







Self-Enhancement in Latin America: Is It Linked to Interdependence?

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Abstract

Although individuals of Latin American heritage (*Latin Americans* in short) are considered interdependent, they also value traits like uniqueness and positivity, like individuals of European American cultural heritage, who are considered independent. It remains unclear whether this inclination toward positivity extends to a bias in self-perception known as self-enhancement. Moreover, if Latin Americans are indeed self-enhancing, it is uncertain how these tendencies align with their interdependent cultural orientation. In this article, we report three studies ($N = 1,246$) with three operationalizations of self-enhancement. We found that Mexicans, Colombians, and Ecuadorians show self-enhancement that is mostly similar in magnitude to European Americans. Notably, Study 3 found that self-enhancement is related to interdependence in Latin America: Unlike European Americans, Latin Americans in Ecuador exhibited stronger self-enhancement when interdependence is primed rather than independence. Our findings suggest that among Latin American individuals, self-enhancement not only exists but also reinforces interdependence.

Keywords

culture, self, self-enhancement, self-evaluation, Latin America

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Introduction

In the current cultural psychology literature, Latin Americans are often described as collectivistic (emphasizing social welfare) and interdependent (favoring social engagement and connection) (Campos & Kim, 2017; de Oliveira & Nisbett, 2017; Hofstede, 1980; Kitayama et al., 2022; Kitayama & Salvador, 2017, 2023; Salvador et al., 2023; Savani et al., 2013; Telzer et al., 2010; Triandis, 1989; Zárate et al., 2001). However, Latin Americans also exhibit traits like emotional expressiveness (Salvador et al., 2023), positivity (Senft et al., 2021), and a value for uniqueness and self-interest (Krys et al., 2022; Vignoles et al., 2016)—traits historically attributed to independent European Americans (Heine et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). If Latin Americans emphasize positive uniqueness for the self to a large enough extent, it could develop into self-enhancement, which is an overestimation of one's own ability and other positive traits. In the present work, we sought to investigate whether interdependent Latin Americans exhibit self-enhancement similar to independent European Americans, but unlike East Asians, who are typically self-effacing—not overestimating their positivity (Chang & Asakawa, 2003; Heine et al., 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1995; Sanchez & Dunning, 2019;

Zell et al., 2019). If our hypothesis were confirmed, it raises an important puzzle: if self-enhancement is generally associated with independence, why do Latin Americans, who are interdependent like East Asians, exhibit self-enhancing tendencies?

Culture and Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement, the tendency to overestimate one's abilities and other desirable qualities, is characterized by overly

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positive self-assessments that diverge from objective reality (Dunning et al., 1989). A key feature of the definition of self-enhancement is in the term “over-estimation.” Extensive research has documented that self-enhancement is a manifestation of a psychological bias rather than a truthful reflection of the qualities of the self (Alicke et al., 1995; Dunning et al., 1989; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Zell et al., 2019; Zhang & Alicke, 2021).¹ One common way to establish self-enhancing biases is to test how people’s judgments or inferences deviate from a normative criterion systematically.

For instance, self-enhancement manifests as a tendency for a majority of people to evaluate themselves as “better-than-average” (Alicke et al., 1995; Zell et al., 2019). This tendency is considered a bias because it is impossible for the majority to fit into the top 50% range. Likewise, it is reasonable to assume that if certain causes, such as abilities and luck, are very important in achieving success in a task, people should refer to such causes to explain both their success and failure in the task. However, European Americans typically attribute their successes to internal attributes (e.g., their ability), while attributing their failures to external factors (e.g., unfortunate circumstances) (Malle, 2006; Miller & Ross, 1975). This attributional bias is thought to help protect the positivity of the self. A closely related effect examines the perceived impact of success and failure on self-esteem, showing an important asymmetry similar to the self-serving attribution effect: European Americans typically estimate that successes will boost their self-esteem more than their failures would diminish it (Kitayama et al., 1997; Salvador et al., 2022). Yet another way to document self-enhancement is to ask people to draw circles representing themselves and their friends. If there were no bias in self-evaluation, people should draw circles that represent themselves equal in size to circles that represent their friends. However, this is not what occurs. European Americans typically draw themselves as bigger than their friends, thereby manifesting the symbolic self-inflation effect, which reflects the greater value or significance assigned to themselves compared with their friends (Kitayama et al., 2009).

One important contribution of the last three decades of research in cultural psychology is the documentation that self-enhancement is often attenuated and sometimes completely eliminated for people from East Asian cultures (Heine et al., 1999, 2001; Kitayama et al., 1997; Salvador et al., 2022, 2024). For example, the better-than-average effect is known to be attenuated overall (Zell et al., 2019) and, in fact, sometimes eliminated or even reversed among East Asians (Chang & Asakawa, 2003; Heine & Lehman, 1995). The self-serving attributions of success and failure, highly robust in European Americans, are attenuated in East Asians (Mezulis et al., 2004). Moreover, the tendency to overestimate the impact of success (vs. failure) in self-esteem, also highly robust in European Americans, is reversed in East Asians (Kitayama et al., 1997; Salvador et al., 2022). Finally, unlike European Americans, East Asians typically do not

show the symbolic self-inflation effect when asked to draw circles representing themselves and their friends (Kitayama et al., 2009).

Notably, researchers have taken pains to distinguish self-enhancement from veridical perception of the self as high in ability and other positive characteristics (Alicke et al., 1995; Dunning et al., 1989). The main benchmark to classify these judgments as self-enhancement is to demonstrate that the judgment is a bias based on a certain normative criterion. The existing cross-cultural evidence passes this critical test, thereby providing credence to the hypothesis that self-enhancement is more pronounced in European Americans than in East Asians (Chang & Asakawa, 2003; Heine et al., 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1995).

