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*Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 2003 34: 552

DOI: 10.1177/0022022103256478

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## AN INDIRECT SELF-ENHANCEMENT IN RELATIONSHIP AMONG JAPANESE

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Past research in cross-cultural psychology has emphasized a contrast between Western self-serving tendency and East Asian self-effacing tendency in attributions. The present author, however, poses a question to this simple dichotomy and presents some empirical evidence for indirect self-enhancement among Japanese. Participants were asked to recall their positive and negative life events and to make attributions. Results showed that Japanese tended to make self-effacing attributions for their success and failure. At the same time, however, they expected their parents, siblings, and close friends to make internal attributions for their success more than for their failure. In addition, they believed that these people understand them to a large extent. Japanese would not enhance or protect their self-esteem explicitly, but that they would do so indirectly through others' eyes.

**Keywords:** attribution; self-serving bias; self-enhancement; relationship; culture

**The social environment** shapes the human mind, just as the human mind creates the social environment. Since the Cognitive Revolution, however, many social psychologists have paid their attention solely to individuals as cognitive agents (for review, see Sampson, 1989). Human cognition was formulated and defined as an internal process to deal with information and knowledge. In this individualistic paradigm, the social environment was simply a factor influencing the cognitive processes.

More recently, however, researchers have noticed the limitations of such a unilateral view and revisited the dynamic and mutually influencing relationships between individuals and social environment. Several new meta-theories have made a remarkable contribution to the resurgence of social environment, such as cultural psychology (e.g., Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1997), social constructionism (e.g., Gergen, 1985), and evolutionary psychology (e.g., Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992). These approaches all share the same view on the importance of the social nature of human psyche, although they differ from each other in many ways.

In this article, the author and colleagues, who share this perspective, claim that the scope of research on human cognitions and behaviors should be expanded to include relationship rather than individual self. Specifically, we present an empirical study concerning a relational aspect of achievement attribution. We focus on an interactive and social process of self-enhancement instead of its internal process within an individual. A model of indirect self-enhancement will be presented, in which individuals maintain their positive self-regard by mutual and reciprocal support with others. Cultural variation of attribution tendencies can be explained from this point of view.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Preparation of this article was supported by the Japanese Ministry of Education Grants for Young Scientists (Nos. 11710061 and 13710072). I am deeply grateful to Jonathon D. Brown and Chihiro Kobayashi, the organizers of this special issue. I also thank Mayuko Mitsuta for her assistance in data collection, as well as Kazuko Behrens, Walt Lonner (the editor), and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the article.

JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 34 No. 5, September 2003 552-566

DOI: 10.1177/0022022103256478

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### **PAST RESEARCH ON SELF-SERVING BIAS AND ITS CULTURAL VARIATION**

Past research on causal attributions has often emphasized a contrast between self-serving bias in the West and self-effacing bias in East Asia. Self-serving bias refers to the tendency of individuals to attribute their success to internal causes such as ability or effort, and to attribute their failure to external causes such as luck or task difficulty (e.g., Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Many empirical studies have demonstrated that self-serving bias is prevalent in Western societies, such as the United States (e.g., Davis & Stephan, 1980; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Kashima & Triandis, 1986), Canada (e.g., Fry & Ghosh, 1980; Gilmor & Reis, 1979), the United Kingdom (e.g., Van der Pligt & Eisen, 1983), and Yugoslavia (e.g., Chandler, Shama, Wolf, & Planchard, 1981). It has been explained that people tend to make such a biased attribution to enhance or protect their self-evaluation (e.g., Heider, 1958, 1976; Zuckerman, 1979).

In East Asia, however, self-serving bias is rare, and self-effacing bias is instead prevalent. Previous studies have shown that East Asians tend to make external attributions for their success and internal attributions for their failure (e.g., Fry & Ghosh, 1980; Kashima & Triandis, 1986; Kitayama, Takagi, & Matsumoto, 1995; Shikanai, 1978).

