

## **Interpersonal leveling, independence, and self-enhancement: A comparison between Denmark and the US, and a relational practice framework for cultural psychology<sup>†</sup>**

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### *Abstract*

*We argue that the relational model that people use for organizing specific social interactions in any culture determines whether people self-enhance. Self-enhancement is not a functional consequence of the (independent or interdependent) cultural model of self. Across three studies, Danes self-enhanced considerably less than did Americans but were more independent on the Twenty Statements Test, made more individual attributions about social life, made more autonomous scenario choices, and were more independent on the self-construal scale. Public modesty did not account for these Danish-American differences in self-enhancement. However, Danes practiced interpersonal leveling, preferring equality of outcome more than did Americans. This leveling strongly and inversely predicted self-enhancement within both cultures and mediated Danish-American differences in self-enhancement. In contrast, no independence measure systematically predicted self-enhancement within both cultures nor mediated the cultural differences in self-enhancement. This dissociation of independence and self-enhancement demonstrates that self-enhancing downward social comparisons are not functionally necessary for an independent concept of self. We conclude that social relationships, not the model of the self, mediate the mutual constitution of psyche and culture. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Must independent selves stand out and see themselves as different and better than others? The prevailing theory in cultural psychology would answer, ‘yes.’ This thesis is supported by robust

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empirical findings that the majority of North Americans hold unrealistically positive views of themselves and believe that they are much better than average on many attributes (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, & Yurak, 1995; Taylor & Armor, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994). We refer to this *above-average effect* in downward social comparisons (Festinger, 1954) as self-enhancement. It is generally assumed that self-enhancement is a functional result of motivated cognition to cope with inevitable social threats. Within the US, experimental and naturalistic evidence does indeed suggest that self-enhancement is positively associated with mental health (Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Tesser, 1988; see Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowel, 2003 for a review; but see also Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998). However, social threats as well as socially accepted ways to cope with them should vary with culture and context. Consequently, self-enhancement should also differ across cultures, if it is a motivated cognitive process whose function is to deal with such social threats. Within cultural psychology, it is indeed an almost paradigmatic finding that self-enhancement does not replicate straightforwardly in Japan or East Asia, where it has been demonstrated to be attenuated or even reversed (e.g., Heine & Renshaw, 2002; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; for a review see Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

Such cultural differences in self-enhancement have traditionally been interpreted as a core example of how the construction of self mediates the mutual constitution of psyche and culture. It has been assumed that the crucial factor underlying cultural differences in psychological processes is the independent or interdependent model of self. In their seminal article, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that

For those with independent selves feeling good about oneself typically requires the task associated with being an independent self; that is being unique, expressing one's inner attributes and asserting oneself. . . a reasonable empirical generalization is that Westerners, particularly those with high self-esteem, try to enhance themselves whenever possible. . . Maintaining self-esteem requires separating oneself from others and seeing oneself as different from and better than others. . . This tendency towards false uniqueness presumably derives from the efforts of those with independent selves to maintain positive views of themselves. . . Believing oneself to be better than average may be a primarily Western phenomenon. It is akin to being the nail that stands out. (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 242, 245; see also Markus & Kitayama, 1994: 374; Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998: 915)

This theory posits a functional link between being an independent, autonomous self and believing oneself to be superior to most other people, so that the above-average effect is a necessary condition for independence of self. But, *a priori*, one need not assume that asserting uniqueness is the *only* way to achieve independence (or autonomy), nor is it logically necessary for uniqueness (or standing out) to be generated primarily or exclusively by downward social comparison. Moreover, to feel good about yourself, it is not logically necessary to believe that you are better than most other people; for example, you can feel good about being an intelligent academic without believing your intelligence is superior to that of your intelligent colleagues. In short, our argument is that the above-average effect is not a necessary condition for independence.

Unfortunately, many studies demonstrating cross-national differences of self-enhancement and self-esteem have neither tested for the contrasting (independent or interdependent) concepts of self that are thought to underlie this, nor for the assumed within-culture associations between the concept of self and the psychological phenomenon in question. Matsumoto (1999) reviews five studies that do, in fact, assess self-construals and the dependent psychological phenomena; none support the hypothesized association (see also Takano & Osaka, 1999). Several recent studies have in fact reported self-enhancement on culturally valued traits (and documented other correlates of self-enhancement) within supposedly collectivistic or interdependent cultures (Bond, Kwan, & Li, 2000; Brown & Kobayashi,

2002, 2003; Harrington & Liu, 2002; Kurman, 2001, 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Takata, 2003; but see also Heine, 2003a, 2003b). Heine and Renshaw (2002) did find that Japanese self-enhance less than Americans do and that explicit measures of independence predicted self-enhancement within both cultures. However, interdependence was not inversely associated with self-enhancement within Japan, as predicted by independence-interdependence theory. In addition, Sedikides et al. (2003) did not find a main effect of self-construal on general self-enhancement (although independence and being American were associated with self-enhancement on agentic traits, while interdependence and being Japanese were associated with self-enhancement on communal traits). In sum, there is no clear preponderance of evidence in support of a functional link between interdependence and 'non-enhancement.'

However, the parallel link between independence and self-enhancement remains largely unchallenged. Perhaps this is due to the significant influence of Markus and Kitayama's (1991) higher-order theoretical claim: 'self construals play a major role in regulating various psychological processes,' because 'the way people initially, and thus thereafter, most naturally and effortlessly perceive the world is rooted in their self-perceptions and self-understanding' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 225, 230). We question this claim in so far as it argues that, fundamentally, it is the self—specifically, the cognitive model of an independent or interdependent concept of self—which mediates the effects of culture on psychological processes. Above, the self concept is given the primary role in perception of the world in general, and this implies that we also construct other people in the world based on the self. We see others from 'Inside Out' through the eyes of the self, so to speak. This resembles Husserl's (1929) interpretation of Cartesian methodological individualism. But if we combine this approach with the notion that we acquire our concept of self through self-perception, reflected appraisal and social comparisons in (culturally informed) social interaction (Baumeister, 1998; Markus & Wurf, 1987), then arguing there are two major types of self concepts in the world is akin to saying that there are only two basic types of cultures in the world. This is clearly at odds with the ethnographic evidence. Alternatively, one could argue from the same position that there are as many functionally different types of selves that mediate psychological processes as there are cultures in the world. This argument leads to relativism. In addition, given the contrasting definitions of the independent and interdependent self, it is unclear how to characterize the selves of all of the other cultures of the world if not within this theoretical dichotomy.

The alternative 'Outside In' perspective posits that we see ourselves through the eyes of the other (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Or rather, more precisely, we construct our concepts of self through our history of culturally informed, domain-specific processes of social interaction and relational roles (Mead, 1934; Merleau-Ponty, 1942, 1945; Ryle, 1949; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1980; see Thomsen, Fiske, & Sidanius, 2006 for an extended argument). This epistemological approach moves the primary focus of analysis back one step from the concept of self (an outcome of social interaction) to the basic mechanisms that coordinate social interaction (the processes that construct concepts of selves). This is what we propose—to focus on the culturally informed 'social grammars' that coordinate interaction among persons, thereby (co)shaping the concept of each participant self, or *Me* (Mead, 1934).

Such social grammars make it possible for people to constitute, coordinate and communicate relationships in the first place. Relational models theory (Fiske, 1991, 2000, 2004; Fiske & Haslam, 2005; Haslam, 2004) proposes that people in all cultures use just four basic relational models, but necessarily implement them according to cultural precedents and prototypes. The relational models are Communal Sharing, an 'all for one and one for all' relationship in which the boundaries between individual selves merge (with respect to the specific domain); Authority Ranking, a transitive asymmetrical relationship of social status and privilege; Equality Matching, prototypically constituted by concrete procedures, such as tit-for-tat matching, that ensure evenly matched shares between

separate persons; and Market Pricing, a relationship based on proportions or rates such as cost/benefit ratios or utilitarian moral reasoning.

