is specific to certain cultures. In contrast, the universality view suggests that all people have a tendency to attribute greater humanness to themselves than to others. The current state of research does not allow us to differentiate between a universality and relativity account of self-humanizing.

In support of the relativity approach, the self-humanizing effect has only been reported amongst Westerners, specifically Australians. More broadly, the role of humanness in social perception has primarily been demonstrated in Western cultures: Europe (Leyens *et al.*, 2000), North America (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006; Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007), and Australia (Haslam *et al.*, 2005; Loughnan *et al.*, 2009). We might expect that self-humanizing follows the same cultural pattern as other self-biases such as self-enhancement, which has been shown to be stronger in Western than East Asian cultures (e.g., Heine & Hamamura, 2007). In support of the universality approach, the tendency to attribute greater humanness to the in-group has been observed amongst Chinese people living in Australia (Bain *et al.*, 2009). Although this study did not examine perception of the self, it does suggest that non-Westerners may use humanness in social perception. Further, if self-humanizing reflects in part a basic perceptual tendency to view the self as deeper or more concrete than others then the effect would be expected to occur pan culturally.

The current study

To address the cross-cultural robustness of self-humanizing and self-enhancement, we employed an identical methodology in six diverse cultural settings. Two samples were drawn from Asia (Japan, Singapore), one from Europe (Germany), one from the Middle East (Israel), one from Oceania (Australia), and one from North America (the USA). Our methodology allowed us to assess self-enhancement independently of self-humanizing and to examine the possibility that people also attribute more uniquely human attributes to the self, despite previous evidence that they do not (Cortes *et al.*, 2005; Haslam & Bain, 2007; Haslam *et al.*, 2005).

Given that past self-enhancement research has found significant but variable effects across cultures, we predicted that all of our samples would self-enhance, but to varying degrees. We expected that self-enhancement would be weakest in East Asia, particularly in Japan. By contrast, we expected that self-enhancement would be strongest in the West, particularly in the USA. Given that self-enhancement research has found this bias to be significant but variable across cultures, we expected that the self-humanizing bias will be present in all nations to a varying degree. Given that previous work has robustly demonstrated self-humanizing with human nature, but not human uniqueness, we expected that people will attribute themselves more human nature than others.

Method

Participants

From 6 nations, 480 people participated in the study (i.e., 80 people per nation). The Australian, German, Israeli, Japanese, and Singaporean participants were undergraduate students who received partial course credit for their participation (Australia and Singapore), volunteered (Germany and Israel), or received payment (Japan). American participants were young adults recruited on-line via a freely accessible website, and who completed the questionnaire to enter a lottery for a $50 prize. Although drawn from different sources, the samples were predominately young and female (mean age = 18.63 - 30.10 years; female = 43 - 77%).

Materials

All participants completed a short questionnaire based on previous self-humanizing research (Haslam *et al.*, 2005), in which they rated a set of personality characteristics on four items. A total of 80 characteristics were employed; 60 were personality traits from the Big Five (6 from each pole of each factor, Costa & McCrae, 1992); and 20 were value terms (2 from each segment of Schwartz's value circumplex, Schwartz, 1992). Four different versions of the questionnaire were constructed by randomly sampling 20 of the 80 characteristics. Each participant completed one of these four versions. The questionnaire required participants to rate each of the 20 characteristics on four items. The first item measured self-attribution ('How much do you possess this trait compared to the average student?' or, in the USA sample only, 'compared to the average person?'), and was completed on a seven-point scale (1 = *much less than the average student/person*, 7 = *much more than the average student/person*). The next three items assessed human nature (This characteristic is an aspect of human nature), human uniqueness (This characteristic is exclusively or uniquely human; it does not apply to other species), and desirability (This characteristic is desirable; it is a characteristic that people generally want). Participants indicated their agreement with these statements using a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). The original English version of the questionnaire was used for the Australian, Singaporean, and American samples. German, Hebrew, and Japanese versions were translated and back-translated to ensure equivalence.