A Latin American Paradox

Based on this empirical documentation of cultural differences in self-enhancement, it is commonly assumed that the motivation underlying self-enhancement is individualistic because it glorifies the self above others, which makes it more prevalent in independent cultural contexts (Heine et al., 1999). The overarching hypothesis has been that expressing and confirming one’s positive qualities, including abilities and other socially desirable personality traits, is crucial to validate the sense of the self as an independent entity (Heine et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). For individuals committed to the values of interdependence, such as social and relational harmony, perceiving the inner qualities of the self as desirable might not be as important or as pressing. Hence, self-enhancement is thought to be attenuated or eliminated in interdependent cultures (Heine et al., 1999).

Despite the wealth of research on self-enhancement across cultures, studies have focused mainly on East Asia, leaving other collectivistic and interdependent cultures, such as Latin America, largely unexplored. Latin Americans are a particularly interesting group to test because unlike East Asians, Latin Americans are strongly oriented toward positivity (Senft et al., 2021). This emphasis on positivity is thought to arise primarily to promote and reinforce social relationships (Campos & Kim, 2017). However, one possible consequence of the mutual exchange of positive remarks and emotions is that there may be a reinforcement of the positivity of the self in addition to that of others. This raises the possibility that Latin Americans may exhibit self-enhancing tendencies. If this prediction holds, it presents an intriguing paradox: If self-enhancement is usually associated with independence, why might Latin Americans, who share an interdependent orientation with East Asians, also show self-enhancement?

We suspect that the antecedents and cultural meaning of self-enhancement may be different for Latin Americans compared with European Americans. Latin Americans might emphasize positivity to foster convivial social relationships, as proposed by Campos and Kim (2017). This actively positive

social orientation toward one another—characteristic of the cultural script of *simpatía* (Holloway et al., 2009; Triandis et al., 1984) and supported by recent findings on the value and expression of positive emotions among Latinx² (Senft et al., 2021) and Latin Americans (Salvador et al., 2023)—may influence not just others but also the self and lead individuals to view themselves more positively than is objectively warranted. If so, self-enhancement in Latin America may be quite robust but, unlike for people from European American contexts, self-enhancement for people from Latin American cultural contexts might have its roots in the desire to build and maintain social relationships. In other words, self-enhancement in Latin America may not aim at establishing positive self-worth per se but could arise instead as a consequence of the continuous efforts to foster and sustain mutually positive social bonds.

Present Research

The aim of our work is twofold: first, to test whether Latin Americans exhibit self-enhancement through the better-than-average and symbolic self-inflation effects; and second, to explore whether this self-enhancement in Latin America is rooted in an interdependent ethos, contrasting with the independent motivations typical in European Americans. We anticipated that, like European Americans but not like East Asians, Latin Americans would be self-enhancing. We had no prediction regarding the relative magnitude of self-enhancement between European Americans and Latin Americans. We also expected that unlike European Americans, Latin Americans' self-enhancement would be particularly pronounced when the self's interdependence (vs. independence) is primed.

Study 1

Study 1 tested whether Latin Americans exhibit self-enhancement. We asked individuals from Latin American and European American backgrounds to evaluate themselves and the “average other.” Our prediction was that both Latin Americans and European Americans engage in self-enhancement by rating themselves more positively than the average other, known as the better-than-average effect. We explored whether the self-enhancement effect can be found across traits that vary in whether they emphasize independence (e.g., independent thinking) or interdependence (e.g., sympathetic).

Methods

Participants. We set a target N of 200, a large enough sample to detect small- to medium-sized effects and double the sample of past work with similar measures (e.g., Kitayama et al., 2009). Prior to being able to see the study, Mexicans were pre-screened to live in Mexico, be of Mexican nationality,

and be fluent in Spanish. European Americans were pre-screened to live in the United States, be U.S. citizens, report their ethnicity as White/Caucasian, and be fluent in English. Participants were tested in their native languages, which is Spanish for Mexicans and English for European Americans. Two hundred and one European Americans (97 males, 101 females, 1 missing and 2 other) and 201 Mexican (101 males, 99 females, and 1 other) adults were recruited online through Prolific Academic. The European American sample ranged from 18 to 70 years of age and was, on average, older ($M = 30.21$, $SD = 10.32$) than the Mexican sample ($M = 24.35$, $SD = 6.14$), which ranged from 18 to 67 years of age.

All Mexican participants had a native household language of Spanish, whereas all European American participants had a native household language of English. Mexican participants were mostly living in large cities (133), although a few participants were in smaller cities (40), towns (21), or countryside (7). Two did not report what area they were living in. European American participants were mostly living in towns (83), although some were in large cities (37), smaller cities (66), or countryside (14). Five did not report what area they were living in. As measures of social status, we asked about parents' level of education and their subjective status using a ladder measure (Adler et al., 2000). Parents' education was coded such that 1 = less than high school, 2 = high school, 3 = some college, 4 = 2-year college degree, 5 = 4-year college degree, 6 = master's degree, 7 = doctoral degree, and 8 = professional degree. Mexican participants reported that their fathers ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.43$) had higher levels of education than European Americans' fathers ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.71$), $t(399) = 2.40$, $p = .017$. There were no differences in mother's level of education between Mexicans ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.49$) and European Americans ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.60$), $t(399) = -.91$, $p = .37$. There were no differences in subjective social status between Mexicans ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.45$) and European Americans ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(399) = -.54$, $p = .59$.

