

Self-Perceptions of Ordinariness and Self-Esteem in Japan

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Abstract

It has recently been suggested (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004) that ordinariness is a desirable characteristic in Japan. If this is true, one would expect to find that Japanese individuals' self-feelings are positively associated with being ordinary. A total of 318 Japanese and 89 American college students participated in three studies assessing the effect of self-perceptions of ordinariness on self-esteem. The principle findings were that Japanese self-esteem was not associated with self-perceptions of ordinariness and that the Japanese and American participants did not significantly differ in their willingness to be average, but for the Japanese participants, willingness to be average was associated with self-perceptions of oneself as less competent than average.

Americans feel good about being distinct (Fromkin, 1972), distinctive (Tafarodi, Marshall, & Katsura, 2004), and different from most other people (Wilson, 2002, p. 184). In particular, being better than average is positively associated with self-esteem, and self-esteem has been linked to a slew of positive outcomes, as well as a few that are not so positive (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Japanese people also feel good about being better than other people, but by and large avoid the cognitive illusions that allow them to believe that they are in fact better, hence most Japanese people have moderate self-esteem, unlike Americans, whose self-esteem tends to be high (Baumeister et al.; Twenge & Campbell, 2001; R. A. Brown, 2006b, 2006d). But Japanese do not simply objectively view themselves as average, but on the contrary, positively value being ordinary (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004; Yoshida, Ura, & Kurokawa, 2004), to the extent that they may strive to be more ordinary than other people. Thus, it is claimed that being ordinary is a positive and desirable characteristic, much like being intelligent, attractive, or kind. If this is so, then it is conceivable that Japanese individuals may enhance their self-esteem by believing that they are more ordinary than other people.

Overview

The present investigation focuses primarily on the effect of self-perceptions of “ordinariness” on self-esteem. Ordinariness, the extent to which one is an ordinary, average person, has been described as a positive virtue in Japanese culture (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004). If this is true, then one would expect that individuals who are high on this quality would feel positively about themselves as a result, i.e., would have high self-esteem.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Instrument.

Participants were 169 Japanese university students (71 males, mean age = 19.1, $SD = 1.45$, and 98 females, mean age 19.0, $SD = 1.36$) enrolled in an introductory psychology class taught by a Japanese instructor. Students were asked to fill out the questionnaire, which was described as a survey of student self-perceptions. Questionnaires were filled out in large classes, voluntarily, anonymously, and without compensation. No deception or manipulation was involved and students were free not to participate. There were more females than males but Binomial tests revealed that the proportion of males to females was not significantly different from .5. Chi square tests indicated that the distribution of male and female participants did not differ between the two groups.

Participants completed Hoshino's (1970) translation of the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Sample items were "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I certainly feel useless at times" (reverse scored). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is a widely used instrument for assessing self-esteem and Hoshino's translation was the first available in Japan and has been widely used as well (Hori, 2003). To assess self-perceptions of ordinariness, an ad hoc "Ordinariness (ORD) scale was devised. An initial set of 17 items were selected empirically and rationally, based on the literature and pre-studies conducted by the author. Exploratory Principle Components factor analysis indicated that five items met the criteria for inclusion in the scale. These items were "I'm different from most other Japanese people" (reverse scored), "I'm not a typical Japanese person" (reverse scored), "I'm average in most ways," "I'm an ordinary Japanese person," and "a foreigner could get a pretty accurate idea about what a typical Japanese person is like by meeting me." A 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) was used for both scales. A summary score was computed after reversing the values for the negatively phrased items. Higher scores indicate higher SE and stronger perceptions of oneself as ordinary.

Results

The RSES had a Cronbach's α of .82. The male and female means did not differ, $t(166) = .11$, *ns*, and the combined mean was 2.90 ($SD = 0.61$), which was significantly lower than the scale midpoint, $t(167) = 2.08$, $p < .04$. The five aggregated ORD items had a Cronbach's α of .71. The male and female means differed significantly, $t(167) = 4.16$, $p < .0001$. The male mean was 2.92 ($SD = 0.67$), and the female mean was 3.32 ($SD = 0.58$) and the combined mean was 2.85. The males regarded themselves as less ordinary than the females did. Pearson correlations were calculated to test whether being ordinary contributed to higher SE. A correlation coefficient of $r(168) = .05$, *ns*, was obtained, indicating no relationship.