### **PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN EAST ASIAN SELF-EFFACING TENDENCY**

The apparent rareness of self-serving tendency among East Asians has been explained in at least two ways: (a) self-presentation and (b) self-criticism. In both explanations, researchers have been focusing on self as an attribution agent. However, some empirical evidences indicate that these explanations do not fully explain the complexity of attribution tendencies among Japanese.

#### **EXPLANATION 1: MODESTY AS A SELF-PRESENTATIONAL STRATEGY**

The first explanation is that self-serving and self-effacing attributions are self-presentation strategies to gain the approval of others. In individualistic societies, an individual may be able to enhance or protect one's public image by taking credit for positive behaviors and denying blame for negative behaviors (Bradley, 1978). In collectivistic societies, on the other hand, people are likely to pay more attention to maintaining relationships than to asserting themselves. Under this cultural norm, self-serving bias may not be an effective self-presentation strategy. Bond, Leung, and Wan (1982) found that Chinese undergraduates evaluated self-effacing attributor as more likable than a self-serving attributor. Yoshida, Kojo, and Kaku (1982) also found that Japanese children evaluated a modest attributor as more likable and competent than a self-serving attributor.

The self-effacing tendency among Japanese, however, does not necessarily disappear even when response anonymity is assured. In some empirical studies, Japanese participants consistently showed self-effacing attributions regardless of the manipulation of anonymity (e.g., Kashima & Triandis, 1986; Muramoto & Yamaguchi, 1997; Yoshida, 1991). The previous findings thus provide only limited support for the self-presentational account.

**EXPLANATION 2: SELF-CRITICISM**

The second explanation is that self-serving and self-effacing attributions reflect different nature of the self in cultural contexts. Kitayama and colleagues have argued that individuals in different cultures develop different self-appraisal processes through their active engagement in a particular culture (e.g., Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kitayama, 1998). They claimed that self-enhancement is not a universal and absolute nature of the human psyche but a tendency pervasive among individuals brought up and socialized in an independent cultural context. In contrast, self-criticism, a psychological process in which individuals selectively attend to undesirable aspects of themselves and attempt to reduce their shortcomings, is widespread among those in an interdependent cultural context (Kitayama, 1998).

Some empirical studies, however, have demonstrated that Japanese at least sometimes show self-enhancing tendencies. In Kashima and Triandis (1986), Japanese and American participants rated the importance, goodness, and necessity of doing well on a task higher in the success condition than they did in the failure condition: "In this regard, the Japanese subjects do exhibit as much of a self-serving tendency as do the Americans" (p. 90). It has also been shown that Japanese undergraduate students with high self-esteem tend to attribute their success to ability (Morio, 1993; Shikanai, 1978; Yagi, 1997; Yoshida, 1991). These results indicate that Japanese would also be motivated to gain positive self-evaluation, although in many cases Japanese self-efface in their attributions.

**ATTRIBUTION TENDENCIES DEPENDING  
ON A RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS**

So far, previous literature has focused on cultural variations in the internal process of self, such as self-presentation strategies and self-appraisal processes. As summarized above, however, some empirical evidences indicate that these explanations do not fully explain the complexity of attribution tendencies among Japanese.

Muramoto and Yamaguchi (in press) claim that (a) the apparent rareness of self-serving attribution does not mean lack of self-enhancing tendency among Japanese, and (b) the scope of research should be expanded to include relationship rather than self. They conducted a social survey with a random sampling of 1,500 Japanese aged 20 to 70 years. The respondents were asked about their attribution styles in the presence of various in-group members. It was found that Japanese show a self-serving tendency when they are with family members, whereas they show a self-effacing tendency when they are with colleagues in a workplace. Muramoto and Yamaguchi argue that an individual would show different attribution tendencies depending on a relationship with others.