Procedure. In this online study conducted through Prolific Academic, participants were recruited and provided informed consent. The study, approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Michigan and Duke University aimed to investigate self-evaluation and community perceptions. Participants completed a questionnaire via Qualtrics, beginning with an informed consent form. Subsequently, they engaged in two types of self-evaluation tasks, known to examine the better-than-average effect. First, they were presented with a series of positive personality adjectives (responsible, friendly, persistent, reliable, resourceful, polite, dependable, trustful, pleasant, and good-tempered) and asked to rate both themselves and the average member of their chosen community (defined by the participants) on a scale from 1 to 7, indicating how characteristic these traits were (1 = *not at all characteristic* to 7 = *very characteristic*). Reliabilities were good for both the

self ($\alpha = .80$ and $.87$) and other ($\alpha = .90$ and $.93$) traits for Mexicans and European Americans, respectively. Community was defined in a way that was most meaningful to each participant, encompassing friends, acquaintances, colleagues, or neighbors (Thomson et al., 2018). This definition of community was taken from Thomson et al. (2018), to provide a concrete reference group for a non-student sample. We refer to this task as the self-other evaluation task. The logic of the task is that the self is a member of a community and, consequently, the self ought to be rated very close to the average of all community members overall across participants. Hence, greater positivity in the self-rating, compared with the average community member rating, constitutes a cognitive bias of over-evaluating the self. Using this task, European Americans are highly self-enhancing, whereas East Asians are much less so (Heine & Lehman, 1995) and sometimes even self-effacing, rating the self as less desirable than the average others (Chang & Asakawa, 2003).

In the second self-evaluation task, participants estimated the proportion of their community members who exhibited various traits more than they did, rating on a scale from 0% to 100%. These traits included ability (intellectual abilities, memory, athletic abilities), independence (independent thinking and strong viewpoints), and interdependence (sympathetic and warm-heartedness). Reliabilities were low-adequate for the ability ($\alpha = .62$ and $.55$), independence ($\alpha = .52$ and $.27$) and interdependence ($\alpha = .49$ and $.79$) traits for Mexicans and European Americans, respectively. We present these separately to follow past work by Markus and Kitayama (1991), but avoid strong interpretations of differences between these domains given the low reliability. A rating of 0% implied that no community members exhibited the trait more than the participant, while 100% indicated that all community members did. The logic of the task is that each participant is a member of the community. Hence, the self-ratings should converge to 50% overall across participants in the absence of any bias. Any mean scores lower than 50% would indicate self-enhancement since they underestimate the proportion of others with desirable characteristics. We refer to this task as the percent estimation task. Using this task, Markus and Kitayama (1991a) found European Americans to be self-enhancing, with their average scores significantly lower than 50% (Markus & Kitayama, 1991a). Among Japanese, however, this effect was significantly attenuated in traits related to ability, eliminated in those related to independence, and reversed (showing self-effacement) in those related to interdependence.

After completing these tasks, participants filled out a satisfaction with life scale for exploratory purposes and a demographic questionnaire. Finally, they were debriefed and compensated for their participation. All study materials were originally developed in English and underwent translation and back-translation into Spanish with at least three different English-Spanish bilinguals. Materials, data, and syntax for

this article are accessible on OSF at: <https://osf.io/uc76v/>. The studies in this article were not pre-registered.

Results

Self vs. Other evaluation. The self and other ratings obtained from the self-other evaluation task were submitted to a protagonist (Self and Other) and country (Mexico and United States) analysis of variance (ANOVA). We found significant main effects of protagonist and country, $F(1, 400) = 121.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .233$ and $F(1, 400) = 40.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .093$, respectively. These main effects were qualified by a significant protagonist \times country interaction, $F(1, 400) = 7.40$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2_p = .018$.

Our key interest was to determine whether the ratings in the self-judgment condition were significantly more positive than the other-judgment condition, thereby showing self-enhancement. As shown in Figure 1A, the self-other difference was significantly positive and confidence intervals did not include zero, indicating self-enhancement, for both cultural groups, although this effect was significantly weaker for Mexicans ($M = .40$, $SE = .068$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.27, .54]) than European Americans ($M = .67$, $SE = .068$, 95% CI = [.53, .80]), $F(1, 400) = 7.40$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2_p = .018$. Aside from the analysis of self-other difference scores (i.e., our index of self-enhancement), both self and other ratings were relatively more positive for Mexicans than for European Americans. These effects were statistically significant ($M_s = 5.88$ vs. 5.56 and 5.48 vs. 4.89), $ps < .001$, for the self and other ratings, respectively.

As noted previously, *simpatía* is a trait highly valued in Latin America. Some scholars, such as Sedikides et al. (2003), have suggested that people may be more motivated to enhance their positivity on culturally valued traits, resulting in stronger self-enhancement (Sedikides et al., 2003). If this is the case, Mexicans might show a greater self-enhancement effect for *simpatía*-related traits compared with traits unrelated to *simpatía*. Although we had no a priori plan to test this possibility, some of the traits we tested turned out to be related to *simpatía* (friendly, polite, pleasant, and good-tempered), while others were unrelated (responsible, persistent, reliable, resourceful, dependable, and trustful). In the self-condition, reliabilities were good for both the *simpatía*-related ($\alpha = .82$ and $.81$) and *simpatía*-unrelated traits ($\alpha = .69$ and $.83$) for Mexicans and European Americans, respectively. In the other-condition, reliabilities were good for both the *simpatía*-related ($\alpha = .80$ and $.90$) and *simpatía*-unrelated ($\alpha = .88$ and $.89$) traits for Mexicans and European Americans, respectively. We thus explored whether self-enhancement (i.e., the difference between self and other ratings on traits) might depend on trait-type. The results did not support this idea. In a repeated-measures ANOVA with Protagonist (Self and Other), Trait (*simpatía*-related and *simpatía*-unrelated) and Country (the United States and Mexico), the three-way interaction between Protagonist, Trait, and