Procedure

Australian, German, Israeli, Japanese, and Singaporean participants completed a pen-and-paper version of the questionnaire in small groups under experimenter supervision. American participants completed an electronic questionnaire on-line using personal computers. Participants were randomly assigned one of the four questionnaire versions and debriefed after completing it.

Results

Trait ratings were nested within different samples, so we analysed the results using multi-level modelling,[1] specifically a multi-level random coefficient model. This

[1] *We re-ran the analysis as separate regressions within each nation. The pattern of findings was largely the same. We employed multi-level modelling to accommodate the nested nature of the data (Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).*

Table 1. Product–moment correlations of desirability, human nature, and human uniqueness across nations

	Desirability/HN	Desirability/HU	HN/HU
Average	.32*	.31*	.15
Australia	.10	.23*	−.23*
Germany	.70*	.75*	.86*
Israel	.43*	.22	−.09
Japan	.04	.28*	.15
Singapore	.42*	.41*	.07
USA	.21	.18	.05

*$p < .05$.

approach allowed us to examine each participant's rating of each trait on all four characteristics while collapsing across all four versions of the questionnaire. Our model had two levels;[2] level 1 predicted self-ratings based on trait desirability, human nature, and human uniqueness ratings, which were nested within level 2, which contained individual differences (i.e., age, gender, and country). All level 1 variables were group mean centred. Neither age nor gender significantly altered the ability human nature, human uniqueness, or desirability to predict self-ratings (ps $> .10$), and were excluded from further analyses. The level 1 model contained one outcome variable (self-ratings) and three predictor variables (human nature, human uniqueness, and desirability). The zero-order correlations between the predictors can be seen in Table 1.

To test the ability of human nature, human uniqueness, and desirability to predict self-ratings across the combined sample, the first model tested the level 1 equation. Table 2 summarizes the effects of each predictor and shows that all three ratings independently predicted self-ratings. The more a trait was considered desirable, part of human nature, and uniquely human the more it was attributed to the self-relative to others. Trait desirability had the strongest effect,[3] followed by human nature, with these effects corresponding to self-enhancement and self-humanizing, respectively. A small but significant effect was also obtained for human uniqueness.

To examine the potential effect of culture on the self-enhancement and self-humanizing effects, each nation was entered in the second level of the model, using dummy variables coded 1 for the country of focus (e.g., 1 = USA) and 0 for all other nations (e.g., 0 = not USA), while excluding the second level intercept (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Desirability and human nature were significant predictors of self-ratings in every country. Self-enhancement and self-humanizing therefore appear to be cross-culturally robust. In contrast, human uniqueness was a significant predictor only in Germany and Israel (Table 3). The self-enhancement effect was stronger than the self-humanizing effect in four nations, but self-humanizing was stronger in Germany and Japan (Figure 1). The Japanese pattern is consistent with previous work indicating

[2] *Although it is strictly possible to generate a three-level model (i.e., ratings nested within people nested within nations), this model would possess so few degrees of freedom at the third level so as to preclude meaningful hypothesis testing.*
[3] *Although the coefficients are unstandardized, because all variables were rated on the same scale we can directly compare the magnitude of the effect by examining the size of the coefficients. The calculation of standardized coefficients is not recommended (Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998).*

Table 2. Predicting self-ratings across all samples

	B	*t* value	*p*
Desirability	0.18	14.15	<.01
Human nature	0.14	9.98	<.01
Human uniqueness	0.03	3.57	.01

attenuated self-enhancement there (Heine & Hamamura, 2007), but the strong self-enhancement effect in Singapore suggests this effect is not pan-Asian.