With regard to self-enhancement, our hypothesis is that, like other social psychological processes, self-enhancement is inherently relational: whether you see yourself as better than (specific or general) others depends on how you relate to them. Thus, whether people tend to see themselves as superior to specific others should vary functionally according to the specific relation that people are trying to implement in the given situation. Whether people tend to see themselves as superior to others in general should vary with the default or ideologically preeminent 'relational flavor' of the culture. In this latter, general sense, there is a thematic overlap with Triandis' proposal that

In both individualist and collectivist cultures, the vertical dimension accepts inequality, and rank has its privileges. This is reflective of 'the different self.' In contrast, the horizontal dimension emphasizes that people should be similar on most attributes, especially status. This reflects the 'same self,' which does not want to stand out. (Triandis, 1995, p. 44)

Because Triandis also maintains Markus and Kitayama's (1991) definition of the independent self in individualistic cultures, however, it is not clear which predictions to make with regard to horizontal individualism and self-enhancement: Horizontals do not like to be unique and stand out—yet uniqueness is itself often defined as a core component of individualism (e.g., Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). Interestingly, Triandis's (1995) vertical individualism scale is defined by competition items (which do not imply autonomy/individualism) whereas the horizontal individualism scale is defined by autonomy/individualism items (which do not imply horizontal equality). We would argue that autonomy/independence and competition are separate, orthogonal constructs, as the meta-analysis of Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) convincingly demonstrated. The empirical question is whether it is the model of self (here, independent) or the implemented relational model (here, an equality of opportunity framework for competitive ranking) which predicts self-enhancement. We argue that the culturally predominant relational model determines general self-enhancement.

Recent cultural psychological evidence is consistent with this relational practice perspective on the self and indicates that self-enhancement is in fact a function of relationship. Work within the individualism-collectivism paradigm suggests that public expression of self-enhancement should be negatively associated with vertical collectivism because of the need to accept one's place within the social hierarchy and hence for subordinates to display public modesty. This is the case for Singapore Chinese (Kurman & Sriram, 2002; Kurman, 2003). Still, the evidence suggests relationship-specificity in such public modesty: Druze Arabs do self-enhance in relation to abstract peers (Kurman, 2001), although the ethnographic literature suggests that they are characterized by paternal hierarchy and strong communal identification ('vertical collectivism') within the family (e.g., Oppenheimer, 1980; for reviews of context-specific collectivism/interdependence and individualism/independence in several cultures see Green, 2006; Green, Deschamps, & Páez, 2005; Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, in press; but see also Chirkow, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003).

Similarly, Takata (2003) recently demonstrated that Japanese self-efface in *Uchi* (inner), or communal sharing, relations with 'people with whom we have a strong emotional bond, such as relatives, those living in the same community, or those belonging to a same group or organization' (Takata, 2003: 543), as suggested by Markus and Kitayama's (1991) core analysis. In contrast, Japanese do self-enhance in *Soto* (outer) relations with 'those whom one tends to disregard, be hostile to, and compete with' (Takata, 2003: 543). In addition, Brown and Kobayashi (2002) found that on important traits Japanese believe themselves to be better than the typical person of their age and gender, but rate their best friend higher than themselves. Of course, this Japanese tendency to place oneself below others in close friendships would result in Japanese non-enhancement—if one operationalizes self-enhancement as the difference between the rating of participants by themselves and their friends

(as done and found by Heine & Renshaw, 2002 following John & Robins, 1994). However, the implication of Takata (2003) is that this effect should reverse if one compared participant self-ratings with how their external competitors rate them. Even Americans automatically interact in more modest ways with friends than with strangers (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995) and self-enhance more when comparing themselves to ambiguous, 'free' targets such as the average person, rather than to specific others (Alicke et al., 1995; but see also Zuckerman & Jost, 2001). This allows for 'tactical self-enhancement' (Sedikides et al., 2003) that 'ebbs and flows' (Taylor et al., 2003) with situational constraints and is reduced by anticipated accountability (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002), so that one avoids putting off others with public self-aggrandizement (Colvin et al., 1995; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997; Paulhus, 1998). In sum, self-enhancement varies with the type of relationship that people are enacting, as would be predicted by a relational practice framework.

We expect self-enhancement to depend on which relational model people are enacting, but also on the manner in which people are implementing this relational model. For instance, the effect of Equality Matching on self-enhancement should depend whether it is implemented as equality of outcome or as equality of opportunity (Béteille, 1986). One form of equality of opportunity is a merit-based system, where people believe that, ideally, everyone should have equal starting points, but should be differentially rewarded according to effort and talent. This makes competition possible and often leads to gross outcome inequality and legitimization of authority ranking in power, prestige, and wealth (Béteille, 1986). A true competitive race requires that people start at the same time, run the same course, and be categorically balanced, in the sense that 4-year olds are not racing professional athletes. Thus the framework that makes it a race is equality matching, but the point of a race is to come in ahead of others—to be above them in Authority Ranking. Another illustrative example of this is curve grading: everyone has the same assignments and the same instruction, but each person's grade depends inversely on everyone else's performance. The outcome of the race or exam is a rank ordering of the competitors: by definition, doing great is doing better than the others. In this relational framework of equality of opportunity in competition for ranked outcomes, holding yourself in positive regard may be achieved by believing that you are better than others—that is, by self-enhancement.

In contrast, equality of outcome is a system in which the objective is to achieve and maintain evenly balanced power, prestige, and wealth (Béteille, 1986). No matter whether it is opportunity or outcome that is being evenly matched, equality matching presupposes separate and distinct persons. However, the equality of outcome model precludes competitive differentiation among individuals; instead, cultural institutions and the psychologies of participants are implicitly oriented to keeping every separate, distinct agent evenly matched. In this relational framework, standing above others is a direct violation of equal outcome, so self-enhancement transgresses the equality of outcome principle. In sum, people who implement Equality Matching as the default model for peer relations, whether implemented as equality of opportunity or equality of outcome, are likely to be distinct and individuated, highly autonomous persons, independent toward their peers, because Equality Matching presumes distinct, individual agents to balance. Yet people who implement Equality Matching as equality of outcome in this context should be unlikely to self-enhance. They may hold themselves in positive regard by believing good things about themselves, but their self-regard should not be based on competitive comparison—they should not think they are better than their peers, because this violates equality of outcome.

The authors—a native Dane, a Swedish citizen of American descent, and an American psychological anthropologist—think that Scandinavia and the United States are ideal comparison cases for these hypotheses. We believe that the Scandinavian culture area, including Denmark, is characterized by high levels of many of the practices and values that have been identified with the 'individualism' construct (Thomsen, Fiske, & Sidanius, 2003). Supporting this, both Hofstede (1980/2001) and Triandis (as cited in Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000) ranked Denmark as the 7th most

individualistic country in the world, above most other Western European countries. Our observations also indicate that Scandinavians traditionally practice and highly value equality of outcome (Thomsen et al., 2003, 2006; see also Durrenberger, 1996 for similar ethnographic observations of Iceland). In the Scandinavian welfare societies equality of outcome is most notably enacted through substantial redistribution of income and other resources in order to level economic outcomes. Other examples of equality of outcome are abundant in Scandinavia. For example, universities are not ranked systematically against each other, but are assumed to be equal. Within the schools, there are virtually no programs for especially gifted children, but plenty of programs focused on aiding those who lag behind.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a popular rumor has it that a Danish minister of education in the 1980s declared that 'nobody should learn what everybody cannot learn.' Interpersonal leveling is also captured by Norwegian writer Aksel Sandemose's (1933) novel describing the core norm of leveling in a prototypical Danish small-town, stated thus (translated here by the authors):

The Law of Jante: Don't think you are anything special, Don't think you are just as much as we are, Don't think you are smarter than us, Don't think you are better than us, Don't think you know more than us, Don't think you are more than us, Don't think you are good for anything, Don't laugh at us, Don't think anybody likes you, Don't think you can teach us anything.