In other research, Muramoto and Yamaguchi (1997, 2003) conducted a series of laboratory experiments in which Japanese participants were asked to perform a bogus hypothetical ability measurement task individually or in a small group. Half of them were led to believe that they scored very well and the other half were led to believe that they scored very poorly. They were then asked to make an attribution for the success or failure. It was revealed that Japanese make self-effacing attributions for their own performance, whereas they make group-serving attributions for their group performance. The result was interpreted as individuals' attempt to indirectly raise their self-evaluation by praising their in-group, whereas maintaining harmonious relationships with others by self-effacing attribution. Muramoto

and Yamaguchi (2003) argue that group-serving bias can be considered a kind of self-serving bias because one can heighten one's self-esteem through group-serving attributions of group performance, albeit indirectly.

The above findings suggest that the cultural difference on attribution tendencies is not a simple reflection of different selves but of different relationships. As social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) posits, an individual belongs to many different social groups and exhibits different cognitions and behaviors depending on a salient group membership. Likewise, a culture consists of many different social groups in which individuals are engaging in many different relationships. A culture is not a simple aggregate of selves but a fabric of relationships. Hence, the mechanism of self-serving and self-effacing attributions cannot be fully explained without focusing on relationships.

## THE PRESENT RESEARCH

### INDIRECT SELF-ENHANCEMENT THROUGH OTHERS' EYES

Individuals may be engaged in different self-enhancement processes, depending on a relationship. Based on this assumption, we provide a new explanation: Self-effacing attributions among Japanese may reflect a relationship of mutual support in which individuals protect and enhance each other's self-esteem.

Previous literature on self-enhancement has assumed, in advance, that a motive to enhance their self-esteem leads individuals to make direct and autonomous self-serving attribution. On the other hand, we hypothesized that self-enhancement would not necessarily be an individual's internal process. This is our hypothesis: While making self-effacing attribution, Japanese would enhance themselves not directly but indirectly through others' eyes. More specifically, they would maintain and enhance their positive self-regard not by making self-serving attributions but by receiving supportive attributions from others who are closely related to them.

It has been argued that East Asians are more contextual, relational, and embedded in context than Euro Americans (e.g., Kitayama, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Triandis, 1994). Extrapolating from the literature, it would be reasonable to assume that East Asians' self-enhancement is achieved not individually but collectively.

Our previous research has provided initial support for this hypothesis. In an open-ended questionnaire, Japanese undergraduates and their parents were asked to recall their positive and negative life events and make attributions for them (Muramoto, Kim, Yamaguchi, Hidaka, & Izuta, 1998). They were also asked to guess how others would attribute the success and failure. The results revealed that (a) the participants tended to make self-effacing attributions for their success and failure, and (b) at the same time, they estimated that their parents, spouse, and close friends would make internal attribution for their success and external attribution for their failure to a greater extent than they themselves did. In that study, however, all responses were open-ended, making it unable to compare success attributions and failure attributions strictly.

Therefore, in the present study, a new questionnaire was developed to test the hypothesis above. Japanese undergraduates were asked to recall their positive and negative life events and make attributions on the prepared scale.

## METHOD

### OVERVIEW

The present study focused on success and failure experiences in real life. Japanese participants were asked to recall their most important personal success and failure in their life. They were also asked to estimate how other people around them would attribute their success and failure. It was hypothesized that Japanese participants would make self-effacing attributions for their success and failure. At the same time, however, they would expect others who are closely related to them to make supportive attributions for their success and failure.

### PARTICIPANTS

As partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement, 118 Japanese undergraduates (46 men, 69 women, and 3 unspecified) at a university in Okayama participated in this study. Thirty-nine of them lived with their family, whereas 75 lived alone.

### DESIGN

Two independent variables were manipulated in a  $2 \times 7$  within-subject design: Outcome Valence (success/failure) and Attributor (self/mother/father/sibling/close friend/classmate/stranger). All of the 14 experimental conditions were created using a questionnaire.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first two sections were concerned with the participants' attribution for personal success and failure, respectively. In these two sections, the participants were first asked to list three personal successes (failures) in their lives and then choose the most important success (failure) among them. Causal attributions for the most important success (failure) were measured on eight dimensions: Ability, Effort, Motivation, Personality, Luck, Chance, Shape of the Day, and Environment. Specifically, the participants were asked how much they think each of the eight factors was responsible for the outcome on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*least responsible*) to 7 (*most responsible*). Subsequently, the participants were asked to estimate how much their mother, father, sibling, close friend, classmate, and stranger would think each of the eight factors was responsible for the outcome on the same scale. They were also asked to answer how much they wanted the others to know the success (failure) and how much they wanted to talk about the success (failure) with the others on a 7-point Likert scale.