Although the self-humanizing effect was on average smaller than the self-enhancement effect (Tables 2 and 3), it was also more consistent, falling within a narrower range (.09–.19 vs. .06–.28). To statistically examine whether human nature was a less variable predictor of self-ratings than desirability, we ran a series of contrasts comparing the strength of these predictors across nations, resulting in 15 comparisons for each predictor. These contrasts measured the difference in the ability of HN or desirability to predict self-ratings between each nation at level 2 (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). For instance, to compare Australia and Germany on human nature, the nations are weighted (Australia = 1; Germany = −1; all others = 0) and a chi-square on the level 2 variable indicates whether the influence of these nations on the beta weight of human nature at level 1 of the model significantly differs. For human nature, only 3 of the 15 comparisons were significant. Self-humanizing was stronger in Germany than Israel, Japan, and the USA. By contrast, for desirability 9 of the 15 comparisons were significant ($p < .05$), 2 were marginal ($p < .08$), and only 4 were clearly non-significant. The USA, Israel, and Singapore did not differ, nor did Germany and Japan. Thus, self-humanizing may be weaker but less cross-culturally variable than self-enhancement.

Table 3. The predictive ability of trait desirability, human nature, and human uniqueness (*B*) by sample

	Desirability	Human nature	Human uniqueness
Australia	.18***	.12***	−.01
Germany	.09***	.19***	.12***
Israel	.27***	.11***	.05*
Japan	.06*	.10**	−.01
Singapore	.28***	.14***	.01
USA	.26***	.09*	.04

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the tendency to see ourselves as better and more human than others occurs across cultures. Stated broadly, people in all nations tended to self-enhance *and* self-humanize. Across six diverse nations both desirability and human nature emerged as a significant predictor of self-ratings. The strength of these effects varied between nations: self-enhancement was stronger in Australia, Israel, Singapore, and the USA, whereas self-humanizing was stronger in Germany and Japan. However, these differences should not obscure the finding that the self-humanizing effect appears to be a cross-culturally stable but relatively unexplored bias in self-perception.

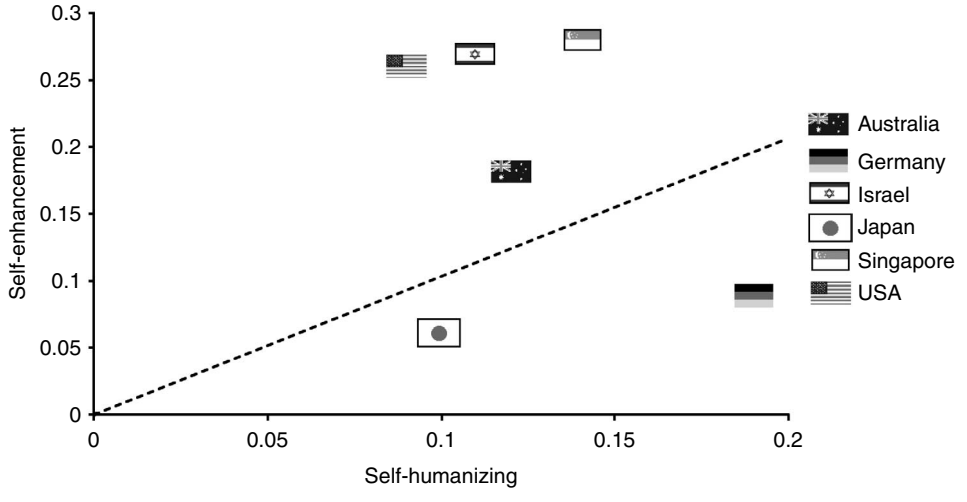

Figure 1. Self-enhancement and self-humanizing effects for each nation. Diagonal line indicates equality of the effects.

Although it is too early to claim that self-humanizing is truly universal, the replication of the effect in this study provides preliminary evidence for this claim. The nations employed represent a wide range of cultures and world regions, including Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the 'new world' (i.e., Australia, USA). Half were English speaking (i.e., Australia, Singapore, USA) and half were not (i.e., Germany, Israel, Japan). The replication of this effect across these nations indicates that despite being previously identified only in Australia, self-humanizing is not specific to Western or Anglophone cultures. This finding provides evidence that the self-humanizing bias conforms more to the 'universality' hypothesis (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008) than the 'relativity' hypothesis (Heine *et al.*, 1999, 2007). While debate about the universality or relativity of self-enhancement has dominated the cross-cultural study of self-biases, the current research suggests that another cross-cultural bias – self-humanizing – has remained largely unstudied.

