Self-Interest Bias in the COVID-19 Pandemic: 
Own Self-Serving Behaviors Are Judged More Leniently than Others’ in the US but not China

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Abstract

In the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries attempt to enforce new social norms to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus. A key to the success of these measures is the individual adherence to norms that are collectively beneficial to contain the spread of the pandemic. However, individuals’ self-interest bias (i.e., the prevalent tendency to license own but not others’ self-serving acts or norm violations) can pose a challenge to the success of such measures. The current research examines COVID-19-related self-interest bias from a cross-cultural perspective. Two studies (N = 1,558) sampled from the US and China, and consistently revealed that US participants evaluated their own self-serving acts (exploiting disinfectants or test kits in Study 1; social gathering and sneezing without covering the mouth in Study 2) as more acceptable than identical deeds of others, while such self-interest bias did not emerge among Chinese participants. Cultural underpinnings of independent vs. interdependent self-construal may influence the extent to which individuals apply self-interest bias to justifications of their own self-serving behaviors during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, culture, self-interest bias, norm violation, moral judgment
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The Novel Coronavirus Disease (below as COVID-19) has become an unprecedented global epidemic, and has made tremendous changes to politics, economics, and ordinary people’s daily life. Notably, many countries attempt to enforce new social norms to contain the spread of the disease, both in the personal (e.g., washing hands frequently) and in the social sphere (e.g., social distancing and sheltering at home). Social and behavioral scientists have endeavored to illuminate effective ways to disseminate these appeals (e.g., Jordan & Rand, 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020). However, many people seem to acknowledge the importance of respecting new regulations but often excuse themselves for transgressions when self-interest is at stake (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008). The current research investigates this self-interest bias in people’s judgments of own as compared to others’ COVID-19-related self-serving behaviors. Additionally, we investigate such bias from a cross-cultural perspective. Extending previous insights on Western cultures, we posit that East Asians would show less self-interest bias than Westerners.

The perceived moral acceptability of one’s actions can be biased when self-interest is at stake. People judge identical misdeeds as more acceptable when they can (vs. cannot) benefit from these misdeeds (Bocian & Wojciszke, 2014), and evaluate their own transgressions more leniently than others’ (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008). Such bias emerges largely because people consider themselves as unique and superior to others, for example, as more humane (Haslam et al., 2005) and communal (Weiss et al., 2018). We reason that individuals might apply similar biases in the context of COVID-19-relevant behaviors. Consequently, people’s own self-serving behaviors against others’ interest or public norms are more likely to be justified than identical deeds of others.
Importantly, cultures differ in how people understand their behaviors with reference to others and social norms (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Westerners are often deemed to have an independent self-construal, which endorses the uniqueness of individual self and autonomous decisions against situational constraints; in contrast, East Asians are more likely to embrace an interdependent self, which emphasizes connectedness with others and behavioral accommodation to normative standards (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Morling et al., 2002). Interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal may not directly translate into less (vs. more) self-serving behaviors (Romano et al., 2017), but may reduce the extent to which people judge themselves more favorably as compared to others (i.e., self-interest bias). Supporting this proposition, East Asians (vs. Westerners) are more likely to adjust their self-evaluations contingent on relational demands (English & Chen, 2007) and social-role expectations (Boucher, 2010). We therefore predict a cultural difference in COVID-19-related self-interest bias. More specifically, individuals should display more leniency toward their own (vs. others’) COVID-19-related self-serving behaviors, and such self-interest bias should be more pronounced among Westerners than East Asians (e.g., people from the US than China).

**Overview of the Current Research**

To examine people’s COVID-19-related self-interest bias and its cultural differences, we conducted two studies with participants from the US and China—two countries that strongly differ for independent vs. interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). We predict that participants should evaluate their own self-serving behaviors as more acceptable than others’, and the above self-interest bias should be more pronounced among people from the US than China. In Study 1, we operationalized self-serving behaviors as the exploitation of COVID-19-related medical resources in short supply. In Study 2, self-serving behaviors were conceptualized as violations of COVID-19 norms that restricted social
contact. To explore potential cross-cultural implications, both studies compared the occurrence of self-interest bias in the US and China, as a function of independent vs. interdependent self-construal. Study 2 further examined an alternative cultural mechanism. Besides their stronger interdependent self-construal, people from China also endorse authority and power distance to a greater extent than people from the US (Zhang et al., 2010), which may induce self-compliance with social norms and less self-interest bias. All the materials were developed in Chinese, and were translated into English and back-translated. We reported all the materials and ancillary results in the Supplementary Materials.

