

Self-Evaluative Focus, Life Orientation, Self-Esteem, and Self-Ambivalence in Japan

By R.A.Brown

Abstract

The present research investigated whether within-culture (specifically Japan) differences in Self-Esteem, Life Orientation (optimism-pessimism), and Self-Ambivalence are related to a propensity for differentially attending to and accessing (focusing on) negative, positive, or mixed self-evaluative information (Self-Evaluative Focus, or SEF). Participants were 224 Japanese college students. Results indicated that (1) negative SEF individuals had lower Self-Esteem and were less optimistic and more pessimistic, than positive SEF individuals, (2) mixed SEF individuals also differed from negative SEF individuals in precisely the same ways. However, (3) positive and mixed SEF individuals did not differ in SE, optimism, or pessimism. Self-ambivalence was modestly correlated with mixed SEF, but also marginally with positive SEF, suggesting that SEF overlaps partially with but is conceptually distinct from self-ambivalence. Overall, it is suggested that in Japan, having a mixed SEF does not entail adverse mental health consequences, but rather promotes a “self-improvement orientation” while simultaneously facilitating modest self-presentation, both of which are culturally endorsed.

Key Words: Self-Evaluation. Self-Esteem, Life Orientation, Japan

The anomalous—by North American standards—Japanese self-concept, in particular the evaluative component of that self-concept, has been of evergreen interest to cross-cultural psychologists. Defying assumptions of universal human needs and motivations to hold oneself in high regard, Japanese self-esteem (SE) scores tend to be low (by Western standards) and moderate (near the actual or hypothetical scale mid-point). If a need for high SE is universal, Japanese scores must reflect some sort of discrepancy between responding and genuine feelings. Kurman and others (Kurman, 2001; 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002) have argued that Japanese are more modest than North Americans and understate their SE, at least in part, as a result. Campbell and others (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalee, & Lehman, 1996) have argued that Japanese are less clear in their self-concepts and therefore do not endorse positive SE items, which contributes to more moderate scores. Heine and colleagues (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999) have taken a different approach, arguing that Japanese SE really is lower because Japanese motivations to have high SE are weaker. Obviously, this raises the question, why is that motivation, presumably universal, weak, or weaker, in Japan? Spencer-Rogers and colleagues argue that expectation for change and tolerance for contradiction are aspects of a cultural syndrome that is relatively more prevalent in East Asia than in the Anglo-European world. (Spencer-Rogers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004; Spencer-Rogers, Williams, &

Peng, 2010). Noguchi, Gohm, Dalsky, and Sakamoto (2007) provide evidence that Japanese people pay attention to negative information relevant to the self, but not relevant to other people, compared to Americans who pay attention uniformly to positive information. This suggests that Japanese SE may be relatively low because Japanese people notice and can more efficiently access negative self-relevant information, compared to Americans.

If this is true, then one might expect negatively self-focused individuals within a culture to have lower SE than positively self-focused individuals, and individuals with mixed self-foci to have SE somewhere between the negatively and positively focused individuals. In the present research, self-evaluative focus (SEF) is conceptualized as a predisposition to attend to, access, and apply self-relevant evaluative information and as such is distinct from SE, which denotes an overall evaluation of the self as an attitude object (Rosenberg, 1965). Similarly, because the past may be a guide to the future, it is reasonable to suppose that Life-Orientation (Scheier, Carver, and Bridges, 1994), more colloquially known as optimism-pessimism, would be related to SEF, in that individuals who, for example, expect positive outcomes may focus on personal attributes that might contribute to those outcomes. Swann and Read (1981) argued that people seek, pay attention to, and believe information that confirms their self-conceptions, whether positive or negative. As elaborated by Rydell and Boucher (2010), high SE people look for negative self-relevant information in order to discount it, while low SE people look for positive self-relevant information for the same reason. If this process operates cross-culturally, high SE Japanese people should focus on negative information while low SE Japanese people should focus on positive information. Presumably moderate SE Japanese people should either focus on both, or show no preference.