In short: don't think you are better than anybody or everybody else! In Scandinavia, this short version of The Law of Jante is a cultural prototype on a par with the American Dream in the U.S. Every Scandinavian knows the Law of Jante and most people believe that it accurately characterizes Scandinavian norms and practices—although in their explicit attitudes, most people disparage this extreme leveling, or at least are embarrassed to be perceived as personally endorsing it in this absolute form (see also Askgaard, 1992; Braathe & Ongstad, 2001; Byrkjeflot, 1999; Daun, 1991; Rodnick, 1955; Wårdh, Hallgren, Berggren, Anderson, & Sörensen, 2003; and see Nelson & Shavitt, 2002 for qualitative interviews with Danes about the Law of Jante). In Scandinavia, you must not see yourself as outstanding: an outstanding person stands out above others, and such stand-outs may be outcasts.

Hence our predictions: Danes self-enhance considerably less than do Americans, but are at least as independent as Americans. However, Danes endorse leveling more than do Americans. Within Danish culture, such leveling predicts self-enhancement, but independence does not. At a between-culture level of analysis, leveling mediates Danish-American differences of self-enhancement, but independence does not.

## STUDY 1

### Methods

Participants were psychology majors from universities in Los Angeles ( $n = 110$ ) and Copenhagen ( $n = 105$ ). These samples are comparable in that excellent grades are required for these programs at both schools. The American participants were recruited from an introductory psychology class in which they received partial course credit for their participation in the study. Since no similar system exists in Denmark, the Danish students were recruited from an introductory psychology lecture, as well as through a snowball sample of psychology students. These two sampling strategies in Denmark resulted in no overall differences on any variables of interest and were collapsed into one sample for all

<sup>1</sup>The first school in Denmark for especially gifted children was opened last year. A frequently cited reason in the popular press for children to attend the school was that they were bullied for being 'too clever' in their regular schools.

further analysis. All participants were given an omnibus 'Self and Social Situations' questionnaire with no further instructions than to fill it out in privacy. American students filled out the questionnaire in the lab and Danish students either handed in the questionnaire in class the week after they received it or sent it to the authors in a prepaid envelope. We excluded anyone from the sample who had lived in Denmark or the US for less than 10 years or did not report how long they had lived in the country. This resulted in an overall sample of 101 Americans and 99 Danes. Ninety-nine Danes (71 females, 28 males; mean age 26 years) volunteered for the study.<sup>2</sup> Ninety-six reported their ethnicity as White Danish, one as Black, one as Jewish and one person did not volunteer this information. One-hundred and one Americans volunteered (77 females, 24 males; mean age 21 years; 37 Asian Americans, 36 Whites, 8 Latinos, 4 Blacks, 12 people who described themselves as 'other,' and 4 persons who did not volunteer ethnic identity).

## Measures

All items were translated into Danish by the first author and back translated by one of two Danish bilingual graduate students who were blind to the hypotheses. All measures were coded by the first author and double-coded by an undergraduate bilingual research assistant who was blind to the specific hypotheses and worked independently.

### *Independence*

In this study, we seek to clearly distinguish the cultural concept of self from other cultural factors by focusing specifically on the cognitive model or process by which people define themselves (e.g., how rather than what they think about themselves). The Twenty Statements Test (TST; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), which asks people to complete the sentence, 'I am \_\_\_\_\_,' 20 times, allows analysis of this procedural aspect of self-definition. It taps the sort of things—global traits, situation specific characteristics, social roles, etc.—with which one can meaningfully describe the self in a specific cultural context. To ensure comparability with the work of Markus and Kitayama (1991), we closely followed their use of Cousins's (1989) classical TST coding-scheme:

Any psychological attribute was regarded as qualified if it included reference to other people (e.g., 'I am silly with close friends'), to time (e.g., 'I am grouchy in the morning'), or to locale (e.g., 'I am talkative in class'). Pure attribute responses are, by contrast, free from such contextual qualifications: 'I am honest.' (Cousins, 1989: 127; see also Shweder & Bourne, 1984).

We coded only pure psychological attribute responses as independent (mirroring Markus & Kitayama, 1991; see also Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995; Parkes, Schneider, & Bochner, 1999). Several Danish respondents did not complete all 20 statements, so we analyzed the proportion rather than the absolute number of independent self-descriptions. The intra-class correlation coefficient of the coders for the overall proportion of independent (pure psychological attribute) responses used by each participant was  $\rho = 0.99$  within the US and  $\rho = 0.99$  within Denmark.

The TST and Singelis' (1994) self-construal scale are two independence measures so widely used that they almost amount to standard operationalizations of the construct. However, they failed to converge in both of the two recent validity studies of the independence construct (Bresnahan, Levine,

<sup>2</sup>Danish college students generally tend to be older than American ones. The only significant effect of age within any sample was a negative association with the proportion of independent self-descriptions on the TST ( $r_{\text{Denmark}} = -0.28, p < 0.01$ ;  $r_{\text{US}} = -0.22, p < 0.05$ ) in the direction opposite to our hypothesis. Age did not change the general pattern of results when used as a covariate.

Sherman, Lee, Park, & Kiyomiya, 2005; Grace & Cramer, 2003). We addressed this issue by including several other measures of independence: We adapted a procedural attribution task from Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000).<sup>3</sup> Subjects viewed a picture of six (identical) fish in which one fish is swimming in front of the others. In order to tap into cultural norms, we asked the subjects to 'imagine you were writing a children's story about the fish below' and explain the drawing. All attributions were coded as either individual or group/situational. Again, however, the total number of attributions varied between subjects, so we analyzed the proportion of individual to group/situational attributions. The intra-class correlation coefficient of the coders for the overall proportion of individual attributions used by each participant was  $\rho = 0.64$  within the US and  $\rho = 0.84$  within Denmark.

To test declarative endorsement of an independent ideology of self (declarative independence), we also deduced a set of four explicit statements about the independent concept of self adapted from Markus and Kitayama (1991) (e.g., 'who you really are is determined by your innermost thoughts and feelings';  $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.70$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.56$ ).<sup>4</sup> Finally, we also developed an age-appropriate measure to assess subjects' perceptions of their autonomy in making life-decisions. In three scenarios we asked participants to imagine that they disagreed with their parents about what to study, whether to go traveling, or whether to move in with a new partner. Subjects were then asked to indicate 'How important is your parents' point of view compared to your own in choosing what to do in this situation?' They responded to the probe on a six point Likert-scale with the end points labeled 'very important' and 'not very important' (for the three scenarios,  $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.69$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.73$ ). This is an anchored measure of self-perceived independence, in responses to realistic, albeit hypothetical, choices.

### *Self-Enhancement*

We assessed self-enhancement by two different measures, both of which asked people to rate themselves in comparison to their average peers. Corresponding to Markus and Kitayama's (1991) report of Myers (1989), we asked people to rank themselves compared with their peers on a percentile scale on intelligence, attractiveness, ability to get along with others, leadership ability, and leadership motivation ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.77$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.83$ ). We also used the 'How I See Myself' (HSM) questionnaire (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995;  $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.83$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.86$ ). The percentile self-ranking and HSM were strongly associated both within Denmark ( $r = 0.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the US ( $r = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), so we standardized each scale within each culture and combined them to an overall self-enhancement composite ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.86$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.89$ ). We also standardized items between countries in order to get an overall self-enhancement composite to be used for between culture comparisons ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

### *Manipulation of Anonymity*

To control for possible effects of impression management or 'public modesty' on self-enhancement, we experimentally manipulated whether people believed their answers to be anonymous. Whereas the anonymous condition was simply the standard questionnaire, in the non-anonymous condition we first asked subjects to volunteer their email address or phone-number 'so that we can contact you if we have any more questions regarding your answers.'