**Study 1**

Study 1 preliminarily tested how people from the US and China evaluated their own or others’ exploitation of two COVID-19-related resources (i.e., disinfectants and test kits).

**Method**

**Participants.** We estimated small-to-medium effects of violator and country by violator interaction, based on the average achieved effect size of social psychological studies ($\eta_p^2 = .04$; Richard et al., 2003). A priori power analysis yielded a sample of $N = 235$ (that is, at least 118 participants in each country) to detect the intended effect with 80% power at an alpha level of 0.05. With this minimum standard, we aimed to recruit as many participants as we could within two weeks after the start of data collection. Data collection involving Chinese participants started on February 7th, 2020, recruiting participants through social networks. US participants were recruited on April 20th, 2020, from the crowdsourcing platform Turkprime. Data collection was implemented at the early rising stage of the coronavirus disease in the respective cultures. In total, 426 Chinese (183 males; $M_{age} = 28.7$, $SD = 10.5$) and 283 US (154 males; $M_{age} = 39.9$, $SD = 12.2$) adults completed our survey voluntarily with no monetary incentives.
Materials. US participants were recruited in the context of an unrelated economic game study with economic incentives, in which they were asked whether they would be willing to answer some questions about the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese participants answered our intended questions as part of a socio-psychological survey on various COVID-19-related topics.

Participants in both countries were randomly assigned to either a self- or other-as-violator condition, evaluating two hypothetical scenarios in which they themselves or another person exploited COVID-19-related medical resources (i.e., buying up disinfection products and taking a shortcut to get test kits; see the SM for original materials), presented in a random sequence. Participants evaluated how acceptable the exploitative behaviors were, either targeting at themselves or a stranger with a gender-neutral name (e.g., “Under special circumstances, I [Riley] should [could] have good reasons to buy up all the available disinfectants”; on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = Completely disagree to 7 = Completely agree; \( \alpha = .65 \) across six items, that is, three items in each scenario).

Results

A mixed-factor ANOVA, with country (the US = -1 and China = 1) and violator (other = -1 and self = 1) as between-subjects factors and scenario (test kits = -1 and disinfectants = 1) as a within-subjects factor, revealed a two-way country by violator interaction effect, \( F(1, 705) = 6.92, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .01 \). As shown in Figure 1 (left panel), US participants evaluated their own self-serving behaviors as more acceptable as compared to others’, \( F(1, 564) = 9.10, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .02 \), while the different standards for self and others did not emerge among Chinese participants, \( F(1, 850) = 1.17, p = .28, \eta_p^2 = .001 \).
To sum up, despite the small effect size, Study 1 findings supported the cultural difference on self-interest bias, such that only US—but not Chinese—people evaluated their self-serving acts as more acceptable than identical deeds of others. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution, given (1) Study 1’s smaller achieved effect size ($\eta^2_p = .01$) than anticipated ($\eta^2_p = .04$), and (2) the imbalanced conditions in the respective countries (i.e., participants’ number and age, administered incentives, and preceding survey contents).

**Study 2**

Study 2 was designed to replicate Study 1 with three main changes. First, we recruited a larger number of participants from the US and China in a more balanced condition. Second, we examined self-interest bias in a different domain, that is, own vs. others’ violations of COVID-19 regulations that were discouraged in both countries (i.e., social gathering and sneeze without covering the mouth in public). Third, we additionally measured participants’ power distance belief as a covariate, to examine an alternative cultural explanation. Besides an interdependent self-construal, people from China (vs. the US) more strongly endorse authorities and power distance (Zhang et al., 2010), which may also prompt them to align self-judgments with normative standards and show less self-interest bias.
Method

Participants. Based on the achieved country by violator interaction effect size in Study 1 ($\hat{\eta}^2 = .01$), a priori power analysis required a sample of $N = 779$ to test our hypothesis with 80% power at an alpha level of 0.05. In both countries, participants were recruited from crowdsourcing platforms with monetary incentives since May 15th, 2020 in two consecutive days. Overall, 489 Chinese (256 males; $M_{\text{age}} = 28.3$ years, $SD = 5.6$) and 489 US participants (204 males; $M_{\text{age}} = 29.4$ years, $SD = 7.1$) completed the survey through the survey platform Credamo and the crowdsourcing platform Prolific, respectively.