The objective of the present research was to determine to what extent self-evaluative focus (SEF), is associated with SE and LO. Additionally, the conjectures of Swann and Read (1981) and Rydell and Boucher (2010), described above, were tested in a non-Western cultural context. Finally, because one of the SEFs, namely, mixed SEF, superficially resembles self-ambivalence, the degree to which SEF differs from self-ambivalence was explored.

Method

Participants. Participants were 224 Japanese university students (147 males, 76 females, one unspecified, average age = 18.9, $SD = 1.12$), from two universities in the Tokyo area. Participants were first and second year college students enrolled in English classes designed to meet graduation requirements and the minimum standards of proficiency set by the national government (Hashimoto, 2007), accordingly enrollment in these classes does not indicate any special familiarity with or interest in Anglo-American culture or psychological theories. Eighty-three participants filled out the questionnaire anonymously while 141 were personally identified by name and student number. None of the outcome measures varied with condition. (Indeed, on the few items that approached significance, it was the anonymous participants who were more self-effacing. Apparently, anonymity does not have much impact on students' self-presentation, see also Brown, 2006-c.) Questionnaires were filled out in large classes, voluntarily, and without compensation. No deception or manipulation was involved

Materials and Procedure. SEF was assessed via two measures in order to enhance reliability. The first consisted of the three items: “I focus on my good points more than my bad points,” “I focus on my bad points more than my good points,” and “I focus on my good and bad points equally,” answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*doesn't apply to me*) to 5 (*applies to me*). Second, participants indicated categorically which (one only) of the three above options (positive focus, negative focus, mixed focus) best described their habitual SEF.

SE was assessed with the Yamamoto, Matsui, and Yamanari (Yamamoto, 2001) translation of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The Yamamoto et al., translation of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is among the most commonly used in Japanese SE studies (Brown, 2008-a; 2010-b; Hori, 2003). Sample items are “I take a positive attitude toward myself” and “I certainly feel useless at times” (reverse scored). Life Orientation was assessed with the Yamamoto (2001) translation of the Scheier, et al, 1994), Life Orientation Test (LOT), comprising two 4-item sub-scales, (optimism and pessimism). Sample items were “I am generally optimistic about the future” (optimism) and “I only sometimes expect things to go my way” (pessimism). While several studies have shown optimism and pessimism to be distinct albeit highly related constructs (Herzberg, Glaesmer, & Hoyer, 2006; Nakano, 2004), at least some of the variance is due to item phrasing. Initial analyses indicated that the pattern of results did not vary between the optimism and pessimism sub-scales. Consequently, life orientation was analyzed unidimensionally. All items were answered on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*doesn't apply to me*) and 5 (*applies to me*), unless otherwise indicated. Higher scores represent greater optimism.

Self-ambivalence was assessed using the Similarity-Intensity Model (SIM) formula, whereby the dominant (larger) of two assessments of the same attitude-object is subtracted from a weighted conflicting (smaller) assessment. Ambivalence results when an attitude-object is evaluated in conflicting ways and the degree of ambivalence increases when the assessments are more similar. Positive SE (POS SE) was calculated as the sum of the five positive RSES items, and Negative SE (NEG SE) similarly as the sum of the five (unreversed) negative items. The POS SE and NEG SE scores were then used to calculate self-ambivalence scores, following Priester and Petty (1996). Higher scores represent greater self-ambivalence.

Hypotheses and Plan of Analysis

It was hypothesized that:

1. Positive SEF individuals will have higher SE than mixed SEF individuals,
2. Positive SEF individuals will have higher SE than negative SEF individuals,
3. Mixed SEF individuals will have higher SE than negative SEF individuals.
4. Positive SEF individuals will have higher LOT scores (both higher optimism and lower pessimism) than mixed SEF individuals,
5. Positive SEF individuals will have higher LOT scores (both higher optimism and lower pessimism) than negative SEF individuals,
6. Mixed SEF individuals will have higher LOT scores (both higher optimism and lower pessimism) than negative SEF individuals,
- 10.. SEF will be unrelated to self-ambivalence.

