

Remarks on Feigned Modesty and Language in Relation to Japanese Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Pursuing, protecting, and promoting positive self-feelings has been somewhat of a preoccupation, if not obsession, in the United States for well over fifty years. These motivations have been assumed to be universal. Yet few studies of Japanese self-esteem have found other than low to moderate self-esteem. This has been explained in terms of either modest responding (suggesting that self-reports are not veridical) or self-criticalness (suggesting that self-reports are veridical). The present essay reviews the arguments against the modesty view and concludes that there is insufficient evidence for rejecting modest self-presentation as the source of low to moderate Japanese self-esteem scores. Finally, potential linguistic sources of response distortion are discussed.

A great deal of evidence has been assembled over the past half century (recently summarized in Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003) indicating that high self-esteem is normal and healthy. Indeed, high self-esteem has been described as a basic and universal human need (Zhang & Baumeister, 2006). But in study after study, with no apparent exception, Japanese people, in general, express moderate or even low self-esteem¹⁾ (reviewed in Brown & Kobayashi, 2003, Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999, and Heine & Hamamura, 2007).

Moderate or low Japanese self-esteem is problematical in several ways. If the self-esteem self-reports of most Japanese research participants (almost always college students) are accurate, then either self-esteem is not a universal human need, or most people in Japan, a country of 127 million individuals (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, N. D.), are functioning with that need unmet. Two contrasting solutions have been proposed. The first argues that the need for high self-esteem is indeed universal, and that Japanese self-esteem is high, but test scores do not reflect this reality because Japanese people are modest, and modest people do not affirm, and may even deny, having the characteristics that are taken as indicative of positive self-views in North America, contrary to what they actually believe and feel (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Kurman 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Kurman & Sriram, 2002.) In other words, Japanese self-reports are not accurate. The second argues that Japanese self-esteem self-reports are accurate. Japanese people are self-critical rather than modest (Heine & Lehman, 1995; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunit, 1997). Japanese people are reporting what they really believe and feel, because their primary motivation is not to have positive self-views, but rather to improve their actual selves, which can best be done by identifying and correcting flaws. To put in unambiguously, Japanese people are not merely being modest

when they say, for example, that they are less intelligent than average, or deny that they have a number of positive qualities, rather they genuinely believe it, and this serves to enable them to become better than average (or at least average). Somewhat confusingly, this view maintains that self-criticalness is socially desirable in Japan, so that people who express low self-esteem actually have positive self-views. In this view, self-esteem is just one way to have a positive self-view. But high self-esteem is not the objective of Japanese self-criticalness. Rather, according to Heine, Takata, and Lehman, self-criticalness is designed to gain the approval of other people.

There is a rather obvious connection between being modest and attempting to gain the approval of others by being self-critical, in that the motive for modesty is often the desire to avoid incurring the disapproval of others simply for being immodest. In other words, one is not necessarily modest in order to win praise for being modest, but rather in order to avoid censure for being arrogant. Self-criticalness and modesty are essentially variations on the same theme.

Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) argue that low self-esteem scores represent self-criticalness because “feigned modesty” can be ruled out. By “feigned” they mean that Japanese participants do not really believe what they say, and do not report what they genuinely feel or think. They reason as follows. First, Japanese do not score higher than Americans in measures of socially desirable responding. Second, Japanese do not evaluate themselves more highly by way of indirect measures. Third, they believe that certain experiences would affect the self-respect (*jisonshin*) of other Japanese in the same ways that it would affect their own. Fourth, they are consistently humble even under apparently anonymous conditions.

