

The Effect of Self-Perceptions of Averageness on Self-Aggrandizement and Self-Esteem in Japan

By R. A. Brown

Abstract

One hundred and sixty-nine Japanese college students assessed themselves on a version of the Pelham and Swann (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire and the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. The principle findings were that, contrary to some past research, the self-esteem of the Japanese participants was positively associated with self-aggrandizement and negatively associated with self-effacement, but not associated with lack of self-aggrandizement. Unlike American students, being “average” did not have a negative impact on the self-esteem of Japanese participants. Supplementary findings were that most participants evaluated themselves primarily as average or slightly better than average, females were more likely to evaluate themselves as average, personal importance ratings did not very much influence how much “better than average” self-evaluations were associated with self-esteem, the availability of an “average” option did not affect very much the distribution of self-evaluations.

Americans regard being average as undesirable (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995). According to Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989, p. 1084), “. . . calling someone average often prompts the inference that the person is undesirable.” Indeed, several noted cross-cultural self-esteem researchers have gone so far as to deliberately avoid using the expression “average” in their questionnaires because “. . . it may have a pejorative connotation” (Kobayashi & Brown, 2003). In the United States, where competition and achievement are strongly emphasized (Sternberg, 1997; see also Covington, 1989, cited in Kahne, 1996) to be less than “above average” may be experienced as a form of failure (Alicke, et al.). Viewing oneself as less than above average appears to have a deleterious effect on the self-esteem of North Americans. But are high self-esteem and self-aggrandizement positively related outside of “secular, middle-class Anglo-America”? (Markus & Kitayama, 2003, p. 280).

In Japan, it may be shameful or disgraceful (Endo, 1995) to be below average, but it is not a form of failure *not* to be above average, hence is not anything that need have a negative impact on one’s sense of self-worth. Japanese indeed are said to value being ordinary and average (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004; Yoshida, Ura, & Kurokawa, 2004). If being average in Japan is a desirable condition, then being average might promote self-esteem. The present research examines the relationship between self-aggrandizement (evaluating oneself as better than average without objective evidence that this evaluation is accurate) and self-esteem in Japan. Specifically, three hypotheses were tested: (1) being better than average is associated with higher self-esteem, (2) being worse than average is associated with lower self-esteem and, (3) being average is associated with higher self-esteem.

Two additional questions were investigated: (4) which domains of self-evaluation contribute more to self-esteem? And (5) does the availability of a neutral scale response option affect participants' self-evaluations?

Method

Participants

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 (and 14 chose not to). There were more females than males but Binomial tests revealed that the proportion of males to females was not significantly different from .5. Participants were assigned randomly to two groups: One group ($n = 87$, 37 males and 50 females) responded to the questionnaire items using a 7-point scale including the option of "average," the other group ($n = 82$, 34 males and 48 females), used a 6-point scale without the "average" option. Chi square tests indicated that the distribution of male and female participants did not differ between the two groups.

Procedure

Participants completed the 5-item version of the Pelham and Swann (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire SAQ, augmented by seven items previously shown to be relevant for Japanese (Ito, 1999; Yamamoto, Matsui, & Yamanari, 1982). The five SAQ items were *chitekinouryouku* (intellectual ability), *shakousei* (social skills), *geijutsutekinouryouku* (aesthetic sense), *undouryouku* (athletic abilities), and *youshi* (physical appearance). The supplemental items were *seikaku* (character), *nouryouku* (capability), *joushiki* (common sense), *kinben* (diligence), *seijitsu* (sincerity), *kenson* (modesty), and *eigonouryouku* (English language ability). Participants were asked to estimate the degree to which they possessed each of the attributes relative to other people of their own age and sex. As Nunnally (1978) suggested, participants may select the neutral or "don't know" options because they do not want to respond. Therefore, analyses were also conducted using the data from the 7-point scale sub-sample (described above), but with the neutral responses omitted. Because "self-estimates of qualities are particularly likely to affect global self-esteem *when the quality is highly valued* [italics in original]" (Rosenberg, 1968, p. 231), participants were then asked to estimate how important each attribute was for them personally. The questionnaire also contained Hoshino's (1970) translation of the Rosenberg 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 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). A 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) was used and a summary score computed after reversing the negatively phrased items. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

Results

The 12 SAQ aggregated items had Cronbach's α s of .86 and .85 in the 7-step and 6-step formats, respectively, but inter-item correlations were generally not so high as to indicate synonymy (mean inter-item correlation in both formats was .33), in addition to which the items with the highest inter-item correlations were clearly not synonymous (for example, *sincere* and *aesthetic sense*, $r = .74$). Nevertheless, to guard against the possibility of inflated SAQ scores stemming from the summation of highly overlapping domains and traits, analyses were conducted with standardized values where appropriate. The RSES had a Cronbach's α of .78 (for both males and females).

The male and female means for the SAQ12-7 for did not differ significantly, $t(84) = .25$, *ns*. The combined mean was 3.79 ($SD = 0.85$) which was lower than the scale midpoint, $t(85) = 2.27$, $p < .05$. The male and female means for the SAQ12-6 did not differ significantly ($t(80) = 0.26$, *ns*). The combined mean was 3.51 ($SD = 0.72$) which did not differ from the hypothetical scale midpoint, $t(81) = 0.11$, *ns*.