<sup>3</sup>All new and adapted measures are available from the authors upon request, but are not included for sake of brevity.

<sup>4</sup>The coherence of the independence measure in the US was somewhat lower than we would like and attests to the overall difficulty of measuring the construct. Caution in interpreting any null findings is thus in order. Note however, that this explicit measure as well as the scenario measure of independence (both of which were constructed for the purpose of this research) were the only measures that predicted self-enhancement according to the predictions of independence-interdependence theory, although only within the American sample.



*Interpersonal Leveling (Law of Jante)*

In order to create an ecologically valid, procedural measure of leveling, in a pilot questionnaire we asked American and Danish students to 'please describe yourself briefly.' From their 150 anonymous answers, we randomly selected six Danish and six American self-descriptions. Out of these 12 anonymous self-descriptions, we *a priori* identified five self-descriptions which breach the Law of Jante because the writers either used adverbs such as 'very,' 'extremely,' or 'exceptionally' about their own positive qualities, or else listed several positive qualities in a row (e.g., *I am witty, charismatic, smart, goal-oriented, self-assured.* . .). Subsequently, all of these five self-descriptions were identified by each of three Danish independent, bilingual and 'blind' judges who were asked to select the six self-descriptions out of the 12 that they thought breached the Law of Jante the most. The 12 self-descriptions generated from the pilot were all included in the final questionnaire in which respondents were asked to rate how much they liked the person who wrote each self-description. The rationale for this procedure is that even if you are not able or willing to explicitly state the principles by which you decide whether you like someone or not, you surely should be able to express whether or not you do like a person. Combining the liking-ratings of the five descriptions that breach leveling, we found that they scale to a coherent construct within Denmark ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ), but less so within the US ( $\alpha = 0.56$ ). This makes sense, as we are operationalizing leveling norms hypothesized to play an important role within Danish culture, but not necessarily within American culture. We reverse scored these five evaluations and combined them into a composite score of dislike of leveling violators.

We also asked participants to rank order their top six choices for potential roommates. A respondent got a 'Law of Jante score' of '0' if she had chosen an explicitly positive self-description as her first preference for roommate, and a score of '6' if not. For the second choice, the respondent got a score of '1' if the choice included an explicitly positive self-description and '6' if not, and so forth. Summing the resulting scores, the minimum score of '15' thus means that all the five authors of the self-enhancing self-descriptions were chosen as potential roommates and the maximum score of '36' means that none of these authors were chosen at all.

Finally, we included three explicit questions about the leveling practices expressed by the Law of Jante (Declarative leveling; e.g., *Even if people really are especially good at something it is difficult to like them if they point it out about themselves*;  $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.65$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.71$ ).

## RESULTS

For the sake of clarity and brevity, we organize the results by theoretical constructs rather than by individual hypotheses. We first test the predicted Danish-American differences of self-enhancement. We then compare our argument that such differences are a result of differential cultural endorsement of leveling to the alternative argument that differences of self-enhancement are a result of different levels of independence. In testing this, we present the analytically distinct within and between culture effects separately, because it is empirically possible and conceptually interesting for two constructs to be associated within a culture but not between cultures in the combined samples, and vice versa. Within each culture, we regress self-enhancement (standardized within culture) on all independent variables. We then follow Aiken and West (1991) in testing for slope differences of each independent variable on self-enhancement (standardized between culture), controlling for main and interaction effects of the anonymity manipulation. Testing for between culture effects, we include both culture and the manipulation of anonymity as factors in all analyses of variance. Finally, we follow the procedures of Baron and Kenny (1986) in testing whether independence or leveling mediates cultural differences of self-enhancement.

## Self-Enhancement

As predicted, Danes self-enhanced considerably less on the composite self-enhancement measure ( $M = -3.33$ ) than did Americans ( $M = 4.24$ ;  $F_{(1, 196)} = 19.32$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.09$ ).<sup>5</sup> If this relative lack of Danish self-enhancement were due to impression management resulting from cultural restrictions on public display, then Danes should be more likely to self-enhance in a private than in a public condition of the questionnaire. Contrary to these expectations, it is the Americans who showed higher levels of self-enhancement in the standard anonymous condition compared to the public one on both self-enhancement measures. If anything, Danes described themselves more positively in the public than in the anonymous condition. This interaction of culture  $\times$  anonymity condition on self-enhancement was significant: ( $M_{\text{Denmark non-anonymous}} = -1.17$ ;  $M_{\text{Denmark anonymous}} = -5.49$ ;  $M_{\text{US non-anonymous}} = 2.14$ ,  $M_{\text{US anonymous}} = 6.35$ ;  $F_{(1, 196)} = 6.14$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ; see Figure 1). The simple effects of anonymity on self-enhancement were marginally significant within Denmark ( $F_{(1, 97)} = 3.46$ ,  $p = 0.066$ ) as well as within the US ( $F_{(1, 99)} = 2.79$ ,  $p = 0.098$ ).

## Independence

### Within Culture Effects

None of the four independence measures were significantly correlated within either culture (see Table 1). The within-culture associations had a mean of  $r = 0.02$  and ranged from  $r = -0.18$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ,

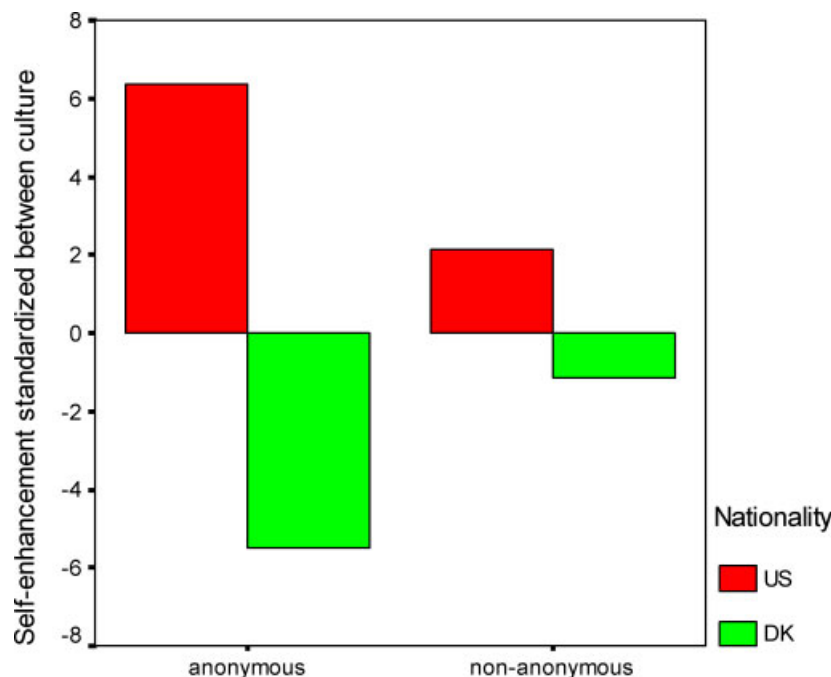


Figure 1. Interaction of Nationality  $\times$  Anonymity condition on Self-enhancement

<sup>5</sup>The conclusions of Study 1 still hold if comparing Danes to White and Asian Americans separately (all main effects of culture were Bonferroni corrected for multiple comparisons).

Table 1. Zero-order correlations of independence/individualism measures<sup>a</sup>

	Implicit procedural measures		Explicit self-report measures	
	1. Independence of self on TST	2. Individual attributions	3. Autonomy scenarios	4. Explicit independence
Implicit procedural measures	1		0.05	-0.18 <sup>#</sup>
	2	0.14	-0.00	0.03
Explicit self-report measures	3	0.08		0.18 <sup>#</sup>
	4	-0.11	-0.04	

<sup>a</sup>Correlations within the Danish sample below the main diagonal, and correlations within the American sample above the main diagonal.