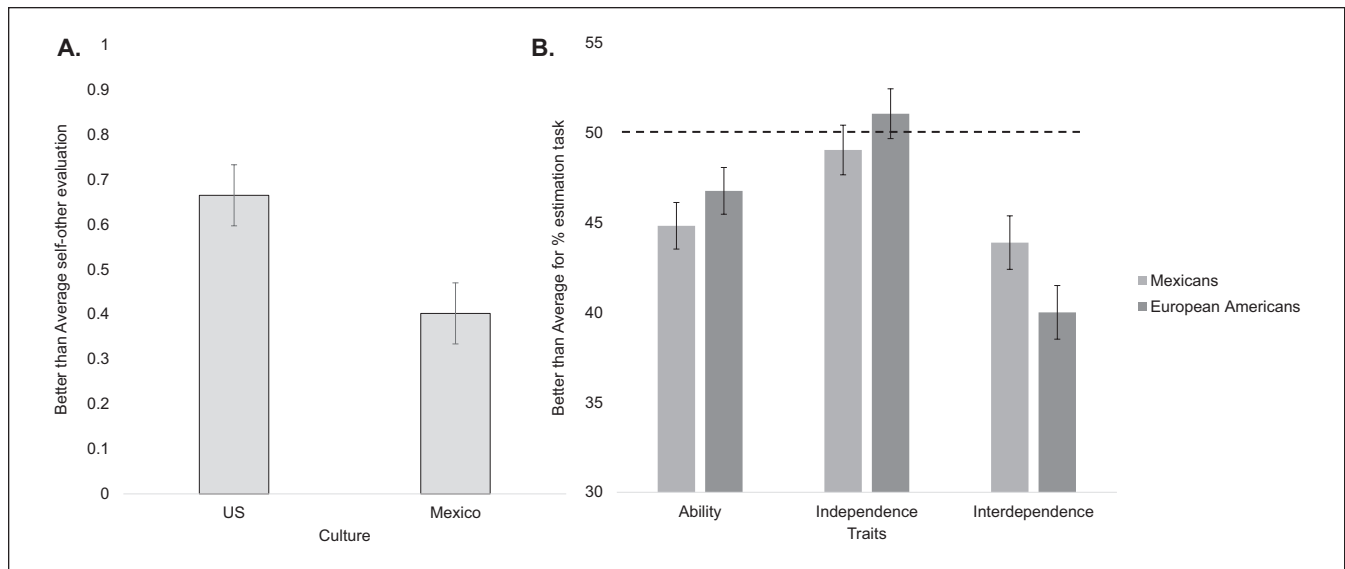


Figure 1. (A) Better Than Average Effect Measured in the Self-Other Evaluation Tasks (i.e., Ratings of How Characteristic Positive Traits Are of the Self Compared to Others in Their Community) in Mexico and the United States. (B) Better Than Average Effect Measured in the % Estimation Task (i.e., Ratings of How Much More Characteristic a Positive Trait Is of the Self Compared to the Average Community Member) in the Mexico and the United States. Numbers below 50 (the dashed line) indicate self-enhancement. Vertical bars represent the standard error of the mean.

Country was not significant, $F(1, 400) = 1.85, p = .18, \eta_p^2 = .005$. However, the Protagonist by Trait interaction was significant, $F(1, 400) = 59.43, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .129$. Self-enhancement was weaker for *simpatía*-related than *simpatía*-unrelated traits for both Mexicans and European Americans (.12 vs. .59 and .47 vs. .80), $F(1, 400) = 41.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .093$ and $F(1, 400) = 20.16, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .048$, respectively.

Percentage Estimate Judgment. The percentage estimates from the estimation task were submitted to a 2×3 ANOVA with Trait (Ability, Independence, Interdependence) and Country (Mexico and the United States) as factors. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of Trait and a significant Trait \times Country interaction, $F(2, 400) = 22.71, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .054$, and $F(2, 401) = 3.92, p = .020, \eta_p^2 = .010$, respectively.

Our key interest was to determine whether each mean deviated significantly from 50%, as an estimate below 50% would imply that fewer than half of people are perceived as “better than oneself,” suggesting a population-level bias toward overestimation of the self. Figure 1B highlights these observed deviations. Self-enhancement was evident for both Mexicans ($M = 45.06, 95\% CI = [42.52, 47.61]$) and European Americans ($M = 46.78, 95\% CI = [44.23, 49.34]$) in ability-related traits, with no significant difference between the two cultural groups, $p = .36$. For independence-related traits, self-enhancement was not significant for neither Mexicans ($M = 49.31, 95\% CI = [46.60, 52.01]$) nor European Americans ($M = 51.08, 95\% CI = [48.37, 53.79]$), $p = .30$. Finally, self-enhancement was substantial for interdependence-related

traits and somewhat stronger for European Americans ($M = 40.02, 95\% CI = [37.09, 42.94]$) than for Mexicans ($M = 44.12, 95\% CI = [41.20, 47.04]$), although the cross-cultural difference was only marginal, $F(1, 400) = 3.81, p = .052, \eta_p^2 = .009$. Thus, although the significant trait \times country interaction indicates that the patterns of country differences vary across the three trait domains, there was no clear evidence that the overall magnitude of self-enhancement differs significantly between people from the two countries in any of the trait domains. There was not an overall country difference, as the country main effect did not reach statistical significance, $F(1, 400) = 0.02, p = .88, \eta_p^2 = .00$.

Association Between the Two Indices of Self-Enhancement. Since the two indices under study (the self-other difference score from the first task and the percentage estimate from the second task) are alternative indices of self-enhancement, we may expect them to be significantly associated. This association should be in the negative direction since self-enhancement is suggested by a larger difference from the first task and a lower than 50% estimate from the second task. As may be expected, the association was small and negative for both Mexicans and European Americans ($r_s = -.19$ and $-.35$), $p = .007$ and $p < .001$, respectively.