In the present data, self-aggrandizement and self-esteem were positively associated. Self-esteem was significantly correlated with the number of above average self-evaluations in the 6-point response format, $r(82) = .48$, $p < .0001$. The more often participants evaluated themselves above average, the higher was their self-esteem. Since the 6-point format lacked a neutral option, the total range of responses was fully specified by the above average self-evaluations. In the 7-point format, participants' self-esteem was again associated with the number of times they evaluated themselves above average, $r(86) = .47$, $p < .0001$. Self-esteem was not significantly associated (at $p < .05$, Bonferroni adjusted to $p < .02$ to hold the error rate constant over the three tests) with the number of times participants evaluated themselves as average, $r(86) = .24$, *ns*. In both formats, below average self-evaluations were associated with lower self-esteem. As in North America, being above average is associated with higher self-esteem than being average, which in turn is associated with higher self-esteem than being below average (R. A. Brown, 2006b). But unlike in North America, being average is *not* associated with lower self-esteem.

The percentage of the relevant sub-sample describing themselves as average with respect to each of the 12 domains ranged from 13% to 25%, with an average of 18%. Chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether the distribution of above average and below average self-evaluations in the 6-point format, treated categorically, differed from the distribution of above average and below average responses, omitting the neutral "average" responses in the 7-point format. As can be seen in Table 1 below, only two of the 12 self-evaluations differed at $p < .01$ (knowledge and English ability, where participants who lacked the "average" option were more self-flattering. In sum, participants were about as likely to self-enhance as to self-efface when they could not describe themselves as average.

Table 1. *Distribution of Below Average and Above Average Self-Evaluations in Odd and Even Numbered Response Formats, with Neutral “Average” Option Omitted in the Odd Numbered Format.*

	7-Point Format <i>n</i> = 87		6-Point Format <i>n</i> = 82	
	Below	Above	Below	Above
Knowledge	33	12	34	48 *
Social Skills	38	25	40	42
Aesthetic	41	24	47	35
English	51	08	47	35 **
Athletics	33	32	41	41
Appearance	38	06	51	31
Common Sense	25	34	24	58
Character	25	21	28	54
Capability	26	18	31	51
Diligence	44	19	53	29
Sincerity	19	36	28	54
Modesty	23	36	21	61

Note. Difference between distribution of responses differs according to chi-square test,

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

Chi-square tests were conducted to determine if the males and females selected the “average” option with equal frequency. The results (Table 2) show that the female participants described themselves as average more than the males did ($p < .01$).

Table 2 . *Relative Frequency with which Males and Females Selected Neutral Response Option.*

	Males		Females		
Knowledge	14	20%	27	54%	**
Social Skills	11	16%	13	26%	
Aesthetics	6	8%	16	32%	*
English	11	16%	17	34%	
Athletics	7	10%	15	30%	*
Appearance	13	18%	30	60%	***
Common Sense	10	14%	18	36%	*
Character	17	24%	24	48%	
Capability	15	21%	27	54%	**
Diligence	7	10%	17	34%	*
Sincerity	8	11%	24	48%	***
Modesty	7	10%	19	38%	**

Note. Distribution of responses between males and females differs according to chi-square test,
 * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$, *** $p < .0001$,

Discussion

The present study contributes to the literature on the structure and cognitive concomitants of positive self-assessments and self-affect (self-esteem) in Japanese college students in several ways. Moderate self-esteem scores, for example, can be accounted for by the tendency of Japanese participants to view themselves as mostly average and to use the scale option that reflects that self-perception. When given the explicit option of describing themselves as average, Japanese participants tended to describe themselves as average, females more so than males. Consistent with results reported in R. A. Brown (2006a), the sum of the 12 SAQ items and most of the individual items were positively correlated with self-esteem. Japanese self-aggrandize less than North Americans do, but those who self-aggrandize more have higher self-esteem than those who self-aggrandize less.

These results are more intelligible if it is assumed that Japanese and North Americans are similar in feeling good about being above average and feeling bad about being below average, but are dissimilar in how they feel about being average. North Americans feel bad about this, Japanese do not. This may be because being average connotes lack of success in North America, but lack of failure in Japan, as noted above. Because most people are by definition average, it is perhaps less surprising that most Japanese believe that they are average, than that most Americans believe that they are not.

In Japan, meeting a certain standard is regarded as a more concrete, more attainable goal than the more abstract goal of “achieving excellence” or “being all that one can be.” Being “average” means that one has meet expected standards and thereby successfully avoided failure (rather than failed to achieve excellence). Why American students feel the way they do about being average, or rather, why “average” has come to mean “sub-par” however, is undoubtedly influenced by sociological and historical factors and is beyond the scope of the present article to address.

Concluding Comments

Several limitations in the present research must be addressed. It is generally impossible to distinguish between responses and attitudes based on questionnaire data alone. Moderate responses are particularly problematic because there are so many possible things that midpoint scale responses can indicate, including ambivalence, uncertainty, apathy, and even hostility to the assumptions, method, or objectives of the research (Nunnally (1978, p. 596). These, needless to say, are problems that beset every study that assesses subjective states using self-reports. In any case, there is at present no better way to know what people feel than to ask them (Barrett, 2006), and self-reported data are probably as reliable as any other source of information, provided that obvious faking and response styles are accounted for (Nederhof, 1985).

Finally, students' extensive experience in ability-sorted age cohorts sharing highly similar educational experiences (Dore, 1997; Iwasaki, 2005; McVeigh, 2001) in all probability means that asking participants to compare themselves to "the average student" without further specification means that they are likely to be accurately assessing themselves, assuming that they are using their classmates as comparison targets. In this case, moderate self-assessments may not be closely associated with self-esteem, if participants derive their sense of self-worth from being better than average students in general or better than students from less prestigious universities in particular, rather than their classmates. Future research should consider more precisely specifying the comparison targets used in such self-assessment tasks.

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Author Note

I am indebted to Yoko Kondo, Teruhiro Tomita, and Mami Ueda for assistance with various aspects of the research.

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