The data were submitted to a 2 (sex) X 2 (anonymity) X 3 (SEF) Analysis of Variance test (ANOVA), with sex, and anonymity, and SEF as between-subjects factors and RSES and LOT as dependent variables treated as repeated measures.

Results

A significant main effect for SEF Group was found, $F(2,140) = 9.730$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$. Main effects for sex and anonymity were not significant, nor were any interactions. Subsequent analyses therefore focus on the SEF groups.

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for RSES, Positive SE (POS SE), Negative SE (NEG SE), Life Orientation and SEF are shown in Table 1. With the exception of RSES, alphas tend to be on the low side. However, as Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) and Schmitt (1996) observe, there is no absolute cut-off point for alpha adequacy, which must be evaluated in reference to the research objective and content validity of the scale items. For the present essentially exploratory purpose, these alphas were deemed to be adequate.

Means for the RSES were similar to those obtained in previous studies of Japanese SE (Brown, 2006-a, 2006-b, 2007-a, 2007-b, 2008-a, 2008-b, 2008-c, 2009, 2010-b; Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

Participant's positive SE and Life Orientation scores were moderate, their negative SE and negative SEF were high. Their overall SE was low, due to high endorsement of the five negative items. They were moderate in their endorsement of the mixed SEF item, a result which requires some interpretation, which will be provided, below.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Self-Esteem (SE), Positive Self-Esteem (POS SE), Negative Self-Esteem (NEG SE), Life Orientation (LO), Positive Self-Evaluative Focus (POS SEF), Negative Self-Evaluative Focus (NEG SEF), and Mixed Self-Evaluative Focus (MIX SEF) .

	Mean	Standard Deviation	α
SE	2.87*	0.66	.78
POS SE	3.10	0.70	.68
NEG SE	3.30****	0.81	.69
LO	3.01	0.61	.65
POS SEF+	2.59 ****	1.22	na
NEG SEF+	3.69 ****	1.14	na
MIX SEF+	3.00	1.08	na

Note. * $p < .05$, **** $p < .0001$, two-tailed single-sample t tests against the scale midpoint.. + = single-item SEF measures.

Self-Evaluative Focus

Correlations are shown in Table 2. As expected, SE was positively correlated with Positive SEF and negatively correlated with negative SEF. However, it was also positively correlated with mixed SEF. Self-Ambivalence was modestly correlated with mixed SEF but uncorrelated with either positive or negative SEF. As expected, Life Orientation was positively correlated with positive SEF, negatively correlated with negative SEF, and uncorrelated with mixed SEF. However, the mixed focus item was significantly and positively correlated with the positive focus item. While logically, the mixed and positive items should be uncorrelated as well, (one cannot focus more on one thing than another while also focusing equally on them), the moderate but significant positive correlation indicates some commonality between the two foci, but one that appears to exclude the negative focus. Thus having a positive self-focus is not apparently incompatible with having a mixed (or “balanced”) self-focus. It also suggests that the act of assigning numbers to questionnaire items may not entirely faithfully capture participants’ actual sentiments. In the present case participants may have been less than certain how often they focus on mixed versus positive self-aspects, but they seemed emphatic that they focus on negative more than either positive or mixed self-aspects.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations between Self-Esteem (SE), Self-Ambivalence (SA), Life Orientation (LO), Positive Self-Evaluative Focus (POS SEF), Negative Self-Evaluative Focus (NEG SEF), and Mixed Self-Evaluative Focus (MIX SEF) .

	1	2	3	4	5.	6
1. SE	---	---	---		---	
2. LO	.56 ****	---	---		---	
3. SA	.12	.01	.---	---	---	---
4. POS SEF ⁺	.33 ****	.37 ****	.12	---	---	---
5. NEG SEF ⁺	-.44 ****	-.42 ****	-.04	-.59 ****	---	---
6. MIX SEF ⁺	.21 **	.11	.15 *	.27 ****	-.03	---

Note. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, **** $p < .0001$. + = single-item SEF measures.