Discussion

Using two standard methods to assess self-enhancement, Study 1 showed the first clear evidence that Latin Americans, as represented by Mexicans here, are self-enhancing. This self-enhancement effect was weaker for Mexicans in one of

the tasks, but did not replicate in the other. Hence, it is not possible to draw any strong conclusion about differences in the magnitude of self-enhancement between European Americans and Latin Americans. Regardless of the conclusion on this point, the data are very clear that Latin Americans appear to be highly self-enhancing. This overarching conclusion begs the question of whether self-enhancement occurs amongst people from other Latin American countries. Moreover, it is unclear if the same conclusion would be obtained with any alternative measures of self-enhancement. Study 2 addressed these issues.

Study 2

Study 2 tested an alternative index of self-enhancement, the symbolic self-inflation effect, to conceptually replicate Study 1. We also tested another cultural group within Latin America, i.e., Colombians. In addition, one potential limitation of Study 1 was that it did not include any East Asian group—the group typically used as a representative interdependent culture. To address this gap, we included an East Asian group (Japanese). Prior work shows that East Asians are less self-enhancing compared with European Americans (Heine et al., 1999; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Kitayama et al., 1997; Salvador et al., 2022). We anticipated that both Latin Americans and European Americans would be more self-enhancing than Japanese.

Methods

Participants. Study 2 drew on participants from Study 2 in the work of Salvador et al. (2023). These participants performed several tasks in addition to the task Salvador et al. (2023) analyzed and reported. One such unreported task was the symbolic self-inflation task—the focus of the current article. The participants included 204 European Americans (98 males and 106 females), 175 Colombians (69 males and 106 females), and 178 Japanese (69 males and 109 females) college undergraduates. The total number of participants with available sociogram data included 198 European Americans, 171 Colombians and 178 Japanese. This study was conducted in person using the same procedure across sites, and all participants were currently residing in their respective countries. In all three locations, we set a target N of 200 or as many as possible until the end of the term. This is at least double the sample sizes in prior cross-cultural work (e.g., Kitayama et al., 2009).

All three groups were significantly different from each other in age, $F(2, 540) = 50.95, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .159$. The European American sample was on average the youngest ($M = 18.69, SD = 0.99$), followed by the Japanese sample ($M = 20.04, SD = 1.24$) and the Colombian sample ($M = 20.60, SD = 2.92$). An analysis of the type of environment participants reported growing up in revealed a significant main effect of Culture, $F(2, 540) = 60.67, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .183$. Colombians ($M = 1.48, SD = .807$) reported growing up in larger cities than both Japanese ($M = 2.23, SD = .856$) and European Americans ($M = 2.39, SD = .812, ps < .001$). The

latter two groups did not differ from each other. There were no cultural differences observed in subjective social status, $F(2, 540) = .893, p = .410, \eta^2_p = .003$.

Materials. All materials were originally developed in English. They were translated into Japanese and Spanish. Back translation was used to ensure the equivalence of meaning.

Symbolic Self-Inflation. People who think of the self as important may self-enhance and represent the self as larger than others in an abstract image of their social network. To measure this tendency, past work has used the sociogram task (Kitayama et al., 2009; San Martin et al., 2018). As in Kitayama et al. (2009), we asked participants to draw their social network using circles to depict themselves and their friends in 5 minutes. As part of the network, people were asked to draw lines to connect the circles to represent a relationship between people. The main dependent variable was the diameter of the self, compared with the average diameter of the friend circles. A larger diameter in the self (vs. friend) circle indicates higher levels of self-enhancement.

Self-Construal Scale. We included a self-construal scale as part of a larger data collection effort in Study 2. Please see the Supplemental Information for detailed information.

Procedure. The study, overseen by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Michigan, met ethics requirements of all three countries in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. In all sites, participants were tested in person, in their native language, and in small groups of two to eight people. Upon arrival at the lab, participants were told that the study was about cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors that influence individual self-perceptions. Participants began with the consent form, followed by paper and pencil tasks, which included the sociogram task, reported here. There were other tasks included that are part of separate papers or ongoing projects on psychological tendencies unrelated to self-enhancement. After all tasks, participants were debriefed and compensated.

Results

Our focus was on self-enhancement—as assessed by the relative size of self- vs. the average of the circles for others. The circle sizes were analyzed in a 3×2 ANOVA, with Country (Colombia, the United States, and Japan, between-subjects) and Protagonist (Self and Other, within-subjects), which yielded significant main effects of both Country and Protagonist, $F(2, 544) = 56.55, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .172$ and $F(2, 544) = 230.39, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .298$, respectively. Overall, circles were bigger for Colombians than for Japanese, with European Americans falling in-between. Moreover, circles were bigger for the self than for others. Critically, however, a significant interaction between country and protagonist also proved significant, $F(2, 544) = 67.16,$

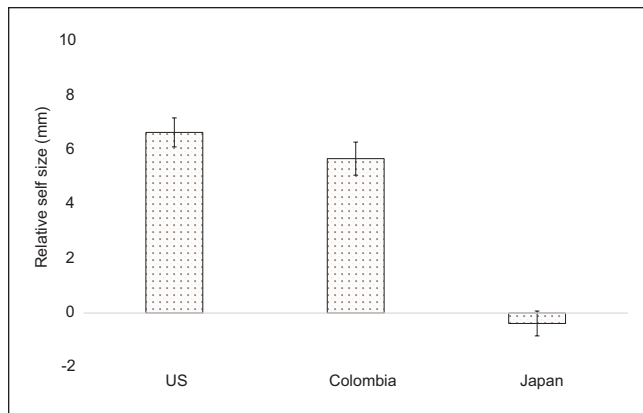


Figure 2. Symbolic Self-Inflation (i.e., the Relative Size of the Self and Other Circles) in the United States, Colombia, and Japan. Vertical bars represent the standard error of the mean.

$p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .198$, suggesting that the magnitude of self-enhancement showed a systematic country difference. Figure 2 shows the relative self-size, compared with the average size of the circles for others. A one-way ANOVA performed on the relative self-size showed a significant main effect of country, $F(2, 544) = 67.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .198$. Both Colombians and European Americans exhibited robust symbolic self-inflation, which did not differ from each other, $p = .25$. In contrast, Japanese significantly differed from both groups and did not show any self-inflation as shown by a 95% CI overlapping with zero, $95\% CI = [-1.42, 0.66]$.