The third section concerns their relationships with others. The participants were asked to indicate to what extent they thought each of the others understand them by illustrating the level of understanding on a scale ranging from 0% (*not at all understanding them*) to 100% (*completely understanding them*). The participants were also asked to indicate to what extent they understand themselves by illustrating in the same way as above. Furthermore, the participants were asked to answer 24 items describing what kind of relationship they have with their mother, father, sibling, close friend, classmate, and stranger, respectively. Each item was presented on a 7-point Likert scale. The results regarding these items are, however, not reported in this article.

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants in a classroom setting. They were asked to fill out the questionnaire without consulting with other participants.

### PREDICTIONS

*Prediction 1.* In attributing one's success and failure, external factors will be emphasized to a greater degree for success as compared with failure, whereas internal factors will be emphasized to a lesser degree for success as compared with failure.

*Prediction 2.* In estimating attributions made by others, the participants will expect those who are closely related to them to emphasize internal factors to a greater degree for success as compared with failure, whereas external factors to a lesser degree for success as compared with failure.

*Prediction 3.* The more participants estimate that others understand them, the more they will expect others to emphasize internal factors for success and external factors for failure.

## RESULT

### SELF-EFFACING TENDENCY IN ATTRIBUTION

A two-way ANOVA with Outcome Valence (success/failure) and Attributor (self/mother/father/sibling/close friend/classmate/stranger) as repeated measures was conducted on each dependent measure. The significant interaction effect was found for six causal factors out of eight: Ability,  $F(6, 606) = 5.73, p < .001$ ; Effort,  $F(6, 606) = 4.12, p < .001$ ; Personality,  $F(6, 600) = 2.65, p = .015$ ; Luck,  $F(6, 594) = 3.54, p = .002$ ; Chance,  $F(1, 594) = 2.87, p = .009$ ; and Environment,  $F(6, 588) = 4.29, p < .001$ . On the other hand, only the main effect of Attributor was significant for Motivation,  $F(6, 594) = 13.43, p < .001$ , and Shape of the Day,  $F(6, 576) = 3.99, p = .001$ .

Mean attribution scores by self are shown in the first row in Table 1, with the result of simple effects analyses. For external factors, one's success was attributed more than was one's failure, concerning three factors (Luck, Chance, and Environment). For internal factors, success was attributed to Effort more than was failure, although it was attributed to Personality less than was failure.

Overall, the participants tended to make external attribution for their success more than for their failure, indicating a self-effacing tendency. Hence, our Prediction 1 was supported, with one exception of Effort.

### EXPECTATION OF SUPPORTIVE ATTRIBUTIONS BY OTHERS

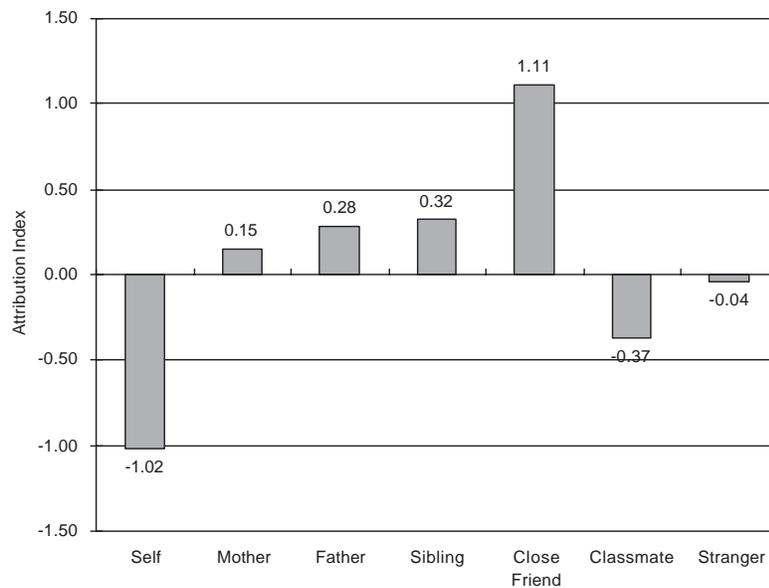
Mean scores of others' attributions estimated by self are also shown in Table 1, with the result of simple effects analyses. The participants estimated different attribution patterns, depending on a relationship with others.