As described previously, participants also assigned themselves to one of three SEF groups: positive SEF, negative SEF, and Mixed SEF. (Twenty-four participants declined to assign themselves to any of the three categories). Of the 200 who did, 23 (11.5%) professed positive SEFs, 113 (56.5%) negative SEFs, and 64 (32%) mixed SEFs. Chi square tests indicated that self-categorization was not equal across categories, $\chi^2(2) = 60.91, p < .0001$. However, males and female did not differ, $\chi^2(2) = 4.18 ns$. Of note is the fact that negative SEFs exceeded the combined total of positive and mixed SEFs.

To confirm that the single-item self-categorization and the Likert scored items are assessing the same construct, focus was compared by category. We would expect that positive SEF individuals would have high

scores on the positive SEF Likert item, and low scores on the negative and mixed items; that negative SEF individuals would have high scores on the negative item and low scores on the positive and mixed items; and that mixed SEF individuals would have high scores on the mixed item but low scores on the positive and negative items, given as mentioned above that just as the three categories are independent, so are the Likert items logically disjoint, entailed by the meanings of “more than” and “equally.” Results (Table 3) were generally in line with expectations.

Table 3. Relations between Categorical and Single-Item Interval Level Measures of SEF.

	POS SEF Group	NEG SEF Group	MIX SEF Group
POS Focus	4.00 (1.00) _a	2.11 (0.99) _b	2.95 (1.13) _c
NEG Focus	2.17 (0.89) _a	4.13 (0.96) _b	3.41 (0.99) _b
MIX Focus	2.65 (1.03) _a	2.67 (0.91) _a	3.78 (0.97) _b

Note. Different subscripts indicate that means are different at $p < .0001$. Rows = SEF groups, columns = single-item measures.

One-Way Analysis of Variance tests indicated significant differences between the three SEF groups with regard to the three focus measures.

Positive SEF Group, $F(2, 197) = 40.30, p < .0001$. Post hoc tests indicated that the positive SEF group was more positive than mixed SEF which was more positive than negative SEF.

Negative SEF Group, $F(2, 197) = 43.42, p < .0001$. Post hoc tests again indicated that the positive SEF group was more positive than mixed SEF which was more positive than negative SEF.

Mixed SE Group, $F(2, 197) = 30.30, p < .0001$. Post hoc tests indicated that the mixed SEF group was more mixed than the positive SEF and negative SEF groups, which did not differ from each other.

Thus, self-categorization reliably predicted scores on three items each assessing a distinct focus (positive, negative, and mixed).

The positive SEF, negative SEF, and mixed SEF groups differed significantly in Life Orientation $F(2, 181) = 14.99, p < .0001$. Levene’s test was significant for Life Orientation so Games-Howell was used to test for differences between sub-groups, which revealed that the negative SEF group had lower Life Orientation scores than the positive and mixed SEF groups, who did not differ from each other (Table 4.). The three SEF groups also differed in RSES. Levene’s test was not significant so a Bonferroni adjusted independent-sample t test was used. A similar pattern was revealed in both cases: The negative SEF group differed from the other two, which did not differ from each other.

Table 4. Self-Esteem (SE) and Life Orientation (LO) in Three Self-Evaluative Focus (SEF) groups.

	POS SEF	NEG SEF	MIXED SEF
SE	3.26 (0.58) _a	2.63 (0.60) _b	3.17 (0.59) _a
LO	3.42 (0.71) _a	2.82 (0.60) _b	3.22 (0.47) _a

Note. Different subscripts indicate means differ at $p \leq .001$, + $p < .05$.