Discussion

Study 2 used an alternative index of self-enhancement (symbolic self-inflation) and found that Colombians are self-enhancing, like European Americans. Japanese showed no evidence of self-enhancement. Based on the measures of self-enhancement, Studies 1 and 2 found Latin Americans and European Americans to be no different except in one of the two tasks in Study 1: Both groups are highly self-enhancing. However, as noted earlier, the literature shows that, compared with European Americans, Latin Americans are much more collectivistic (Campos & Kim, 2017; Hofstede, 1980), value social obligations and duties (Telzer et al., 2010) and seek to be more interdependent (rather than independent) through the expression of socially engaging (rather than disengaging) positive emotions (Salvador et al., 2023). Thus, we are left with a paradox: How come Latin Americans are just as self-enhancing as European Americans, even though Latin Americans are demonstrably more collectivistic and interdependent than European Americans? Resolving this puzzle was the main objective of Study 3.

Study 3

One important clue in addressing the puzzle that Latin American individuals are self-enhancing comes from the work

of Campos and Kim (2017), who proposed that Latin Americans prioritize crafting convivial social relations. Salvador et al. (2023) further support this view, showing that while Latin Americans are emotionally expressive like European Americans, the emotions they express—such as friendliness and closeness—are socially engaging and foster relational ties. The motivation to positively influence others and cultivate supportive relationships could have the consequence that the positivity is not limited to others but extends to the self. Consequently, the mutual reinforcement of positivity could create a bias in self-perception known as self-enhancement, leading individuals to view themselves as more positively than is objectively warranted. However, this effect may arise due to social interdependence for Latin Americans rather than an emphasis on the positive uniqueness of the self or personal independence like for European Americans.

To address this possibility, we drew on research by San Martin et al. (2018). San Martin et al. (2018) observed that Arabs were highly self-enhancing, like European Americans. However, unlike European Americans they became more self-enhancing when interdependence rather than when independence was primed. This suggests that self-enhancement may have a more interdependent basis in Arab cultures. In our study, we applied the same priming technique to test whether Latin Americans are similarly more self-enhancing for interdependent (social) reasons rather than independent (personal) ones. We conducted an experimental study with European American and Ecuadorian college undergraduates.

Methods

Participants. A power analysis was conducted on the effect of Prime in the Arab sample tested in the work of San Martin et al. (2018), Study 3. To achieve 80% power to detect an effect if it is present, a sample size of 128 was necessary. To obtain at least this many participants, we set a target sample size of 150 per cultural group. A total of 151 Ecuadorian college students from a University in Quito, Ecuador participated in the current study. Participants included 65 males (84 females and 2 missing), who ranged from 19 to 39 years of age ($M = 21.63$, $SD = 2.86$). All participants reported Ecuadorian as their nationality. To target approximately 150 European Americans, we had all students in a large classroom at an American university participate in the present study. A total of 247 students enrolled in a selected class participated. Many participants did not meet ethnicity criteria (identifying as European American/White) and, consequently, they were excluded. This meant anyone who reported being of African, Arab, South Asian, multi-racial, Latinx, or East Asian ancestry was not included. This left us with a total of 137 White/European American participants. All participants reported the United States as their nationality. Participants included 40 males (91 females and 6 missing), who ranged from 17 to 24 years of age ($M = 19.64$, $SD = 1.00$).

Table 1. Size of the Circles in mm for the Self and Friends in the United States and Ecuador, Separated by Prime.

Country	Prime	Self		Friend	
		M	SE	M	SE
The United States	Independence prime	28.36	1.36	22.58	1.04
	Interdependence prime	28.56	1.19	22.92	0.90
Ecuador	Independence prime	29.73	1.12	25.47	0.90
	Interdependence prime	33.21	1.58	24.69	1.06

Materials. All materials were adapted from the work of San Martin et al. (2018), which were originally developed in English. They were translated and back-translated into Spanish to ensure the equivalence of meaning by at least two fully bilingual translators.

Procedure. The study, overseen by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Michigan, met ethics requirements of both countries in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were tested in their native language (Spanish in Ecuador and English in the United States) in classrooms. Participants were told that this study aimed to understand how people think about their social relationships and themselves. First, they filled out the consent form. Then, participants were randomly assigned to either list similarities or differences between them and their family and friends (Trafimow et al., 1991). The similarities prime is a way to activate interdependence, whereas the difference prime is a way to activate independence (San Martin et al., 2018). As part of the prime, participants were given 1 minute to think about what they would write and 2 minutes to write about the prompt they were assigned. After the prime, participants were given a task on emotions included for another study, the sociogram task (reported here) and demographics. When participants filled out their demographics, participants also answered a manipulation check. They were given a multiple-choice question where they were asked to indicate what they were asked to write about at the beginning of the study. They could select the following three options: similarities between me and my family friends, differences between me and my family and friends, and don't know. Nine European Americans and two Ecuadorians failed the manipulation check. The pattern of results was no different, so we reported the data without exclusions for completeness. Participants were debriefed and everyone in the class was given candy for their participation.

Results

The means for the self and other circles separated by Prime and Country are presented in Table 1. There was a significant main effect of Protagonist and Country, $F(1, 284) = 145.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .34$ and $F(1, 284) = 7.34$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2_p = .025$. These main effects were qualified by a significant Prime \times Protagonist and Prime \times Protagonist \times Country

interaction, $F(1, 284) = 4.20$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2_p = .015$ and $F(1, 284) = 4.83$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2_p = .017$. Simple effects tests of the three-way interaction showed that only Ecuadorians showed a difference between the two prime conditions in the self-condition, $p = .043$. Specifically, Ecuadorians represented the self as larger in the interdependence as opposed to the independence prime condition ($M = 33.31$, $SE = 1.24$, 95% $CI = [30.78, 35.64]$ and $M = 29.74$, $SE = 1.17$, 95% $CI = [27.41, 32.06]$, respectively).