First, the participants estimated that all family members (i.e., mother, father, and sibling) would attribute their success to Ability to a greater degree than their failure. The participants also estimated that parents would attribute their success to Effort to a greater degree than

**TABLE 1**  
**Attribution of Success and Failure**

	<i>Mean Score</i>															
	<i>Ability</i>		<i>Effort</i>		<i>Motivation</i>		<i>Personality</i>		<i>Luck</i>		<i>Chance</i>		<i>Shape</i>		<i>Environment</i>	
	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
Self-attribution	4.84	4.71	<b>5.64</b>	<b>5.10</b>	5.45	5.35	<u>5.12</u>	<u>5.51</u>	<b>5.63</b>	<b>4.48</b>	<b>4.69</b>	<b>3.60</b>	4.72	4.30	<b>5.50</b>	<b>4.21</b>
Others' attribution estimated by self																
Mother	<b>5.02</b>	<b>4.04</b>	<b>5.51</b>	<b>4.61</b>	<u>5.32</u>	<u>4.92</u>	5.00	5.08	<b>5.30</b>	<b>4.47</b>	<b>4.56</b>	<b>3.86</b>	4.44	4.30	<b>5.50</b>	<b>3.93</b>
Father	<b>4.88</b>	<b>4.08</b>	<b>5.18</b>	<b>4.58</b>	4.98	4.74	4.81	4.84	<b>4.96</b>	<b>4.44</b>	4.31	3.92	4.36	4.13	<b>5.37</b>	<b>3.87</b>
Sibling	<b>4.91</b>	<b>4.07</b>	4.96	4.58	4.93	4.59	4.78	4.90	<b>5.01</b>	<b>4.49</b>	<b>4.46</b>	<b>3.91</b>	4.19	3.82	<b>5.07</b>	<b>3.99</b>
Close friend	<b>5.16</b>	<b>3.80</b>	<b>5.45</b>	<b>4.15</b>	<b>5.29</b>	<b>4.49</b>	<b>5.15</b>	<b>4.69</b>	4.92	4.67	4.24	4.14	4.42	4.36	<b>5.08</b>	<b>4.07</b>
Classmate	4.59	4.29	<u>4.81</u>	<u>4.40</u>	<b>4.66</b>	<b>4.23</b>	4.52	4.35	<b>4.84</b>	<b>4.17</b>	<b>4.38</b>	<b>3.84</b>	4.39	4.06	<b>4.68</b>	<b>3.94</b>
Stranger	4.46	4.24	4.58	4.37	4.61	4.32	4.18	4.38	4.62	4.36	<b>4.34</b>	<b>3.88</b>	4.20	3.88	<b>4.74</b>	<b>3.91</b>

NOTE: For each attribution factor, bold-faced, italicized values within each row significantly differ at  $p < .05$  or less,  $t(105 \sim 111) \geq 2.07$ , whereas underlined values marginally differ at the  $p < .10$  level.



**Figure 1: An Index of Self-Serving/Effacing Tendencies in Attribution**

NOTE: Attribution Index = (Attribution to Ability for Success + Luck for Failure) – (Attribution to Luck for Success + Ability for Failure). The index value above zero point means a self-serving tendency, whereas the value below zero point means a self-effacing tendency.

failure. As to external factors, the participants tended to estimate that the family members would attribute their success more than their failure to Luck, Chance, and Environment. Thus, the participants tended to estimate that their family would emphasize internal and external factors for their success more than their failure.