Self-Ambivalence

Individuals with consistent and positive self-concepts might be expected to endorse positive RSES items while rejecting negative items. Participants in the present study did not do that, but instead endorsed the negative items to a greater extent than the positive items. As shown in Table 1, the mean for the positive items did not differ from the scale midpoint, while the mean for the negative items was significantly higher (indicating high negative SE). The two score differed from each other, $t(206) = -2.41, p < .05$.

Following the Similarity Intensity Model, described above, Self-Ambivalence scores ranged from a minimum of -.80 to a maximum of 8.20 with a mean of 4.28 (SD = 1.85). Higher scores represent greater self-ambivalence. The males and females did not differ in self-ambivalence, $t(205) = .508, ns$.

The mixed SEF group was slightly more self-ambivalent than the positive negative SEF groups, but a three-way Analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that the difference was not significant, $F(2,195) = 1.03, ns$.

If SEF is the same as self-ambivalence we would expect self-ambivalence to correlate significantly and substantially with mixed SEF, and to correlate more highly with mixed than either positive or negative SEF. In fact, self-ambivalence correlated significantly, $r(206) = .15, p < .05$, but modestly with mixed SEF, but did not reach the $p < .05$ level for positive or negative SEF. indicating that, in Japan at least, SEF partially overlaps with but is distinct from self-ambivalence.. This is as would be expected, since Self-Ambivalence represents the presence of conflicting or contradictory self-views (Riketta & Ziegler, 2006), while SEF represents a mixed or balanced self-view, acknowledging one's separate positive and negative points equally.

Discussion

In summary, it was found, as predicted, that (1) individuals with negative SEF had lower SE than individuals with positive SEF, and were less optimistic and (2) individuals with mixed SEFs also differed from negative SEF individuals in precisely the same ways. However, positive and mixed SEF people did not differ in SE or optimism, which suggests that SEF is not simply an aspect of SE. Likewise the fact that the three SEF groups were similar in self-ambivalence indicates that SEF and self-ambivalence are distinct. That is, individuals can be self-ambivalent while focusing on either positive or negative self-relevant information, as

well as focusing on both equally.

The majority of participants reported negative SEF. Because SEF is associated with SE, low Japanese SE would appear to stem, at least in part, from the fact that participants focus on self-relevant negatives rather than positives. This result is consistent with that reported by Noguchi et al., (2007) who found that “attention to positive information” among Japanese is associated with optimism and life-satisfaction (which in turn has been found to be significantly correlated with SE in Japan; Diener & Diener, 1995), while “attention to negative information” is inversely associated with the same constructs. Noguchi et al., did not specifically examine the correlates of what in their model would correspond to mixed SEF and so failed to notice, as was found in the present study, that mixed SEF may not be associated with lower SE than a uniformly positive SEF.

In a similar vein, Hamamura, Meijer, Heine, Kamaya, and Hori (2009) have proposed that unlike Americans, who tend to focus on approach-oriented information, Japanese focus on avoidance-oriented information. Doing so enhances the SE of the former, while maintaining the “face” of the latter. It follows that SE is relatively more important for Americans than for Japanese, but relatively less important to Japanese, who, according to Hamamura et al., systematically subordinate their SE needs to face concerns. An economic alternative to this view has been recently offered, suggesting that low Japanese SE, and high American SE, are “equivalent mechanisms to induce efficient effort and investment decisions,” given the different economic environments Japanese and Americans operate in (Dessi & Zhao, 2010, p. 1).