Materials. Participants first completed the power distance belief scale (e.g., “As citizens we should put high value on conformity”; $\alpha = .86$ across 8 items; Zhang et al., 2010), and then were asked to evaluate two scenarios about COVID-19 norm violations, either enacted by themselves or an unknown person with a gender-neutral name. One scenario described a party at a friend’s home, and the other was about sneezing without covering the mouth in public (presented in a random sequence). After reading each scenario, participants indicated their perceived acceptability of the transgressive behavior (e.g., “The circumstances would justify that I [Jordan] attend the party with some close friends”; $\alpha = .86$ for eight items, that is, four items for each scenario).

Results

As in Study 1, a mixed ANOVA was conducted with country (the US = -1 and China = 1) and violator (other = -1 and self = 1) as between-subjects factors and scenario (partying = -1 and sneeze without covering the mouth = 1) as a within-subjects factor. Consistent with Study 1, we found a significant country by violator interaction effect (see Figure 1; right panel), $F(1, 968) = 6.04$, $p = .01$, $\hat{\eta}^2 = .01$. More specifically, although people from the US tended to evaluate their own violations as more acceptable than those of others, $F(1, 972) = 3.75$, $p = .05$, $\hat{\eta}^2 = .004$, the pattern was reversed in China such that Chinese perceived their
own violations as less acceptable than others’, $F(1, 968) = 5.64, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .006$. Power
distance belief was stronger in China than the US, $F(1, 970) = 328.42, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .25$, and
correlated with harsher moral judgments, $F(1, 967) = 31.28, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .03$. Despite so, an
alternative ANCOVA revealed that after controlling for power distance belief, the country by
violator interaction effect remained significant, $F(1, 967) = 7.19, p = .007, \eta^2_p = .01$.

Overall, Study 2 replicated the findings in Study 1 by showing that people judged
COVID-19-related norm violations more leniently for themselves than for others, and such
self-interest bias only manifested among US but not Chinese participants. The above cultural
difference was not accounted for by the stronger power distance belief in China (vs. the US).

**General Discussion**

Since the early outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, social and behavioral scientists
have endeavored to figure out effective ways to improve public awareness and endorsement
of COVID-19 preventative recommendations (Van Bavel et al., 2020). However, it is not
well explained why many people seem to acknowledge the COVID-19 preventative measures
but often act against them when self-interest is at stake. In two studies, we provided evidence
for people’s self-interest bias in evaluations of their own as compared to strange others’
COVID-19-related self-serving behaviors; remarkably, such self-interest bias only manifested
among US but not Chinese participants.

The current research implies that cultural underpinnings of independent vs.
interdependent self-construal can be a mechanism that prompts individual cognition of, and
behavioral compliance with, COVID-19-related protective measures. Self-construal in
relation to others and the collective might have reduced self-interest bias in China more than
in the US. However, our tentative explanations do not preclude other possible cultural
mechanisms. For example, we measured people’s judgments rather than behaviors, which can
be inflated by self-presentational concerns. Given concerns about modest cultural norms (Cai
et al., 2010) or strict external sanctions (Feinberg et al., 2018), Chinese (vs. US) people can be more vigilant in explicit evaluations of their own (vs. others’) self-serving acts, which may also explain why Chinese judged own norm violations more harshly than others’ in Study 2. Moreover, the US and China differ in various socio-cultural dimensions including political ideologies and power distance. Although we preliminarily showed in Study 2 that power distance belief did not contribute to the cultural difference in COVID-19-related self-interest bias, further examination of other cultural dimensions, or different countries endorsing an independent vs. interdependent self-construal, can better consolidate and extend our findings.