Second, the participants estimated that their close friends would attribute their success more than their failure to all four internal factors (i.e., Ability, Effort, Motivation, and Personality). As to external factors, on the other hand, no biased attributions were estimated, except for Environment. Thus, the participants tended to estimate that their close friends would make internal attributions for their success more than for their failure.

Third, the participants estimated that classmates and strangers would attribute their success, more than their failure, to external factors. For internal factors, they did not expect strangers to make any biased attributions, although they estimated that classmates would attribute their success to Effort and Motivation more than their failure.

In sum, the participants expected all family members and close friends to emphasize Ability for success more than for failure, although they made no biased attribution on Ability by themselves. Moreover, the participants expected close friends to make no biased attribution on Luck and Chance, although they estimated that family members, as well as themselves, would emphasize these factors for success more than for failure. It should be noted, however, that family members' attributions on Luck and Chance were expected to be less biased than was the self attribution,  $t(103 \sim 111) \geq 2.41, p < .05$ .

Focusing only on Ability and Luck, we created an index of self-serving/effacing tendencies in attribution. The index calculation is described in the note to Figure 1. As is clearly shown in Figure 1, the index values for family members and close friends are above the zero point, indicating a self-serving tendency. Overall, our Prediction 2 was supported.

**TABLE 2**  
**The Most Important Success and Failure Experiences in Life**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	
	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
Entrance exam	48	24
Interpersonal relationship	18	27
Hobby, sports (group)	19	16
Hobby, sports (individual)	9	5
Work	4	5
Home	0	3
Getting license	2	2
Illness, injury, accident	0	14
Others	16	16
NA	2	6
Total	118	118

Successes and failures listed by the participants are summarized in Table 2. Many participants considered success in university entrance examinations and failure in interpersonal relationships such as friendship and love relations as the most important experiences in life.

#### **WILLINGNESS TO SHARE THE SUCCESS AND FAILURE WITH OTHERS**

The participants were asked how much they wanted others to know their success and failure. Mean scores are shown in Table 3, with *F* values of one-way ANOVAs. The participants wanted their family and close friends to know their success. That is, they were willing to share their success experience with those who would highly appreciate their ability and effort. On the other hand, the participants wanted to talk about their failure with their close friends, who were expected to make the most supportive attributions among all the six others.

#### **EXPECTATION OF BEING UNDERSTOOD BY OTHERS**

The participants were asked to estimate how much they thought others understand them. Mean percentages are shown in Table 4. Most participants answered that family members, especially mother and close friends, understand them to a very large extent. In contrast, the participants do not think their classmates or strangers understand them very much.

#### **EXPECTATION OF BEING UNDERSTOOD AND SUPPORTIVE ATTRIBUTION BY OTHERS**

To examine our third prediction, we calculated the correlations between the attribution score and the expectation of being understood, for each one of the six others. Pearson's correlation coefficients are shown in Table 5. For instance, the correlation coefficient between the mother's Ability attribution score for success and the expectation of being understood by mother was .26, which was significantly bigger than zero. That is, the more the participants estimated mother understands them, the more they were likely to expect her to emphasize Ability for success. The same tendency was repeatedly observed in the other internal factors for success (but not for failure) among all family members and close friends. In sum, the

**TABLE 3**  
**Willingness to Share the Success and Failure With Others**

	<i>Mean Score</i>						F(5, 525)	p <
	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>Sibling</i>	<i>Close Friend</i>	<i>Classmate</i>	<i>Stranger</i>		
The person would be proud of my success	5.74	5.45	5.28	5.23	3.51	3.05	86.43	.001
I want the person to know my success	5.84	5.66	5.61	5.87	4.20	3.77	64.13	.001
I want to talk about my success with the person	4.91	4.68	4.55	4.82	3.47	2.98	44.41	.001
The person would grieve at my failure	5.05	4.73	4.55	4.89	3.22	2.54	66.37	.001
I want the person to know my failure	3.61	3.57	3.71	4.29	3.12	2.66	19.17	.001
I want to talk about my failure with the person	3.12	2.95	3.13	4.01	2.81	2.28	22.89	.001

NOTE: Scale ranged from 1 (*minimum*) to 7 (*maximum*).