Discussion

Apparently, viewing oneself as ordinary is not associated with lower self-esteem in Japan (unlike in the United States; see R. A. Brown, 2006b). But neither is being more ordinary, or "super-ordinary" (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004) associated with higher self-esteem. Thus, it may be premature to argue that being ordinary is a positive and sought after condition.

Study 2

Study 2 attempted to replicate and extend the results obtained in Study 1, by using a different sample and convergent measures of self-esteem and averageness.

Method

Participants and Instrument

Participants were 66 Japanese college students (25 males, 41 females), age = 19.4, $SD = 1.5$, attending a large, prestigious private university in Tokyo, Japan. Questionnaires were filled out in class, voluntarily, and without compensation. No deception or manipulation was involved. Participants filled out a questionnaire containing the same Ordinarity scale described above, but with one item omitted, as the internal consistency of the scale was somewhat higher without it. In lieu of the RSES, the Tafari and Swann (1995) Self-Liking/Self-Competence (SL/SC) scale was used, as it distinguishes between two demonstrably distinct aspects of global self-esteem, and these may be differentially related to feelings of Ordinarity in Japan. The SL/SC scale consists of two subscales, one assessing global self-esteem deriving from general perceptions of oneself as a competent individual, the other from perceptions of oneself as a likeable, good person apart from one's abilities or accomplishments. Both scales used a 5-point response format ranging from 1 (*absolutely applies to me*) to 5 (*doesn't apply to me at all*). Sample items are "I am a capable person", and "I feel good about myself." Participants also assessed themselves on seven attributes using the Pelham and Swann (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ) and two additional items previously shown to be relevant to Japanese students' self-views (Brown & Ferrara, 2006; Ito, 1999). The SAQ attributes were social skills, artistic skills, sports ability, appearance, character, capability, and English language ability. They also rated the degree to which each attribute was personally important. A 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*very much below average*) to 7 (*very much above average*) was used for the self-evaluations. The middle scale step was explicitly labeled "average" (*heikin*). Personal importance ratings were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*very important*). The middle scale step was not labeled. A number of other items were included to provide possible illumination as to the meanings participants attach to being average and ordinary.

Results

The four ORD items had an adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$. The female mean (3.54, $SD = .60$) was significantly higher than the male mean (3.18, $SD = .59$), $t(64) = 2.49$, $p < .05$. The SL/SC had a Cronbach's α of .89; the SC subscale α was .80, and the SL subscale α was .82). The subscales were highly correlated $r(64) = .74$, $p < .0001$. The male and female means did not differ significantly. The combined means were 3.06 ($SD = 0.48$) for the 20-item SL/SC scale, 3.12 ($SD = 0.48$) for the 10-item SC subscale, and 3.00 ($SD = 0.54$) for the 10-item SL subscale. Single-sample t tests revealed that none differed significantly from the scale midpoint. Thus, has been repeatedly found in past research cited above, participants' self-esteem tended to be "moderate."

Mean self-evaluations did not differ between the males and females for any of the seven attributes, nor did participants' ratings of the importance of any of them.

Table 1. *Self-evaluations and Importance ratings, means and standard deviations*

	Self		Importance		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Social skills	4.02	1.49	6.12	1.04	
Artistic skills	3.80	1.34	4.38	1.72	
Sports ability	3.74	1.21	5.02	1.30	
Appearance	3.74	1.28	3.94	1.42	
Character	3.64	0.80	****	4.48	1.49
Capability	4.06	1.10	6.02	1.16	
English	4.17	0.83	5.30	1.46	

Note. **** $p < .0001$, single-sample t tests against the scale midpoint (3).