<sup>#</sup> $p < 0.10$ .

between the explicit independence and the TST, to  $r = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.07$ , between explicit independence and the scenarios. Both of these correlations were within the American sample. Setting the alpha level to 0.10, this is within the average rate of 2.4 relationships out of twenty-four correlations (12 within each national sample) that would be expected to occur purely by chance. That is, defining the self by pure 'independent' psychological attributes on the TST, making individual attributions of social life, endorsing autonomous scenario choices, and explicitly endorsing definitions of an independent concept of self are orthogonal aspects of these cultures. These null results replicate the findings of Bresnahan et al. (2005) and Grace and Cramer (2003) and underline the need for a more domain- and relation-specific locus of analysis. However, independence-interdependence theory predicts that each of these aspects of independence will be associated with self-enhancement, so we tested for those associations. Neither self-description on the TST nor individual attributions predicted self-enhancement within either culture. Thus, standing out through self-enhancement does not make one more prone to actually define oneself as a global, decontextualized psychological entity or to use such entities as the basis for making causal attributions about social behavior. We also found no effects of the explicit measures within the Danish sample, but within the American sample self-enhancement was moderately associated with autonomous scenario choices ( $r = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) as well as explicit independence ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In the latter case, the slopes were significantly different between the two cultures ( $t = -2.24$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Simultaneously regressing self-enhancement on all four independence measures resulted in non-significant solutions within both cultures.

### *Between-Culture Effects*

Although Danes self-enhanced considerably less than did Americans, Danes (a) used a significantly higher proportion of independent self-descriptions on the TST to describe themselves ( $M_{\text{Denmark}} = 75.89\%$ ,  $M_{\text{US}} = 55.21\%$ ;  $F_{(1, 186)} = 28.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.13$ ); (b) used a significantly higher proportion of individual attributions ( $M_{\text{Denmark}} = 84.45\%$ ,  $M_{\text{US}} = 74.04\%$ ;  $F_{(1, 173)} = 5.47$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ); and (c) indicated on the scenario measure that they would make considerably more independent choices if they disagree with their parents than did the Americans ( $M_{\text{Denmark}} = 4.92$ ,  $M_{\text{US}} = 3.69$ ;  $F_{(1, 196)} = 67.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.26$ ). Declarative independence did not significantly differ between the two cultures and the anonymity manipulation did not interact with any independence measure.

*Mediation of Danish-American Differences in Self-Enhancement*

No independence measure predicted self-enhancement across the two cultures (the average zero-order correlation equaled  $-0.01$ , with a range from  $-0.05$  to  $0.11$ ). Consequently, we performed no further mediation analyses with these variables.

**Interpersonal Leveling***Within-Culture Effects*

The procedural measures of interpersonal leveling converged to coherent constructs within both national samples (see Table 2). Within the Danish sample, dislike of people who describe themselves in ways that violate leveling robustly correlated with unwillingness to be roommate with them ( $r = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as well as with declarative leveling (e.g., *People who directly tell you that they are good at something are ridiculous*) ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). Danish roommate choices and declarative leveling were also marginally associated ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ). Within the US, the two procedural measures were also robustly associated ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but both were orthogonal to declarative leveling. As predicted, leveling did inversely predict self-enhancement within each culture: Participants' dislike of the five self-enhancing self-descriptions inversely predicted self-enhancement both within Denmark ( $r = -0.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and within the US ( $r = -0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Choosing to avoid roommates who violate leveling also negatively predicted self-enhancement within Denmark ( $r = -0.30$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) and the US ( $r = -0.22$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ). Finally, the Danish norm of declarative leveling did inversely predict self-enhancement within Denmark ( $r = -0.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but not within the American sample. We found no significant slope differences between the cultures in the relations between self-enhancement and any measure of interpersonal leveling.

Table 2. Zero-order correlations of interpersonal leveling measures<sup>a</sup>

		Procedural measures			Explicit measures
		1. Dislike of leveling breachers	2. Unwilling to be roommate with leveling breachers	4. Leveling breachers versus others <sup>b</sup>	5. Other-directed explicit leveling
Procedural	1				
	2	0.61***	0.52***	-0.76***	-0.05
	4	-0.80***	-0.73***	-0.52***	-0.02
Explicit	5	0.30**	0.18 <sup>#</sup>	-0.19 <sup>#</sup>	0.00

<sup>a</sup>Correlations within the Danish sample below the main diagonal, and correlations within the American sample above the main diagonal.

<sup>b</sup>Reports the contrast: (average rating of leveling breaching self-descriptions)—(average rating of all other self-descriptions).

<sup>#</sup> $p < 0.10$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

*Between-Culture Effects*

As predicted, leveling was endorsed more strongly in Denmark than in the US: Danes disliked the five self-descriptions that breach leveling more than did Americans ( $M_{\text{Danes}} = 3.94$ ,  $M_{\text{Americans}} = 3.08$ ;  $F_{(1,194)} = 41.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.18$ ). However, this could simply be due to a response bias making Danes rate people in general lower than do Americans. To counter this argument, we tested a planned contrast, which subtracts the average rating of the self-enhancing self-descriptions from the average rating of all the other self-descriptions. As predicted, Danes liked self-enhancing self-descriptions significantly less than other self-descriptions ( $M = -0.54$ ,  $t_{(97)} = -5.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). For Americans there was no significant difference between preferences for the self-descriptions that violate leveling compared to the other self-descriptions ( $M = 0.10$ ,  $t_{(100)} = 1.20$ , n.s.). A significant interaction of this contrast with culture ( $F_{(1,196)} = 23.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.11$ ) demonstrated that the relative liking of these types of self-descriptions were indeed different within Denmark and the US. As predicted, Danes were also more unwilling to be roommates with people who violate leveling ( $M = 30.46$ ) than were Americans ( $M = 28.03$ ;  $F_{(1,167)} = 18.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.10$ ). Surprisingly, Americans endorsed declarative leveling more ( $M = 4.60$ ) than did Danes ( $M = 3.66$ ;  $F_{(1,195)} = 34.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.15$ ). No leveling measure interacted with anonymity condition on self-enhancement within either culture.

*Mediation of Cultural Differences of Self-Enhancement*

Dislike of people who violate leveling and unwillingness to choose them as roommates also correlated robustly across culture ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but both procedural measures were orthogonal to declarative self-report of leveling. While declarative leveling did not predict self-enhancement across the two samples, procedural leveling did mediate Danish-American differences in self-enhancement: A composite of both (standardized) procedural measures of leveling was predicted by being Danish versus American ( $B = 1.45$ ,  $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.16$ ) and also independently predicted self-enhancement across culture ( $B = -2.66$ ,  $\beta = -0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.17$ ). Crucially, when we predicted self-enhancement from both culture and procedural leveling, the direct path from culture to self-enhancement decreased from  $B = -8.11$ ,  $\beta = -0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$  to  $B = -3.99$ ,  $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $p = 0.04$  (see Figure 2). Indeed, a Sobel test (Goodman, 1960; Baron & Kenny, 1986) for the indirect effect of culture on self-enhancement via dislike was highly significant ( $t = -3.53$ ,  $p = 0.0004$ ). For the sake of brevity, we present only this composite mediation analysis, but we successfully replicated this mediation with both the dislike and roommate subscales of leveling and both the percentile and HSM (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995) subscales of self-enhancement (in fact, leveling fully mediated the effect of culture on the HSM).