**TABLE 4**  
**Expectation of Being Understood by Others**

	<i>Percentage of Being Understood</i>	
	M	SD
Self	77.0	22.4
Mother	72.0	20.0
Father	65.0	21.9
Sibling	63.0	21.5
Close friend	70.0	18.7
Classmate	32.0	19.4
Stranger	12.0	13.4

NOTE: Scale ranged from 0 (*not at all understanding self*) to 100 (*completely understanding self*).

**TABLE 5**  
**Correlations Between Attribution Score and Expectation of Being Understood**

	<i>Correlation Coefficient</i>															
	<i>Ability</i>		<i>Effort</i>		<i>Motivation</i>		<i>Personality</i>		<i>Luck</i>		<i>Chance</i>		<i>Shape</i>		<i>Environment</i>	
	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
Mother	<b>.26</b>	.04	<b>.46</b>	.06	<b>.42</b>	.07	<b>.35</b>	.05	.03	-.09	-.10	-.05	.02	.06	.03	.02
Father	<b>.36</b>	.02	<b>.41</b>	.09	<b>.41</b>	.11	<b>.31</b>	.14	-.01	-.01	-.15	-.09	.10	-.08	.16	-.03
Sibling	.14	.06	<b>.25</b>	-.02	<b>.24</b>	.08	<b>.19</b>	-.06	.06	.12	-.08	.01	.12	.09	.14	-.04
Close friend	<b>.37</b>	-.10	<b>.42</b>	-.06	<b>.30</b>	-.04	<b>.27</b>	-.05	-.01	.13	-.12	.13	.01	<b>.23</b>	.09	.16
Classmate	.17	-.05	.16	.00	.18	.02	<b>.24</b>	-.07	.11	.14	-.01	.03	.00	-.03	.12	-.07
Stranger	-.12	-.05	-.10	.01	-.02	-.03	.05	-.02	.07	.02	.02	.07	.05	.13	-.02	.10

NOTE: A bold-faced, italicized value significantly differs from zero at  $p < .05$  or less.

more the participants estimated that their family and close friends understand them, the more they were likely to expect them to emphasize internal factors for success. Hence, our Prediction 3 was supported.

## DISCUSSION

The present study provided empirical support for the following predictions: (a) the participants showed self-effacing tendency in attribution; (b) in estimating attributions made by others, the participants expected others who are significantly related to them to emphasize internal factors for success more than for failure; (c) the more the participants estimated that others understand them, the more they expected the others to emphasize internal factors for success more than for failure.

The participants made attribution for their important life events. They tended to make external attribution (Luck, Chance, and Environment) for success more than for failure and internal attribution (Personality) for failure more than for success, thus indicating a self-effacing tendency.

In estimating attributions made by others, on the other hand, the participants tended to estimate that their family and close friends would make supportive attributions. Especially, the participants expected close friends to emphasize all internal factors (Ability, Effort, Motivation, and Personality) for success more than for failure and to make no biased attribution for external factors, except for Environment. Furthermore, the participants estimated that all family members and close friends would make Ability attribution for their success more than their failure. The result indicates that Japanese do not negate the contribution of their ability to success, although previous research argues that East Asians do not consider ability as important as do Westerners (e.g., Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Stigler, Hsu, et al., 1990). Japanese do not emphasize their ability on their own but may expect others to do so for them.

The participants estimated that their family and close friends would understand them to a large extent. Some participants answered that mother and close friends understand them more than they themselves do. The participants believed that those who well understand them would highly appreciate their internal factors. On the other hand, the participants estimated that classmates and strangers would not understand them very much. The participants did not expect such nonsignificant others to make Ability attribution for their success. Furthermore, it was also revealed that the more the participants estimated others understand them, the more they expected others to emphasize internal factors for success more than failure.