Participants rated themselves below average in character (at $p < .0001$), but not significantly different from the scale midpoint (*heikin*) for the other six attributes, according to single-sample t tests, Bonferroni adjusted to maintain a constant error rate of $p < .05$ or less across the seven tests. Thus, the average participant assessed him or herself as about average in six of seven personal attribute dimensions, a result that would be expected if participants were viewing themselves objectively, as noted by Markus and Kitayama (1991). But are self-evaluations self-serving at the individual level? It would appear not. None of the self-evaluations was significantly correlated with the importance ratings for any attribute, for either males or females. Do individuals who regard themselves as more ordinary, as assessed by the 4-item ORD scale, tend to evaluate themselves as more average with respect to the seven attributes? It appears that they do not. Pearson correlations were calculated between ORD scores and SAQ self-evaluations. No significant (at $p < .05$) correlations were found.

Table 2. *Means and standard deviations, Supplementary Items.*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. It is important to me to be better than average in man ways	3.32	1.08 *
2. I don't mind being just average in most ways	3.29	1.00 ****
3. If I were less capable than the average person, it wouldn't bother me so much.	2.64	1.02 **
4. I am content being an ordinary person.	2.88	1.00
5. I try to be better than average in the things that are important to me.	4.11	0.90 ****
6. A person who is exceptionally successful or capable is likely to be punished by society.	2.74	1.06
7. A person who is exceptionally successful or capable is likely to be rewarded by society.	3.59	1.04 ****

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, **** $p < .0001$, single-sample t tests against the scale midpoint (3).

Correlations

The pattern of correlations between the ORD scores and the supplementary items suggests ambivalence, or perhaps realistic acceptance, rather than a positive desire to be ordinary and average. Self-perceptions of ordinariness were correlated with affirmation of the statements “I am content being an ordinary person,” $r(66) = .43, p < .0001$, and “I don’t mind being just average in most ways,” $r(66) = .38, p < .002$. At the same time, it was correlated with “It is important to me to be better than average in many ways,” $r(66) = .46, p < .0001$, and “A person who is exceptionally successful or capable is likely to be rewarded by society,” $r(66) = .40, p < .001$. But it was uncorrelated with “I try to be better than average in the things that are important to me,” $r(66) = .18, ns$, (although this was the most strongly endorsed of the items), and “If I were less capable than the average person, it wouldn’t bother me so much,” $r(66) = -.17, ns$.

Discussion

Consistent with Study 1, participants tended to view themselves as ordinary and average, and to have moderate self-esteem. But if being ordinary is a positive virtue as Ohashi and Yamaguchi (2004) claim, it does not appear to have a measurable impact on self-esteem as assessed by either the RSE or the SL/SC scales. Moreover, no self-serving tendency was observed. Participants described themselves as about average regardless how important the attribute was to them personally.

Study 3

One possible reason for the results reported above may be that, contrary to Ohashi and Yamaguchi’s claims, Japanese people do not value being ordinary and average. A third study was conducted to test the hypothesis that Japanese people are (1) satisfied to be ordinary and average (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004, p. 170), and (2) more satisfied to be ordinary and average than Americans, who, as noted previously, famously are not satisfied to be ordinary and average (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995).

Method

Participants and Instrument

Participants were 89 American (32 males, 56 females, 1 unspecified, average age = 19.2 ($SD = 1.6$)) and 83 Japanese college students (45 male, 36 female, 2 unspecified, average age = 19.2, $SD = 1.5$). The two samples did not differ in age nor did the males and females within each sample differ in age. The American students attended a medium sized private university in Des Moines, Iowa, USA. The Japanese students attended the same university as the Japanese participants in Study 2. Questionnaires were filled out in large classes, voluntarily, and without compensation. No deception or manipulation was involved.

Students were asked to fill out the questionnaire, which was described as a survey of student views about themselves, other people, and various subjects in general. The instrument contained a number of scales related to self-concept. These are described in (R. A. Brown, 2006c). Two items were of immediate relevance. The first was “I would be satisfied if I could be just average in most ways.” This will be referred to as willingness to be average (WTBA). A 7-point scale was used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A second item asked participants to assess their personal feelings of self-competence (SC) relative to others of

their age and gender on a 7-point explicitly labeled scale ranging from 1 (*far below average*) to 7 (*far above average*).