To examine whether there was an effect of Prime on self-enhancement, we used the average self vs. other circle size as the main dependent variable. The main effect of Prime was significant, $F(1,284) = 4.20$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2_p = .015$. Importantly, it was qualified by a Prime \times Culture interaction, $F(1,284) = 4.83$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2_p = .017$. As shown in Figure 3, Ecuadorians exhibited more robust symbolic self-inflation as shown by a greater relative self-size, in the interdependence ($M = 8.52$, $SE = 1.00$, 95% $CI = [6.56, 10.48]$) as opposed to the independence ($M = 4.26$, $SE = .95$, 95% $CI = [2.39, 6.14]$) prime condition, $F(1,284) = 9.57$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .033$. Americans did not show such a pattern, $F(1,284) = .011$, $p = .92$, $\eta^2_p = .00$.

Discussion

Study 3 showed that Latin Americans are more self-enhancing when interdependence rather than independence is primed. This finding suggests that Latin Americans self-enhance when some aspects of interdependence are activated, which could suggest that self-enhancement may be a consequence of promoting and enhancing one's interdependence with others. Prior evidence shows that Latin Americans seek to craft convivial and positive social relations with others (Campos & Kim, 2017; Holloway et al., 2009; Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2012), for instance, by expressing positive socially engaging emotions (Salvador et al., 2023). A broader emphasis on positivity in the context of interdependence may have the consequence of highlighting others positive attributes and self-enhancement, a cognitive bias of overestimating one's worth. Although perhaps unwarranted by objective criteria, this bias is not only adaptive but also sensible given the ways in which convivial social relations are crafted in many Latin American social contexts.

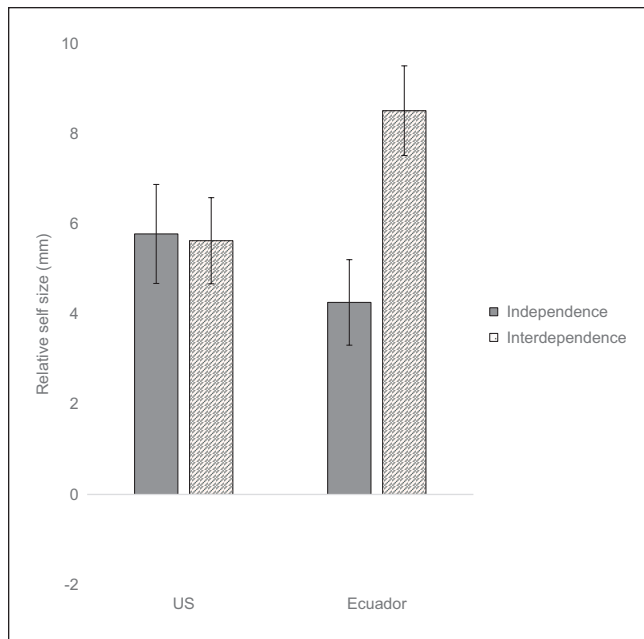


Figure 3. Symbolic Self-Inflation (i.e., the Relative Size of the Self vs. Other Circles) Among Americans and Ecuadorians for the Independence and Interdependence Prime Conditions. Vertical bars represent the standard error of the mean.

Notably, European Americans did not show any effect of priming. The absence of the priming effect for European Americans is surprising since prior work demonstrated that European Americans become more self-enhancing when independence was primed than when interdependence was primed (San Martin et al., 2018). Future work must assess the robustness of this priming effect in European American cultural contexts.

General Discussion

Interdependent Self-Enhancement in Latin America

In the present work, we showed that similar to European Americans, Latin Americans are highly self-enhancing using three indices: self-other evaluation, percentage estimation, and symbolic self-inflation (Kitayama et al., 2009; Markus & Kitayama, 1991a). Across all tasks, Latin Americans were self-enhancing. For two of the three tasks (percentage estimation and symbolic self-inflation), the magnitude of self-enhancement was no different for Latin Americans than for European Americans. In the self-other rating task, Latin Americans still showed a significant self-enhancement effect although the magnitude of this effect was somewhat weaker for Latin Americans than for European Americans. Notably, Study 3 found that Latin Americans in Ecuador became more self-enhancing when primed with interdependence (vs. independence). This priming effect was absent for European Americans.

Our findings are consistent with prior evidence that Latin Americans are often similar to European Americans in traits like emotional expressiveness (Salvador et al., 2023), positivity (Senft et al., 2021), and in valuing uniqueness and self-interest (Krys et al., 2022; Vignoles et al., 2016). At first glance, all these traits would appear inherently linked to an independent sense of the self. Hence, it is not surprising that some have argued that Latin Americans have an independent (rather than interdependent) sense of the self even though their culture is demonstrably collectivistic (Krys et al., 2022). Our findings contribute to this discussion in two significant ways.

First, we found that Latin Americans' focus on self-positivity is strong enough to qualify as a cognitive bias. Study 1 showed that Latin Americans rated themselves as "better than average"—a bias since the majority cannot objectively fall into this category. Studies 2 and 3 further showed symbolic self-inflation, a cognitive bias implying a perceived superiority beyond equal standing. Second, although Latin Americans may seem "independent" at first glance, our findings suggest that their self-enhancement likely serves to strengthen interdependence rather than independence. It is plausible that Latin Americans often build convivial social relations by mutually affirming each other's positivity (Campos & Kim, 2017). The shared emphasis on positivity could lead the positivity to extend to the self, having individuals believe that they are "better than average." Consistent with this interpretation, our Ecuadorian participants displayed stronger self-enhancement when primed with interdependence.