Consistent with previous findings (Haslam & Bain, 2007; Haslam *et al.*, 2005), human nature was a reliable predictor of self-ratings in all nations, whereas human uniqueness was not, only significantly predicting self-ratings in Germany and Israel. It is important to note that in both of these nations self-humanizing was considerably stronger for human nature than human uniqueness. Overall, these findings suggest that people do not simply consider themselves more human than others, but rather that they see themselves as embodying what is essential to being human (human nature) rather than what distinguishes humans from animals (human uniqueness). Previous research has shown that human uniqueness is important for differentiating the in-group from the out-group, independent of in-group favouritism (Leyens *et al.*, 2000; Saminaden, Loughnan, & Haslam, 2010; Vaes, Paladino, & Leyens, 2006). Similarly, human nature is important for differentiating the self from others, independent of self-enhancement. Thus, humanness is relevant to social perception at interpersonal and intergroup levels, but in subtly different ways.

In addition to the consistency with which the self-humanizing effect emerged across cultures, we found that the effect is consistent in magnitude. Although cross-national

differences were the norm for self-enhancement, the only difference that emerged for self-humanizing was a tendency for Germans to self-humanize more than some other nations. This finding provides further evidence for adopting a 'universality' hypothesis for understanding self-humanizing. Why might self-humanizing be particularly strong in Germany? Recent cross-cultural research has suggested that some cultures (e.g., Danish culture) prefer an equal or 'level' society and this reduces the tendency to self-enhance (Thomsen, Sidanius, & Fiske, 2007). It might be that in cultures which focus on the self yet discourage self-enhancement, such as those with high individualism but a culture of equality, self-humanizing constitutes a route through which individuals can perceive personal distinctiveness. Whether this culture of equality and the need for personal distinctiveness can explain the magnitude of self-humanizing is an empirical question that awaits further research. Alternatively, it is important to note that human nature and human uniqueness were highly correlated in the German sample. The increased self-humanizing effect found in Germany may reflect the combined influence of self-humanizing on both senses of humanness. Regardless, it is important to note that differences between nations on self-humanizing were minimal compared to differences in self-enhancement.

Why do people see themselves as more human than average across cultures? One possibility is that self-humanizing reflects an attempt to establish or maintain a feeling of connectedness with the human collective.[4] People possess a strong need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and self-humanizing may be one mechanism for viewing the self as deeply connected to a important super-ordinate group: humanity. By emphasizing the degree to which they possesses those characteristics that reflect our shared human essence (i.e., human nature), rather than characteristics that set us apart from animals (i.e., human uniqueness), people may fulfil their need for connection to a social group. If this is the motivation underlying the tendency to self-humanize, we might expect this bias to be strongest amongst people who feel socially disconnected – such as the chronically lonely – or those whose sense of self is strongly based on their group membership. This possibility awaits empirical scrutiny.

Alternatively, self-humanizing may result from people having more direct access to their own internal processes than those of others. Greater familiarity with our internal world may result in viewing the self as deeper, more complex, and more human. This internal focus on the self may lead to a greater consideration of those attributes which are core, deep, and essential (human nature), rather than those which distinguish us from animals (human uniqueness). This possibility is consistent with the finding that self-humanizing is markedly reduced when people focus their attention on the other when making self-other comparisons (Haslam & Bain, 2007). If self-humanizing is rooted in people's privileged access to their interior experience then the cross-cultural similarity in the magnitude of the self-humanizing effect may be understandable. Self-humanizing may largely result from basic limitations in our knowledge of other minds.

In summary, the current study has provided evidence for a new cross-culturally robust self-bias. Whereas dozens of studies have explored cross-cultural differences in self-enhancement, this study is the first to examine this new self-bias from a comparative perspective. Although the self-humanizing bias is somewhat smaller than

[4] *We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.*

self-enhancement, it may be more cross-culturally stable and may be stronger in some cultural settings. We believe that these findings provide an exciting new direction for cross-cultural inquiry. It appears that across the world people may not only think 'I am better than average', but further 'I am more human too'.

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