These objections can be countered as follows. The claim that Japanese do not respond in socially desirable ways more than North Americans do is based on Heine and Lehman’s 1995 survey of 74 Canadian and 93 Japanese exchange students in Canada, using Paulhus’ (1991) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR). The researchers found no differences between the two samples in either the self-deception or impression management sub-scales. However, Heine and Lehman reported mean sub-scale scores ranging from 66.45 to 81.96, suggesting that they used an unorthodox scoring method, which however they did not describe. Paulhus (1991) recommends scoring one point for extreme responses (*very true* responses to positive items, *not true* responses to negative items) so that scores can range from 0-20 for each 20-item sub-scale. This is problematic because it is well established that Japanese, compared to North Americans, tend to prefer the middle of rating scales, and therefore it seems unlikely that high BIDR scores could be obtained using Paulhus’ scoring method. Perhaps Heine and Lehman took this into account and chose to use the full 7-point format instead. Not surprisingly, mean scores were close to the scale midpoint, suggesting that the Japanese participants answered the BIDR the same way they answered the RSES—using the middle of the scale. The net result appears to be that the Heine and Lehman study does not provide compelling evidence that Japanese self-esteem scores are not the result of desirable responding. It is doubtful that this single, limited, and possibly irrelevant study (as conceded by the authors themselves, in that, among other things, the Japanese participants were exchange students and therefore non-representative of Japanese students in general) can serve as a foundation for the dismissal of the intuitively more plausible possibility that Japanese self-descriptions are tempered by modesty concerns (without of course ruling out other possibilities, see R. A. Brown, 2006b for examples).

Self-esteem is a subjective phenomenon (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991) and as such is assessable only by means of self-reports. Nevertheless, using implicit measures, Kitayama and Uchida (2003) have shown that

Japanese participants do “manifest positive self-evaluations at both explicit and implicit levels.” Heine (2003c) has questioned the relevance of implicit measures, but if implicit measures are not relevant then it can not be maintained that the failure of direct and indirect measures to coincide provides evidence that respondents are answering “veridically.”

According to Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, and Noraskkunit (1997) the fact that Japanese believe that certain experiences would affect the self-respect (*jisonshin*) of other Japanese in the same ways that it would affect their own indicates that they are responding truthfully when they describe the effect that the adverse experience has on their own self-respect. Participants report that their self-respect is damaged more by failure than it is boosted by success, and they believe that other Japanese people probably feel the same way. If they have no self-serving motivations for responding socially desirably when describing other people’s feelings, then this means that they are responding veridically when they describe their own feelings. However, to the extent that self-esteem has a collective source (Hornsey, 2003; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), participants could have been attributing the same modest responses to their group members.

The argument that Japanese are consistently humble even under apparently anonymous conditions appears reasonable. Japanese do tend to describe themselves in similar terms whether assessed anonymously (which as Kurman 2001b says, is the norm in any case) or non-anonymously (R. A. Brown, 2006a). However, this simply indicates consistency, not veridicality. It is just as likely that they are being modest under both conditions as that they are being veridical under both. As Schlenker & Wowra (2003, p. 871) say, “self-presentational scripts are often cued and enacted automatically” (see also Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989, for an earlier observation of this point.) In addition, as Kitayama and Uchida (2003) note, merely imagining the presence of another person can have the same effects as the actual presence of that person (see also Lawani, Shavit, & Johnson, 2006). Thus, consistency of self-reports under different conditions does not guarantee that respondents are not replying modestly or enacting culturally prescribed scripts. Earlier research demonstrated that people’s self-views come to more closely resemble their public presentations (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981; McKillop, Berzonsky, & Schlenker, 1992). If Japanese people are taught to present themselves as average, it is not inconceivable that many do come in time to view themselves as average. This would be all the more likely when they are surrounded by classmates who are similar in academic background, aspirations, and attainment, as well as age and ethnicity (R. A. Brown, 2007b). Regarding themselves as average may contribute to low self-esteem, or to high self-esteem, or it may be irrelevant to self-esteem. This would no doubt depend on what the social implications of being average are, and this is something that seems to vary culturally (for discussion, see R. A. Brown, 2006c; 2007a).

The responses typically obtained from Japanese individuals who complete the RSES and similar Likert-scored scales may be due to neither modesty nor self-criticalness, but may also derive from a number of other tendencies and motivations, several of which have recently been discussed in R. A. Brown (2006c). These include (lack of) self-concept clarity, fear of negative evaluation, sandbagging, as well as modesty. Moderate responses may also reflect the fact that “self-esteem” is a peculiarly Anglo-American “cultural script” (Wierzbicka, 2004b) and has no close equivalent in Japan, where self-esteem is not viewed as a natural source or consequence of the many sorts of behaviors and circumstances that North Americans appear to assume that it is (Baumeister et al., 2003; R. A. Brown, 2007b). Since the underlying core tenets of the self-esteem script do not exist in Japan, it should not be assumed that research participants are understating their self-cognitions

and affect, deliberately, deceptively, or in any other way, when they endorse or reject particular questionnaire items. To put it more baldly, when participants reply that they do not know or are unsure, it is not obvious that this says anything about their self-esteem. For that matter, it is not clear what they are unclear or uncertain about (R. A. Brown, 2007c).