Finally, we replicated the finding that East Asians, specifically Japanese participants, did not show self-enhancement. In East Asian contexts, self-restraint in self-presentation reflects interdependence, with modesty helping individuals fit smoothly into social relations (Heine et al., 1999). While self-enhancement in Japan signals a lack of modesty and, thus, a failure of interdependence, it appears to reflect a willingness to engage in mutually positive social relations in Latin America (Kitayama et al., 2022). These findings suggest that self-enhancement or its absence can coexist with either independence or interdependence, depending on how the meaning of self-enhancement is culturally constructed and valued.

Cultural Nuances in Latinx Self-Enhancement

Previous studies comparing self-ratings of *simpatía* have shown that Latinx tend to rate themselves lower on *simpatía* than European Americans (Holloway et al., 2009; Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2008, 2009, 2012; Rodríguez-Arauz et al., 2019). However, behavioral evidence from social interactions reveals that Latinx exhibit higher levels of *simpatía* than European Americans, suggesting a disconnect between self-ratings and observed behaviors. One explanation proposed by earlier researchers is that Latinx may exhibit modesty, avoiding self-presentation as being high in socially

desirable traits like *simpatía*. At first glance, this explanation seems inconsistent with our findings. Both Mexican and European American participants rated the self more positively than others across all tasks. Indeed, this effect extended to traits related to *simpatía*. For this reason, we suggest that Latin Americans are self-enhancing, often overestimating their positive qualities, including *simpatía*-related traits.

To reconcile our findings with the research on modesty biases, we propose an alternative explanation. While Latinx individuals may indeed display high levels of *simpatía*, they may also hold nuanced and demanding cognitive schemas for these traits. They may require more frequent and perhaps more variable trait-consistent behaviors before acknowledging someone, whether themselves or others, as high in *simpatía*. Therefore, Latinx may not readily consider themselves high in culturally valued traits like *simpatía*, despite exhibiting them more often than European Americans. This discrepancy likely stems from a more elaborate internal schema for *simpatía*, which creates a gap between self-perception and observed behavior. Importantly, since Latinx self-enhancement often arises from the value placed on mutually positive social relationships, they could still demonstrate self-enhancement, even if their appraisals of *simpatía* are lower compared with European Americans.

Comparing With Arab Individuals

The interdependence priming effect for Latin Americans observed in Study 3 parallels a similar effect found among Arabs (specifically Moroccans) by San Martin et al. (2018). San Martin et al. (2018) found that Arabs, including Lebanese, Saudis, and Moroccans, are highly self-enhancing while also demonstrating strong interdependence. Using the same independence vs. interdependence priming method, they found that self-enhancement was more pronounced under interdependent priming than independent priming.

This convergence between Arab and Latin American data suggests that in both cultural regions, self-enhancement is strong and comparable in magnitude to the self-enhancement found among European Americans. But, unlike the one displayed by European Americans, it is rooted in interdependence rather than independence. This raises an intriguing theoretical question: might the mechanisms driving self-enhancement be identical across the Latin American and Arab cultural regions?

San Martin et al. (2018) argued that Arabs may be driven to self-enhance as a demonstration of resourcefulness to fulfill obligations toward protecting their ingroup. In contrast, we suggest that Latin Americans' self-enhancement may arise because of the emphasis on positivity to cultivate mutually convivial relationships, which extend onto the self. Although both motivations foster self-enhancement, the underlying cultural meanings are distinct. This comparison offers a promising area for future research to further explore these underrepresented cultural regions in socio-cultural psychology, highlighting both

similarities and culturally specific nuances in self-enhancement. Such evidence would be crucial to show that Arabs and Latin Americans are interdependent and yet the ways in which they accomplish the interdependent goals might be very different (Kitayama et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations of the current work must be noted. Study 1 used community samples recruited from online platforms, while Studies 2 and 3 included college student samples. College students offer an advantage comparable factors across cultures (e.g., level of education, social status), facilitating closer cross-cultural comparisons. However, it remains essential to test whether these findings replicate in more representative samples from each region.

A challenge with using community samples in Study 1 was defining the reference for "others." Unlike in a college setting, "college students in your university" was not a clear comparison group. To maintain a clear reference group, we adapted the language by Thomson et al. (2018) and asked participants to think about the average member of the community excluding family. The self-enhancement patterns were clear and comparable with past work. However, it is possible that people define communities in different ways across cultures. This could be interesting to test in future work.

One strength of the current work is that we sample from three different Latin American countries (Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico) and show remarkable consistency. This may be surprising because Latin America is a diverse region in terms of race, ethnicity, and geography. This consistency could point to a larger cultural ethos of Latin American collectivism as distinct from other forms of interdependence that can be found in other parts of the world (Kitayama et al., 2022). This general conclusion would be also consistent with other work showing that specific psychological dimensions, such as emotional expression also appear to be similar among Latin American individuals from distinct countries (Salvador et al., 2023). However, to fully test the diversity, it would be important to test other countries and groups within the region, such as small-scale societies or groups that vary in terms of race or social status.

In sum, our work offers two important contributions to the literature: first, it establishes that Latin Americans are indeed self-enhancing; second, it reveals that, contrary to existing theories, self-enhancement in Latin American cultures supports interdependence rather than independence in Latin American cultures. These findings challenge the assumption that self-enhancement is inherently tied to independence of the self, highlighting the need to consider cultural context in understanding self-enhancement.







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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

Notes

1. A cognitive bias does not imply a cultural deficit, error or failure to adapt. Cognitive biases are often adaptive. For example, self-serving biases, such as self-enhancement are thought to be a foundation for good mental health in the West (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994). We use the term bias simply to mean an inclination toward a certain tendency.
2. We use the term Latinx as a gender inclusive term to refer to people in the United States of Latin American heritage.

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