In conclusion, the current research reveals that in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, people judge their own self-serving acts more leniently than identical deeds of others, while such self-interest bias only manifests in the US than China. Theoretically, our findings add to previous insights suggesting the existence of self-interest bias, and innovatively put self-interest bias into a cross-cultural perspective. Practically, our results complement other studies suggesting that emphasizing prosocial than proself benefits is more effective in stimulating COVID-19 prevention intentions (e.g., Jordan & Rand, 2020). Aligning people’s day-to-day behaviors with the COVID-19 regulations is contingent on people’s awareness of how their behavior is important—to not only themselves, but also social others and the collective good.
References


Zhang, Y., Winterich, K. P., & Mittal, V. (2010). Power distance belief and impulsive buying. *Journal of Marketing Research, 47*(5), 945-954. [https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.47.5.945](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.47.5.945)
### Supplementary Table 1

The ANOVA results in Study I.

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<th>$SS_{Num}$</th>
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<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$\eta^2_g$</th>
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*Note. $df_{Num}$ indicates degrees of freedom numerator. $df_{Den}$ indicates degrees of freedom denominator. $SS_{Num}$ indicates sum of squares numerator. $SS_{Den}$ indicates sum of squares denominator. $\eta^2_g$ indicates generalized eta-squared.*
Supplementary Table 2

The ANOVA results in Study 2.

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<th>SS&lt;sub&gt;Num&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
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</table>

Note. df<sub>Num</sub> indicates degrees of freedom numerator. df<sub>Den</sub> indicates degrees of freedom denominator. SS<sub>Num</sub> indicates sum of squares numerator. SS<sub>Den</sub> indicates sum of squares denominator. $\eta^2_g$ indicates generalized eta-squared.
Supplementary Table 3

*Descriptive information of moral acceptability judgment in Studies 1 and 2, in each country (the US vs. China) by violator (self vs. other) by scenario (Scenario 1 vs. 2) condition.*

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<th>Manipulations</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Violator</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>n</td>
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<td><strong>Study 1</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>3.94 (0.93)</td>
<td>224</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>3.10 (1.37)</td>
<td>224</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>3.52 (1.25)</td>
<td>448</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>3.63 (1.11)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Study 1 Materials

[Self-condition: between-subjects]

[Scenario 1]
Many companies in the U.S. have developed and been manufacturing coronavirus test kits. But the number of test kits is very limited relative to the number of people with suspected infection. Imagine that you had some mild symptoms that were like the coronavirus disease. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement.

Under special circumstances, I should be able to use these test kits before others with similar symptoms.
If I managed to obtain the test kits, I should have good reasons to use them before others with similar symptoms.
Even if I had an opportunity to get the test kits through acquaintances or high prices, I should stick to standard protocols. (R)

[Scenario 2]
The coronavirus pandemic has caused extremely high demand and a continuing stock shortage of disinfection products. Although the manufacturers are stepping up production, disinfectants are still in short supply. Imagine that you found a grocery store with a few disinfectants in stock, which could be enough for you and your families for the next few months. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement.

Under special circumstances, I could have good reasons to buy up all the available disinfectants.
Given my capacity to find the disinfectants, I should be eligible to buy as many as I want.
Even if I had an opportunity to stock up for the next few months, I should leave some items for others who might have needs. (R)

1 R represents that the item should be reverse coded.
[Other-condition: between-subjects]

Scenario 1

Many companies in the U.S. have developed and been manufacturing coronavirus test kits. But the number of test kits is very limited relative to the number of people with suspected infection. Imagine that a strange person named Jordan had some mild symptoms that were like the coronavirus disease. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement.

Under special circumstances, Jordan should be able to use these test kits before others with similar symptoms.
If Jordan managed to obtain the test kits, Jordan should have good reasons to use them before others with similar symptoms.
Even if Jordan had an opportunity to get the test kits through acquaintances or high prices, Jordan should stick to standard protocols. (R)

Scenario 2

The coronavirus pandemic has caused an extremely high demand for disinfectants and a continuing stock shortage of relevant products. Although the manufacturers are stepping up production, disinfection products are still in short supply. Imagine that a strange person named Riley found a grocery store with a few disinfectants in stock, which could be enough for Riley and Riley’s families for the next few months. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement.