The results can be understood meaningfully from the perspective of an indirect self-enhancement. In the Japanese culture, individuals are participating in a relationship in which they maintain their positive self-regard by mutual and reciprocal support with others (Muramoto & Yamaguchi, 2003). In the case of attributions of one's success and failure, they can expect that others who are closely related to them would highly appreciate their ability and effort, and would make internal attributions for their success. A direct self-enhancement is neither necessary nor important for them in this situation because they know that their self-esteem is protected and enhanced by these others. Thus, they may not be willing to make self-serving attributions, especially internal attributions for success, because it may hurt others' self-esteem. They may well attribute their success to external factors and thus avoid such an unfavorable influence to others. In fact, such a reciprocal self-esteem maintenance process is often observed in daily conversations among Japanese. For instance, a student who gets good

grades in exams often makes modest attributions such as, "I didn't expect this. I am just a lucky person," and his or her friends often deny it by saying, "No, I knew you did. You are really great!"

It should be noted that Japanese do not expect everybody to make such supportive attributions. Our results revealed that the participants did not expect their classmates and strangers to make supportive attributions. In other words, those nonsignificant others were not expected to protect or enhance the participants' esteem. In such a psychologically distant relationship, individuals may directly protect and enhance their self-esteem by themselves. In fact, our previous research found that Japanese participants tend to show a relatively self-serving tendency when they are with others who do not make internal attributions for their success (Muramoto & Yamaguchi, *in press*).

Furthermore, it was found that the participants consistently emphasized Environment for their success rather than failure, as well as internal factors. They probably imagined others to be an important environmental factor. The emphasis on others as a cause of success may also reflect the relationship of mutual support among Japanese.

In sum, the present findings suggest an indirect self-enhancement process in which in-group members mutually protect and enhance each other's self-esteem. Individuals may be able to maintain and enhance their self-esteem through others' eyes. It needs to be distinguished from the direct and autonomous self-enhancement process that is prevalent in the West, in which individuals protect and enhance self-esteem on their own. Different mechanisms of self-esteem maintenance would prevail among individuals, depending on the relationship with others.

Finally, the present study has some potential limitations. First, we used retrospective successes and failures rather than experimentally assigned ones. A laboratory experiment is needed to make a strict comparison between participants. Second, we prepared in advance only eight causal factors to be attributed. It might have led participants to make attributions in an unnatural manner. Third, we only asked the participants to estimate others' attributions and did not investigate actual relationships they shared. Future research plans include a study in which their family members and friends actually make attributions, and a study in which participants make attributions in the presence of particular others.

## CONCLUSION

The present research demonstrates the interactive and social process of self-enhancement constructed with others. Self-enhancement is not necessarily an individual's internal process. Alternative self-enhancement process is built in the relationship of mutual support with others who are significantly related to self. Hence, self-effacing attribution among Japanese does not mean lack of self-enhancing tendency. They can enhance themselves indirectly through others' eyes.

Previous studies have implicitly assumed that a motive to enhance one's self-esteem would lead one to make direct and autonomous self-serving attributions. Because of this limited assumption, researchers may have paid too much attention to an internal process of self in explanation of attribution tendencies.

Cultural differences we see might not be a simple reflection of different selves but of different relationships that are dominant in each culture. Self-effacing attribution is pervasive among East Asians, maybe because the mutually interdependent relationship is dominant among them. Likewise, self-serving attribution is pervasive among Euro Americans because

of the dominance of mutually independent relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). At the same time, it should be noted that individuals belong to many different social situations and relationships. Some anthropologists and psychiatrists have indicated three different domains in interpersonal relationships among Japanese, namely, the intimate, ritual, and anomic relationships (e.g., Doi, 1973; Inoue, 1977; Lebra, 1976). Different systems of self-enhancement would prevail in different social situations and relationships. Japanese may show a self-serving tendency in some situations and a self-effacing tendency in others. Similarly, Euro Americans may also show a self-effacing tendency when they are engaged in a mutually dependent relationship. Future research should explore a variety of self-enhancement processes built in different types of relationships. The present research represents only a first step toward unearthing the dynamic relationship between social relations and the human psyche.

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