



## Cultural differences in process and person focus: Congratulations on your hard work versus celebrating your exceptional brain

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural differences in process-focused versus person-focused themes were examined using both cultural artifacts (Study 1) and self-reports (Study 2). In Study 1, the contents of Chinese and American graduation and encouragement cards were analyzed for their relative emphasis on person- versus process-focused themes. Person-focused themes center on recipients' stable traits and abilities, and their emotional well-being. In contrast, process-focused themes dwell on the recipients' hard work and effort, and emphasize the importance of continued self-improvement and growth. Messages on Chinese cards were significantly more process than person focused. The reverse was true of American cards. Chinese cards also contained more process-focused (e.g., winding roads) than person-focused images (e.g., student standing on a pedestal). American cards contained more person-focused than process-focused images, although this difference was significant only among encouragement cards. In Study 2, we presented Chinese and American participants with graduation card messages differing in focus. Chinese parents indicated that they would be more likely to select and Chinese students indicated that they would be more likely to receive process- than person-themed graduation card messages. American parents and students showed no effects of message focus. The findings illustrate how cultural beliefs are reflected in cultural artifacts and personal preferences.

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Finding the perfect greeting card is never easy. The ideal card is aesthetically pleasing and conveys the sentiments of the card giver. The senior author, who is of Chinese descent, found this task especially daunting when she struggled to obtain a suitable graduation card for a Chinese research assistant. The American cards seemed a touch too effusive about the recipient's personal traits. She eventually located more suitable cards at a Chinese store. These cards focused much less on the recipients' positive traits and more on their hard work. The cards also emphasized the importance of continued personal growth. The differences between the Chinese and American cards were intriguing. Chinese and American cards were designed for the same purpose – to congratulate the graduating student – yet they approached this goal differently. The American greeting cards appeared to focus on the recipient of the card. The Chinese cards appeared to focus more on the process of achieving success.

In the present article, we conducted two studies to further understanding of cultural differences in person versus process focus. Much cross-cultural research has relied heavily on participants' self-reports. In recent years, some leading cultural psychologists have advocated studying cultural phenomena not just within individuals' psyches (motivations, emotions, cognitions and behaviors), but also

within the sociocultural environments in which these individuals live and interact (e.g., Adams & Markus, 2004; Cohen, 2007; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). In their meta-analysis of individualism–collectivism differences in cultural products, Morling and Lamoreaux (2008) argued that variations between cultures need to be examined at both the level of the individual and cultural products because the relationship between psyche and cultural products is inherently dyadic and dynamic – cultural products both shape and are shaped by psyche. In keeping with this view, we investigated cultural differences in person versus process focus using both cultural artifacts (Study 1) and self-report measures (Study 2).

The distinction between person and process focus was first proposed by Dweck and her colleagues (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998) in their studies of children's responses to praise and criticism. Person feedback focuses on an individual's traits and abilities. In contrast, process feedback focuses on a person's effort and strategies. Children who received person feedback were more likely than those who received process feedback to view their self-worth as contingent upon their performance and to give up in the face of setbacks.

The type of feedback also appears to influence implicit theories of ability. Person feedback promotes the belief that abilities are innate and fixed (entity theory). Process feedback encourages the belief that abilities can be improved (incremental theory; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). For example, children praised for intelligence were more likely

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to hold entity beliefs about intelligence; those praised for hard work were more likely to hold incremental beliefs about intelligence (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

The relation between type of focus (process vs. person) and implicit theories appears to be reciprocal. Type of focus influences implicit theories and implicit theories influence type of focus (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, & Sacks, 1997; Levy, Plaks, & Dweck, 1999). Individuals who hold an entity theory of personality tend to focus on traits; in contrast, individuals who hold an incremental theory tend to focus on variables related to process such as amount of effort.

Relevant to the current research, there appear to be cultural differences in the tendency to endorse incremental versus entity theories of personality and ability. East Asians possess stronger incremental beliefs than North Americans, who, in turn, tend to hold stronger entity beliefs. Korean participants report that personality is more malleable than do American participants (Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 2002). East Asian high school students are more likely than their American counterparts to state that hard work is the primary determinant of achievement in math (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Similarly, Japanese students report that effort accounts for a greater proportion of intelligence than American students do (Heine et al., 2001). The cultural differences in implicit theories of personality and ability are consistent with research on attributions. Compared to East Asians, Westerners assign greater weight to dispositional information than situational information (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Masuda & Kitayama, 2004; Suh, 2002). Similarly, Morris and Peng (1994) found that Chinese newspaper articles include a greater ratio of situational to dispositional attributions in descriptions of mass murders than American newspaper articles did. A dispositional orientation may engender a focus on the influence of stable traits and abilities. An orientation toward the situation may lead to greater consideration of context-specific characteristics, such as strategies and amount of effort.