Results

The mean for the American participants was 2.75 ($SD = 1.56$); for the Japanese participants it was 2.99 ($SD = 1.65$). These were not significantly different, $t(169) = .97$, ns. The males and females within each group did not differ. However, both group means were significantly below the scale midpoint, $t(87) = 7.54$, and $t(82) = 5.69$, respectively, both $p < .0001$. To guard against the possibility that means are influenced by relatively few extreme scoring individuals, the data were treated categorically, responses divided into “*agree*” (= willing to be average) and “*disagree*” (= not willing to be average). When the middle response (*unsure*) was included, the distribution of responses differed between the American and Japanese groups, $\chi^2(2, N = 171) = 7.40$, $p < .05$. However, in view of the established tendency of Japanese students to use the middle parts of rating scales (R. A. Brown, 2006c; 2006e), the data were reanalyzed, excluding the unsure responses. With the unsure participants omitted, the ratio of those who were willing and those who were unwilling to be average did not differ between the American and Japanese groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 0.00$, ns).

Finally, the relationship between SC and WTBA was examined. Participants who assessed themselves as below average to any of the three degrees were coded as 1, while those who assessed themselves as above average to any of the three degrees were coded as 3 (average was coded as 2). Independent-sample t tests were conducted to determine if the high SC participants differed from the low SC participants in their WTBA. Due to the low number of American participants ($n = 3$) who assessed their SC as below average, it was not possible to conduct a cross-cultural test of whether WTBA is associated with SC. In the Japanese group however, the participants with lower than average SCs also scored higher in WTBA. In other words, those who assessed themselves as below average were more willing to be average, $t(60) = 2.10$, $p < .05$, suggesting again that being below average, like being average, is not a uniformly aversive condition for all individuals in Japan, unlike in America.

Discussion

A majority of individuals from both groups (75% of the Americans, 65% of the Japanese; 2% of the Americans and 13% of the Japanese were unsure) would *not* be satisfied to be average, indicating that a desire to be average and ordinary is as uncommon in Japan as it is in North America.

General Discussion

The results of the three studies reported above clearly indicate that about as many Japanese university students viewed themselves as ordinary and average as would be expected if they actually were ordinary and average, and their self-esteem was not dependent on their being exceptional and above average. They would prefer to be above average, but realistically accepted the fact that not everyone can be above average, and that being ordinary and average, while perhaps not the best of all possible worlds, is not cause for self-condemnation. In this respect, they differ from American college students, whose self-esteem appears to be strongly dependent on being above average.

Limitations and Concluding Comments

The differing responses of the Japanese participants to the superficially similar items “I would be satisfied if I could be just average in most ways” and “I don’t mind being average in most ways” were probably due to the fact that the Japanese items are less similar than the English translations suggest. In the first item, “average” is translated as *heikin*, which has a somewhat formal, statistical connotation, while in the second “average” is *hitonami*, which implies “like most other people.” The implications are rather different and would probably be especially salient for anyone who has spent three or more years preparing to take a life-outcome determining standardized examination (the university entrance examination), where a statistically average score would spell failure, i.e., non-acceptance at one of the more selective universities (such as the one attended by the participants in Studies 2 and 3), (Dore, 1997; McVeigh, 2001). And for undoubtedly cultural reasons, most Japanese individuals could not strongly object to being what the sum of their educational and socialization experiences have striven to make them, i.e., like “most other people” (Iwasaki, 2005). Additionally, the first item refers to “satisfaction” (*manzoku*), which implies completion or accomplishment, while the second uses the expression “wouldn’t mind” (*ki ni narimasen*), which implies personal irrelevance. As has been observed before, being satisfied with what one has accomplished in life so far is ambiguous and may for some individuals suggest that enough has been done. Japanese participants appear not to endorse this interpretation. This underlines the importance of confirming that translations capture not only the literal meaning, but also the cultural sense and relevance of standardized questionnaire items.

Finally, it might be noted that, if it is true that Japanese suffer from illusions of averageness (Heine & Lehman 1995), this illusion does not appear to have the same mental health implications that are claimed for North American illusions of “better than averageness,” at least to the extent that these cognitive distortions are associated with high self-esteem, hence are putatively adaptive.

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