The more prevalent focus on self-relevant negatives might arise from the limited accessibility (Higgins, 1996; 2000) of the SE construct in Japan (Brown, 2008-a, 2008-b). Part and parcel of the SE construct, at least as it is construed in America, is that high SE is a positive thing, if not indeed a prerequisite to good mental health and a key to academic, social, and economic success (Brandon, 1994; Taylor & Brown, 1988). This view of SE is widely held, perhaps unquestioned, in North America, but not Japan (Brown, 2008-a; 2010-a). In the absence of cultural encouragement to accentuate the positive and feel good about oneself, it may be that Japanese motivations for self-improvement, perhaps inspired in some way by the legacies of Confucianism (Rohlen, 1983; White, 1987) would take attentional center stage. Because mixed SEF exacts no great cost in terms of low SE and the aversive affect and behavioral sequelae that are associated with it, students can enjoy the benefits of socially approved humility (Brown, 2008-c) and strivings for self-improvement (implied by self-criticism) while remaining self-effacing and modest. Since this is a viable option, the fact that a large majority of students unnecessarily habitually focus on their personal negative aspects, at the cost of lower SE and diminished Life Orientation scores, remains to be explained.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the present research should be noted. First, SEF needs to be explored in more detail, in particular if it proves that differences in SE derive from differences in SEF, as the present research seems to indicate. However, in as much as the present study was primarily correlational, the possibility that lower SE causes participants to focus on more negative self-aspects cannot be dismissed. This possibility could be explored by manipulating SEF and then assessing SE and vice-versa, and then comparing the results. Second, participants were Japanese. Studies should be conducted in other countries to ascertain whether the relation between SEF and SE is universal¹ or at least not specific to Japan. Finally, relating SE to SEF does not explain

why Japanese university students generally focus on their negative sides—although Dessi and Zhao (2010) provide a plausible reason, that low Japanese SE and its associated characteristics (modesty, low self-confidence) are functionally equivalent to high SE in America. If they are correct, the solution to the paradox of Japanese SE (Brown, 2005) is likely to reside at least as much in shared cultural influences as in individual psychological processes. Just as many people in historically Christian countries (Stark, 1996; 2003) hold Judeo-Christian beliefs, (Glaeser & Ward, 2006; Sedikides, 2010), so too do many Japanese people hold culturally transmitted aesthetic (Parkes, 2005), philosophical (Suzuki, 2005), and educational beliefs (Fukuzawa, 1994; LeTendre, 1994) with self-concept relevance. A focus on one's negative self-aspects may be related to cultural desiderata of humility and self-improvement (Brown, 2004; Rohlen, 1983), which are in fact explicit objectives for the compulsory levels in the Japanese school system (grades 1-9), according to the Ministry of Education (quoted in White, 1987, p. 17). In addition, as noted in Brown (2007-c ;2008-c), the very act of self-assessment may impose demands that are either alien to the research participants (Converse & Presser, 1986) or that evoke assessment of a quite different sort, namely, *hansei* (反省). *Hansei* is defined by Japanese dictionaries as “self-examination” (Sakade, 1959), and “self-examination, reflection, introspection” (Kenkyusha, 1982). Students are typically asked to engage in such self-examination when they have failed or perform deficiently (Tamura, 2007; Whitburn, 2003)³ and as a result may come to view *hansei* as an appropriate reaction to failure or shortcomings in general. As White (1987, p. 32), summarizes it, “*hansei* .is oriented toward improvement.” To the extent that the RSES and similar instruments evoke *hansei*, they may be priming participants to differentially retrieve instances of sub-par performance. Thus, as suggested by Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) SE may be as much social as psychological, and may even have economic underpinnings as well (Dessi & Zhao, 2010). Closer cooperation between social scientists may be needed to help unravel the paradox of Japanese self-esteem..

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Author Note

I am indebted to Yoko Kondo and Harada Shinichi for assistance with various aspects of the research. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to R.A. Brown, 1-2-22 East Heights # 103, Higashi Kaigan Kita, Chigasaki-shi 253-0053 Japan. Electronic mail may be sent via internet to RABrown_05@hotmail.com.

Footnotes

1. Research in progress suggests that North American college students differ from Japanese students primarily in the relation between mixed SEF and SE. Unlike Japanese students, the SE of mixed SEF North American students is lower than that of positive SEF students but higher than that of negative SEF students, consistent with results reported in Brown (2006-c), wherein American students feel bad about being “average” and have lower SE than the majority of other students, who view themselves as “above average,” while Japanese students do not feel bad about being average and their SE does not differ from that of the few who view themselves as above average.