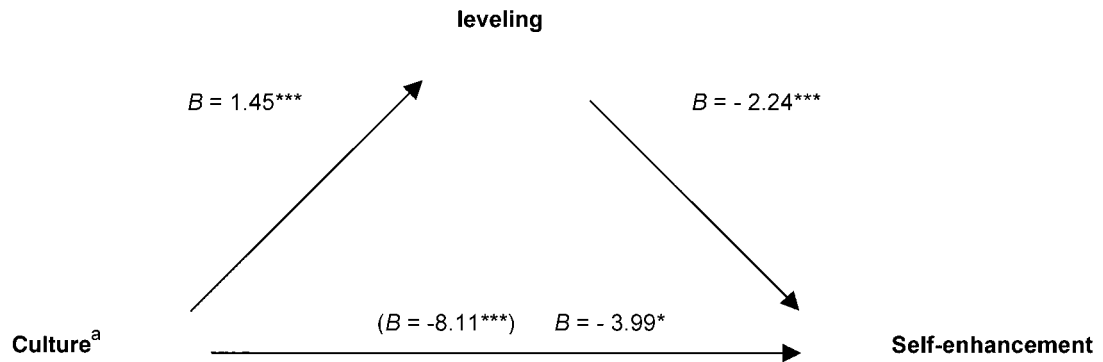
**STUDY 2**

In order to make sure that our previous results generalize beyond the student sample, in a second study we sought to replicate our main findings with an adult sample of people traveling by airplane from Seattle to Copenhagen.

**Methods**

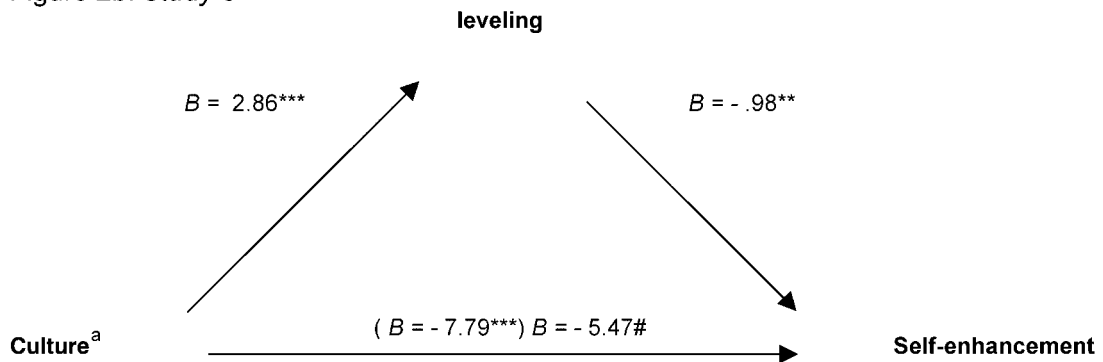
An abbreviated version of the original questionnaire was handed out to volunteers in their airplane seats and was collected by the end of the journey. No compensation was given. There were 18 ethnic Danes

Figure 2a: Study 1



Sobel test for indirect effect of culture on self-enhancement:  $t = -3.54, p = 0.0004$

Figure 2b: Study 3



Sobel test for indirect effect of culture on self-enhancement:  $t = -2.07, p = 0.038$

<sup>a</sup>Being American is coded as "0"; being Danish is coded as "1".

#  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Figure 2. The effect of culture on self-enhancement is mediated by procedural interpersonal leveling

(11 females, 7 males; mean age 38.2 years, ranging from 22 to 59 years), and 17 Americans (2 Black, 10 White and 5 who did not report ethnicity; 6 females, 8 males, and 3 who did not report their gender; mean age of 49.5 years, ranging from 18 to 74 years). The questionnaire contained no identifying information aside from these demographic attributes. It again included the TST, as well as the same self-enhancement composite ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.91$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.67$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.93$ ) and declarative leveling measure ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.67$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.65$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.66$ ) as in Study 1. However, the procedural leveling measure consisting of liking-ratings of self-descriptions which breach leveling was not sufficiently

reliable across the two countries ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.32$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.28$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.48$ ). Possibly this is because we were using the self-descriptions of young students with an adult sample. Supporting this, when we removed the self-descriptions which explicitly referred to being a young student, the resulting two-item scale was reliable ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.60$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.72$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.70$ ), so we used this shortened scale in the analyses.

## Results

### *Self-Enhancement and Independence*

All culture effects from Study 1 were replicated in this non-student sample. Danes still self-enhanced considerably less ( $M = -0.21$ ) than did Americans ( $M = 0.59$ ;  $F_{(1, 33)} = 34.89$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.51$ ). Nonetheless, Danes used a larger proportion of global, decontextualized psychological attributes to describe themselves ( $M = 80.9\%$ ) than did Americans ( $M = 36.8\%$ ;  $F_{(1, 32)} = 37.17$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.54$ ).

### *Interpersonal Leveling*

Replicating Study 1, Danes endorsed leveling more than did Americans: Danes disliked self-descriptions that breach leveling ( $M = 4.36$ ) more than did Americans ( $M = 3.00$ ;  $F_{(1, 30)} = 15.41$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.34$ ). Again, Danes also liked leveling self-descriptions more than they liked non-leveling self-descriptions, whereas Americans liked non-leveling self-descriptions more than they liked leveling self-descriptions. This simple contrast ( $\psi$ :  $M_{(\text{violation of leveling})} - M_{(\text{no violation of leveling})} = 0$ ) interacted significantly with culture ( $F_{(1, 30)} = 14.93$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.33$ ). The contrast was significantly different from zero within the Danish sample ( $M = -0.85$ ;  $t_{(17)} = 3.54$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ), but only marginally significant within the small American sample ( $M = 0.54$ ;  $t_{(13)} = 1.93$ ;  $p = 0.075$ ). Endorsement of declarative leveling did not significantly differ across the two cultures. Also replicating Study 1, percentile self-enhancement was again negatively associated with leveling on both declarative ( $r = -0.55$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ) and procedural measures ( $r = -0.48$ ,  $p = 0.053$ ) within the sample of 17 Danish adults. The direction of the effect of procedural leveling on self-enhancement was the same within the sample of 13 American adults, but did not reach significance ( $r = -0.40$ ,  $p = 0.19$ ).

## STUDY 3

The last two studies demonstrated that self-enhancement is not a necessary condition for independence in the everyday procedural sense of actually using a cognitive model of decontextualized individual agents defined by psychological attributes to describe oneself and make attributions about a social scene. Still, it remains possible that self-enhancement is associated with independence if independence is defined more broadly as declarative endorsement of values and prescriptive norms. That is, one could hypothesize that interdependent versus independent cultures are characterized by contrasting norms and values, where norms and values are explicit, semantically formulated propositions (e.g., 'It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group' versus 'I'd rather say no directly than risk being misunderstood'; Singelis, 1994: 285). Study 3 tests whether self-enhancement is associated with Singelis' widely used declarative self-construal scale of an independence—interdependence dimension.

## Methods

College students were recruited from introductory psychology classes in Southern California and the North of Denmark, respectively. There were 67 Americans (27 Whites, 24 Asian Americans, 7 Latinos, 2 Blacks, and 7 who described themselves as 'Other' or did not report their ethnicity; mean age 20.5 years, ranging from 17 to 41 years), and 43 Danes (mean age of 26 years, ranging from 20 to 48 years old). Americans filled out a questionnaire in privacy in the lab and received partial course credit for their participation. Danish students received a questionnaire at the end of class to return in the following lecture and in return received a raffle ticket for one \$50 prize. Participants again completed the same procedural leveling ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.50$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.64$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.67$ ) and self-enhancement ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.86$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.80$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.88$ ) measures as in Study 1. Finally, we included Singelis' (1994) measure of independence ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.60$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.73$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.83$ ) and interdependence ( $\alpha_{\text{Denmark}} = 0.68$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{US}} = 0.72$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{across}} = 0.68$ ).

## Results

### *Self-Enhancement*

As predicted, Danes again self-enhanced considerably less ( $M = -4.79$ ) than did Americans ( $M = 4.31$ ;  $F_{(1, 100)} = 20.86$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.17$ ). We replicated this culture effect with both subscales of self-enhancement.<sup>6</sup>

## Independence and Interdependence

### *Within Culture Effects*

Explicit independence, as defined by Singelis (1994), did in fact predict self-enhancement within the Danish sample ( $r = 0.44$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), whereas interdependence did not ( $r = 0.07$ , n.s.). Contrary to the predictions of independence-interdependence theory, however, within the American sample independence did not predict self-enhancement ( $r = 0.12$ , n.s.), whereas interdependence was positively associated with self-enhancement ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ).