Why might East Asian cultures exhibit stronger process-focus and Western cultures stronger person-focus? In their investigation of the need for positive self-regard across cultures, Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) characterized North Americans as being “product” focused and East Asians as being “process” focused. According to these researchers, various aspects of North American culture, such as independence and individualism, promote self-enhancement motivation and may encourage a focus on “being” viewed positively. Conversely, specific features of East Asian culture, such as interdependence and collectivism, are conducive to self-critical and self-improvement motivations, and may foster a focus on “becoming” an increasingly more valued member of one’s group. Thus, cultural differences in person and process focus may reflect underlying motivations towards cultivating culturally valued selves.

To our knowledge, the studies reported here are the first to investigate cultural differences in person versus process focus. Our studies are also the first to examine these themes in the context of cultural artifacts. In Study 1, we analyzed the words and images presented in Chinese and American greeting cards. Our hypotheses were consistent with cultural differences in implicit theories. We expected Chinese graduation and encouragement cards to contain stronger process than person themes in both words and images, and American greeting cards to reveal the opposite pattern. In Study 2, we presented Chinese and American participants with sets of process- and person-focused card messages. Participants indicated their likelihood of either choosing to buy or receiving cards containing each message. We expected Chinese participants to indicate a greater likelihood of selecting or receiving cards with process- than person-focused messages. Together, these studies examined both everyday cultural practices and individual preferences for person- versus process-focused messages.

## Study 1

We examined two general types of cards – graduation and encouragement cards. Graduation cards provide a context for examining cultural differences in praise. Graduation cards high in person focus praise the recipients’ abilities and characteristics (e.g., intelligence, and talent) and include images highlighting their talent and uniqueness (e.g., graduating student standing on a pedestal). Graduation cards high in process focus praise the recipients’ hard work and effort, and contain images emphasizing continued improvement and growth (e.g., climbing a ladder, gardening, or studying). Encouragement cards, which are given following personal setbacks or disappointments (e.g., a missed promotion), provide a context for examining cultural variations in social support. Because praise about one’s talents and abilities may not be useful in the face of failure or disappointment, we predicted that encouragement cards high in person focus would focus primarily on the recipients’ emotional well-being (e.g., express sympathy, validate feelings, and offer support). The images on these cards would mostly express concern for the recipients’ feelings (e.g., hugging, comforting, or walking together). In contrast, encouragement cards high in process focus would emphasize effort, patience, and perseverance in overcoming obstacles. These cards would include growth and improvement themed images similar to those found in process-focused graduation cards.

Finally, we counted the number of individuals present in the card illustrations. Illustrations on American greeting cards, which were predicted to be primarily person focused, were expected to include one focal person. In contrast, Chinese greeting cards were expected to include more individuals. This finding would suggest that whereas Westerners regard graduation and overcoming obstacles as individual achievements, East Asians view such accomplishments as more collective ventures. This finding would complement the results of research on newspaper reports of “rogue trader” scandals (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999). American newspapers articles emphasized characteristics of the individual trader, whereas Japanese newspaper articles focused more on the entire organization.

## Method

Graduation and encouragement cards were obtained from American Greetings, an American greeting card company, and Evercare Ltd., a Chinese greeting card company. The American greeting cards were either purchased from a Carlton Cards store, a Canadian subsidiary of American Greetings ( $n = 32$ ), or accessed online via the American Greetings website ( $n = 44$ ). The Chinese greeting cards were either purchased from an Evercare Ltd. store in Kowloon, Hong Kong ( $n = 11$ ), accessed online via the company website ( $n = 22$ ), or taken from an Evercare Ltd. greeting card catalogue ( $n = 26$ ), which was provided by the Hong Kong store. Unfortunately, American Greetings was unable to provide us with a greeting card catalogue. All available graduation themed and encouragement themed cards from the various sources were included in this study. In total, 59 Chinese greeting cards (15 graduation cards and 44 encouragement cards) and 76 American greeting cards (39 graduation cards and 37 encouragement cards) were coded and analyzed.

All cards were transcribed in English to ensure that coders were blind to their cultural origins. The transcriptions included the card message and a written description of the cards’ illustrations. For example, an American graduation card was described as follows: “Card message: ‘Congratulations to a one-of-a kind, class-of-your-own kind of graduate. You’re amazing!’ Card picture: ‘One cat wearing a graduation hat.’” A Chinese graduation card was described as follows: “Card message: ‘Your hard work in the past really hasn’t gone to waste. Congratulations on your successful study and blossoming future.’ Card pictures: ‘Two monkeys studying together. Two monkeys

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