Under special circumstances, Riley could have good reasons to buy up all the available disinfectants.
Given Riley’s capacity to find the disinfectants, Riley should be eligible to buy as many as desired.
Even if Riley had an opportunity to stock up for the next few months, Riley should leave some items for others who might have needs. (R)

因为某些特殊或不得已的原因，我可以一次性买完这些消毒用品。因为有能力找到买消毒用品的渠道，我当然可以想买多少买多少。即使有机会一次买下以后两个月备用的消毒用品，我也应该留一些给可能急需的人。（R）
因为某些特殊或不得已的原因，小周可以一次性买完这些消毒用品。
因为有能力找到买消毒用品的渠道，小周当然可以想买多少买多少。
即使有机会一次买下以后两个月备用的消毒用品，小周也应该留一些给可能急需的人。(R)
Study 2 Materials

[Scenario 1]
Imagine that you have a few close friends from adolescence, and you have an annual routine to throw a party at a friend’s house. You know that during the COVID-19 pandemic, you are not supposed to physically attend any social gatherings, even though it is about socializing with just a small group of friends. However, you really miss these friends and want to catch up with them face-to-face after the whole year. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement. (from completely disagree to completely agree)

The circumstances would justify that I attend the party with some close friends.
It would reflect poorly on me if I attend the party with some close friends. (R)
Concerning the exceptional circumstance, I would have good reasons to attend the party with some close friends.
Despite the exceptional chance to see some close friends, I should follow the restrictions and stay out of any social gatherings. (R)

[Scenario 2]
Imagine that you had hay fever, which made you sneeze and cough a lot especially in spring time. On a recent day, you are walking outside and cannot help sneezing repeatedly all of a sudden. You know that during the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone is supposed to cover the mouth when sneezing. But you do not have a tissue at hand, and the droplets can stain your new jacket if you sneeze into the elbow. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement. (from completely disagree to completely agree)

The circumstances would justify that I sneeze in public places without covering my mouth.
It would reflect poorly on me if I sneezed in public places without covering my mouth. (R)
Since I know it is just hay fever, it should be fine to sneeze in public places without covering my mouth.
Even though I know it is just hay fever, I should sneeze into my elbow. (R)
[Other-condition: between-subjects]

Scenario 1
Imagine that a strange person named Jordan has a few close friends from adolescence, and has an annual routine to throw a party at a friend’s house. Jordan knows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are not supposed to physically attend any social gatherings. However, Jordan really misses these friends and wants to catch up with them face-to-face after the whole year. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement. (from completely disagree to completely agree)

The circumstances would justify that Jordan attends the party with some close friends. It would reflect poorly on Jordan if Jordan attends the party with some close friends. (R)
Concerning the exceptional circumstance, Jordan would have good reasons to attend the party with some close friends. Despite the exceptional chance to see some close friends, Jordan should follow the restrictions and stay out of any social gatherings. (R)

Scenario 2
Imagine that a strange person named Riley had hay fever, which made Riley sneeze and cough a lot especially in spring time. On a recent day, Riley is walking outside and cannot help sneezing repeatedly all of a sudden. Riley knows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone is supposed to cover the mouth when sneezing. But Riley does not have a tissue at hand, and the droplets can stain a new jacket if Riley sneezes into the elbow. Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statement. (from completely disagree to completely agree)

The circumstances would justify that Riley sneezes in public places without covering the mouth. It would reflect poorly on Riley if Riley sneezed in public places without covering the mouth. (R)
Since Riley knows it is just hay fever, it should be fine to sneeze in public places without covering the mouth. Even though Riley knows it is just hay fever, Riley should sneeze into the elbow. (R)
想象一下，一个陌生人（刘畅）有花粉过敏症，尤其在春天时经常打喷嚏和咳嗽。最近的一天，刘畅正在路上走，突然开始不停地打喷嚏。刘畅知道，新冠肺炎管制期间，人们应该注意在打喷嚏时捂住嘴巴。但是，刘畅没带纸巾。如果用手肘挡住嘴，溅出的口水又可能会弄脏新买的外套。你在多大程度上觉得：

在这种情况下，刘畅不捂住嘴巴打喷嚏是可以理解的行为。
如果刘畅不捂住嘴巴打喷嚏，别人眼里会是一件不好的事。（R）
因为刘畅清楚自己打喷嚏是因为花粉过敏，所以不捂住嘴巴打喷嚏应该没什么大问题。
虽然只是花粉过敏，打喷嚏时刘畅还是应该用手肘挡住嘴。（R）