### *Between Culture Effects*

Once more, Danes were considerably more independent ( $M = 4.62$ ) than were Americans ( $M = 3.17$ ;  $F_{(1, 109)} = 88.20$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.45$ )<sup>5</sup>. In fact, Danes were also more interdependent ( $M = 3.95$ ) than were Americans ( $M = 3.26$ ;  $F_{(1, 109)} = 19.98$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.16$ ). However, looking at the contrast ( $\psi: M_{\text{IND}} - M_{\text{INTER}} = 0$ ), Danes were more independent than interdependent ( $M = 0.67$ ,  $t_{(41)} = 4.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); but there was no such difference within the American sample. The interaction of this contrast with culture was significant ( $F_{(1, 108)} = 16.09$   $p < 0.001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.13$ ), demonstrating that this difference between independence and interdependence did indeed vary across culture.

<sup>6</sup>All culture effects of Study 3 still hold when comparing Danes separately to White and Asian Americans (all main effects of culture were Bonferroni corrected for multiple comparisons).



*Mediation of Cultural Differences of Self-Enhancement*

Lastly, neither Singelis' (1994) measure of independence nor interdependence mediated the Danish-American differences of self-enhancement: independence did not at all predict self-enhancement across the two cultures ( $r = 0.03$ ,  $F_{(1, 109)} = 0.09$ ; n.s.). Interdependence very marginally predicted self-enhancement across culture ( $F_{(1, 99)} = 2.69$ ;  $p = 0.10$ ;  $R^2 = 0.03$ ), but this association was positive—in the opposite direction to the prediction of independence-interdependence theory ( $B = 0.22$ ;  $\beta = 0.16$ ). Furthermore, when including both culture and interdependence in the equation, the effect of culture on self-enhancement did not decrease, as would have been the case had interdependence been a mediator. Instead, the effect of culture increased significantly from  $B = -7.79$  to  $B = -11.11$  ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.09$ ;  $\Delta F_{(1, 97)} = 9.81$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ).

**Interpersonal Leveling***Within Culture Effects*

Dislike of people who describe themselves in ways that violate leveling again significantly predicted self-enhancement within the American sample ( $r = -0.34$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), but not within the sample of 43 Danes ( $r = 0.07$ , n.s.).

*Between Culture Effects*

Danes once again liked self-descriptions that violate leveling less ( $M = 4.15$ ) than did Americans ( $M = 4.93$ ;  $F_{(1, 109)} = 19.41$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.15$ ). Again, Danes also liked these non-leveling self-descriptions less than the leveling self-descriptions ( $M = 4.44$ ). This simple contrast. . .; This simple contrast ( $\psi: M_{\text{violate}} - M_{\text{no violation}} = 0$ ) was significant only within the Danish sample ( $M = -0.28$ ;  $t_{(42)} = -2.16$ ;  $p = 0.036$ ). Once more, the contrast interacted with culture ( $F_{(1, 109)} = 6.00$ ;  $p = 0.016$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.052$ ), demonstrating that this relative difference between how well leveling and non-leveling self-descriptions are liked does indeed vary across Denmark and the US.

*Mediation of Cultural Differences of Self-Enhancement*

Again, leveling mediated the Danish–American differences in self-enhancement: The direct effect of culture on self-enhancement ( $B = -7.79$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ) fell barely below significance ( $B = -5.47$ ;  $p = 0.053$ ) when the regression equation also included leveling (see Figure 2b). The Sobel test for this indirect effect of culture on self-enhancement via leveling was significant ( $t = 2.07$ ;  $p = 0.038$ ). We also successfully replicated this mediation with each of the individual subscales of self-enhancement.

**DISCUSSION**

Markus and Kitayama's (1991) ground-breaking argument suggests that core psychological processes must be understood as adaptive and functional for the culturally prevalent cognitive model of self. Our

core argument begins instead with the cultural coordination devices with which people organize the meaningful, motivated complementarity of social interaction. These evolved but culturally informed coordination devices are the basis for the evolution and function of culture (Fiske, 2000; Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Moreover, we posit that the psychology of social relations is the primary source of the psychology of the self. In particular, self-enhancement—how we see ourselves relative to others—is a function of the coordinating ‘social grammars,’ the relational models we are using to generate, organize, understand, and evaluate interactions. We see ourselves through our relational roles, and hence, with reference to the eyes of the Other. In fact, even preferences for highly abstract, iconic representations of different spatio-relational structures predict self-enhancement (Thomsen, 2005; Thomsen, Fiske, & Sidanius, 2006). Based on our ethnographic experience, we argue that Americans organize the plurality of their educational, occupational, political, and recreational peer relations according to competitive equality of opportunity, whereas Scandinavians work to maintain equality of outcome in these relations. If Americans envision themselves getting ahead of their peers, they should self-enhance in such relations. If Scandinavians envision themselves staying even with their peers, they should self-level in such relations. Moreover, this culture effect on self-enhancement should be driven by such cultural differences of social grammars of equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome, but not by independence. Our results are indeed consistent with this theoretical prediction.

Three studies demonstrate the social relational basis of self-enhancement. First, Danes self-enhance considerably less than do Americans and practice procedural leveling more than Americans. Contrary to the predictions of independence-interdependence theory, however, Danes are more prone than Americans to describe themselves in independent terms with pure psychological attributes (Cousins, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991); Danes make more individual attributions about a social scene; they make more autonomous choices on scenarios pitting their own preferences against those of their parents; and they are more independent on the self-construal scale (Singelis, 1994). Second, no measure of independence consistently predicted self-enhancement within culture, nor mediated cultural differences in self-enhancement. In contrast, leveling did predict self-enhancement within culture and mediated the cross-cultural differences in self-enhancement.

Sedikides et al. (2003) recently suggested that people self-enhance pan-culturally on culturally valued traits, so that Japanese/interdependents self-enhance on communion and Americans/independents self-enhance on agency. Kurman (2003) made similar suggestions. This argument does not account for our results: Although all traits of the self-enhancement items, save perhaps leadership motivation, are also normative and valued within Danish culture, being Danish (vs. American) was not positively associated with self-enhancement on any one of four main categories of traits (autonomy, ability, achievement, and sociability) nor with self-enhancement on any of 24 individual traits items across the three studies.

Another possible counter-argument to the effect of culture on self-enhancement is that perhaps Danes privately do self-enhance just as much as do Americans, but they don’t admit it publicly because of egalitarian, leveling norms and practices. This argument entails something of a double standard because there is no particular reason why such impression management would apply only to Danes or other non-American groups. However, we decided to deal with this counter-argument empirically by including an experimental manipulation of anonymity. Our results indicate that Danish non-enhancement is not due to impression management or public modesty norms: If anything, Danes self-enhance less in an anonymous condition than in a public condition. So if one posited that American participants’ anonymous answers express their genuine illusions about their own exceptionally positive characteristics, then presumably Danish participants’ anonymous answers express their genuine feelings about their own normality (a word which has positive connotations in Denmark). Indeed, such ‘illusions’ of ‘normalness’ are likely to be quite adaptive in a leveling society that values equality of outcome in power, wealth, and prestige—just as illusions of being better than one’s peers may be

highly adaptive in a competitive society that values equality of initial opportunity and focuses on striving to win—to beat others to the top—in the authority ranking game of life. In sum, at a between culture level of analysis, the data before us suggests that standing out through self-enhancing, downwards social comparisons cannot be a necessary condition for sustaining an independent self.

Of course there are several other possible ways one might try to account for our findings. However, we do not believe that these alternative accounts are fully convincing. One could question the validity of our measures. We included another procedural attribution as well as a scenario measure to maximize chances of convergence with the TST. However, while our independence measures did converge across cultures—Danes were most independent on all of them—the independence measures did not converge to a coherent construct within either culture in Study 1. Concordant with the non-convergence of independence measures within culture in our study, the multi-method, multi-trait studies of Bresnahan et al. (2005) and Grace and Cramer (2003) also found that the TST, the self-construal scale (Singelis, 1994), and Cross, Bacon, and Morris' (2000) scale failed to converge within Korean, Japanese, and American samples, as well as across these three cultures. Indeed, the meta-analysis of Oyserman et al. (2002) demonstrated that measures of individualism generally fail to converge (see also Fiske, 2002; Takano & Osaka, 1999; Matsumoto, 1999). Although Schimmack, Oishi, and Diener (2005, see also Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002) recently suggested that the non-convergence of individualism measures between cultures may be accounted for by response styles, this does not solve the problem of non-convergence within cultures. Note also that the argument about response bias due to differential reference groups in different cultures does not account for our findings, because it does not apply to procedural measures where people actually perform the behavior of interest (rating themselves relative to others on the self-enhancement measures, defining themselves on the TST, and making attributions of social life). Nor could response styles account for our scenario measure, which was carefully anchored to whether participants or their parents made important life decisions for the respondents.

Thus several studies now indicate that the concept of an overarching cultural syndrome of independence is problematic. If several measures of the same construct consistently fail to converge, then the validity of the construct itself is in doubt, and not simply the measures used to define this construct (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). This points to the need to shift our conceptual focus to comparison of types of relationships, or social grammars, implemented in cultural informed practices in specific domains.

Of course it is possible that the explicit independence and scenario measures, which we developed specifically for these studies, are simply invalid. Note, however, that our new measures more nearly supported the predictions of independence–interdependence theory than the standard measures, predicting self-enhancement within the American (but not the Danish) sample. Even if our new measures were in fact invalid, this does not explain why Danes would consistently be more independent on each standard measure of independence, especially the TST (using the classical coding scheme of Cousins, 1989, which corresponds straightforwardly to Markus & Kitayama, 1991); the self-construal scale (Singelis, 1994), and an attribution task (adapted from Hong et al., 2000). Nor does it explain why these measures would be consistently unrelated to self-enhancement across or within culture (with the exception of Singelis' measure of interdependent self-construal which significantly predicted self-enhancement in the opposite direction to the predictions of independence–interdependence theory within the American sample). In any case, we suggest that our measures do have face validity within the framework of independence–interdependence theory.

One could also question our results that Danes do not self-enhance by questioning the employed percentile and standard How I See Myself self-enhancement measures (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995; Taylor et al., 2003). We chose this straight-forward better-than-average operationalization of self-enhancement because it relates most directly to Markus and Kitayama's theorizing of standing out as seeing oneself as different and better than most others. Furthermore, this operationalization of self-enhancement should provide a conservative test of Danish non-enhancement, because the comparison

with an ambiguous other allows for 'free' tactical self-enhancement (Sedikides et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2003), and is also prone to cognitive processing bias (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Moore & Kim, 2003; see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004, for a review). However, this method of assessing self-enhancement could be criticized for confounding self-enhancement and true personal competence, but the alternative strategy of comparing participants' self-ratings with how others see them is equally prone to confounding self-enhancement with cognitive and cultural bias in the perception of others. Because self-ratings on the HSM also correlate  $r = 0.94$  with the residual scores of how participants rate themselves and how their friends rate them, and because the HSM converges with other leading measures of self-enhancement (Taylor et al., 2003), we judge it to be the most appropriate measure in this context.

That Scandinavians are indeed unwilling to describe themselves as better than most others—that is, to self-enhance (Thomsen, 2002; Thomsen, Sidanius, & Fiske, 2001, 2003; Thomsen, Fiske, & Sidanius, 2003) is also supported by evidence from other fields. Norwegian students describe themselves in less positive terms on the California Psychological Inventory Good Impression Scale than do Americans (Sandal & Endresen, 2002). Despite higher rates of risk behavior, Danish teenagers are less likely to over-estimate deviance and risk behavior among their peers (a form of 'reverse' self-enhancement) than are Americans (Gibbons, Helweg-Larsen, & Gerrard, 1995). Svenson (1981) found that 46% of Americans estimated themselves to be among the 20% most skillful drivers, whereas only 15% of Swedes did so. Norwegians also rate themselves less positively on Big Five Traits that they also rate as desirable (controlling for the mean rating and desirability within the culture; Silvera & Seger, 2004; see also Dechesne, Postel, & van Knippenberg, 2002 for an account of lower self-enhancement amongst horizontal individualist Dutch). Finally, Nelson and Shavitt (2002) found that Danes endorse Schwartz' achievement values (which may also imply rising above others) less than do Americans.

One could also question our samples. In principle it is possible that we would have found a relation between independence and self-enhancement had we used very large data sets. However, the fact that across the three studies the absolute sizes of the correlations were close to zero strongly suggests that the size of such hypothetical effects would have been so small as to be trivial. Contrast this with the consistently substantial effects which we found of leveling. One could also question the fact that we did not exclude anyone from our American samples who was not White. We did not do so, because we believe that culture is enacted and realized in everyday social interaction. So when exploring the psychological effects of culture, samples ought to reflect the everyday social context in which these phenomena are played out. Consequently, our American student samples reflect the predominant demographics of the American campus, i.e., primarily White and Asian American. Nonetheless, we checked the effect of ethnicity by analyzing our White and Asian American sub-samples separately to see if it would alter our conclusions, and it did not: Danes were more independent and practiced leveling more, but self-enhanced less than did both Whites and Asian Americans. One could also question if it is more difficult to be accepted at an American elite university than to a Danish one so that this may account for higher American self-enhancement. However, this interpretation of the findings is inconsistent with the fact that one must achieve only superior grades in about 12 high-school exams to be accepted as a psychology major in Denmark (and Danish high schools are more rigorous than American high schools). The fact that our results replicate with even greater effect sizes in an adult non-student sample also makes this explanation unlikely.

Finally, our findings are limited, as most other cultural studies, by the fact that we compared only two cultures. In principle, it is perfectly possible that the predictions of independence-interdependence theory would come out across a world sample. Yet our mediation effects statistically demonstrate that when comparing the US and Denmark, leveling does indeed account for the cultural differences of self-enhancement, but independence (measured in five different ways) does not. This is sufficient to provide an existence proof that self-enhancement is not a necessary condition for many aspects of 'independence,' and that various dissociable aspects of 'independence' can co-occur with a cultural

emphasis on equality-of-outcome practices and values. As a matter of philosophy of science, such an existence proof need only be demonstrated once (and is not akin to arguing for the null-hypothesis). Our argument is not that independence is never a sufficient condition for self-enhancement in any culture. Our argument is that when comparing Denmark and the US it is not, whereas equality of outcome implemented as leveling is. Logically, self-enhancement therefore cannot be an intrinsic or essential functional component of independence.

We draw four main conclusions from this: First, standing out and seeing oneself as better than others is not a functionally necessary condition for the various distinct practices and values that have been conflated in the 'independence' construct. Second, we think that the self develops in interaction with the world, growing primarily out of social relationships. Consequently, people do not self-enhance if they are enacting a relationship governed by Equality Matching that is implemented as outcome leveling. Third, we believe it does not make sense to treat cultures as socially homogeneous monoliths, such that some cultures are characterized only by practices that consist of pure individual pursuit of happiness or self-interest, while other cultures uniformly practice total self-abnegating deference to the group. We need to adopt a finer-grained perspective, analyzing domain-specific social relationships; we need to recognize that within any culture, within any community, and within any institution or practice, people use multiple relational models to coordinate different aspects of their interaction. Fourth and most generally, to understand the mutual constitution of culture and psyche, it may be most fruitful to start with the analysis of the basic relational 'grammars' coordinating social interaction and the culturally informed ways that people implement them in diverse domains.

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