Similarly, words, speech-acts, and questionnaire items do not occur in isolation and are customarily construed by participants in the context of a plexus of assumptions about what people intend, believe, want to accomplish, etc., when they perform any communicative act, including asking someone to anonymously evaluate themselves by agreeing or disagreeing with statements whose meaning is vague or ambiguous and whose perlocutionary force is unevident. Moreover, these communicative acts necessarily are enacted by means of the resources and within the limitations of particular languages. Psychologists too often appear to assume that issues of cross-cultural equivalence can be addressed with statistical methods alone. However, cross-cultural differences almost always involve linguistic differences as well, sometimes subtle (as with different groups using the same language), or gross (as with genetically unrelated languages—such as English and Japanese). Different linguistic systems both reflect and predispose, if not different world-views (Carruthers, 2002; Rosch, 1977; Whorf, 1956), at least different patterns of processing and manipulating information about selected aspects of the physical and social worlds. Closer attention to linguistic issues is clearly warranted.

By way of illustration, it is known that pronoun primes can influence self-representations, at least among Americans (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Despite this, the dependence of self-reflection on language is often ignored in cross-cultural research. This is relevant because many languages differ significantly in key ways from English, the original source for the RSES. Personal pronouns are particularly important, as they pick out and presumably focus attention on the “self.” As Markus and Smith (1981) expressed it, “... there is a strong linguistic pressure to develop a concept of ‘I’ or ‘me’... Individuals are constantly required to code their social world in terms of the concepts of ‘I’ or ‘me’.” More recently, Leary and Buttermore (2003, citing Ingold, 1996) write that “the construction of personal identity relies on language . . . people use words to conceptualize who they are and what they are like . . . first-person pronouns play a central role in people’s self thoughts.” But this viewpoint reflects a Western and more specifically Anglo-American, bias. Grammatical subjects are obligatory in most English sentence types. They are not in many other languages, including Japanese.¹ In Japanese, first-person pronouns are customarily omitted in colloquial speech and informal writing (Hasegawa & Hirose, 2005). Incorporating them calls special attention to the speaker by explicitly excluding other people as subjects of the predication. Languages may omit first person pronouns via two (if not more) methods. On one hand, some European languages, for example, Portuguese, often omit first person pronouns, because the identity of the speaker is redundantly signaled by verb agreement. On the other hand, languages like Japanese, Korean, and Thai omit first person pronouns even though there is no verb agreement. The information necessary for properly identifying the referents of the sentence is encoded, even if it is not explicit. Moreover, Japanese first person pronouns encode information about the relationship between the speaker and the person spoken to, and often, people spoken about and people who may happen to hear the message. The Japanese language, among others, also includes a vast system of lexical alternatives designed to express different degrees of social rank and connectedness. Eight of the 10 RSES items in the widely used Hoshino (1970) translation of the RSES (see also Hori, 2003) include the first-person pronoun 私 (which can be pronounced either *watashi* or the more formal *watakushi*.) which automatically creates, or presupposes, a more formal relationship between the

participant and whoever it is that he or she feels that the questionnaire represents, relative to the use of other equally acceptable pronouns (each of which presupposes a set of identities and relationships), or no pronoun at all. Precisely because it is the norm not to use first person pronouns, using them probably has the effect of focusing attention on the self to an abnormal degree, while the specific type of pronoun used highlights the subordinate status of the participant. It is not out of the question that the form of the RSES items induces a deferential, self-effacing form of responding. The impact of language on endorsement of self-esteem items needs further investigation.

The linguistic influence is not limited to pronouns. Key words can have similar denotations (i.e., dictionary translation equivalents), but very different cultural connotations, patterns of usage, or prevailing “scripts” for interpretation (Wierzbicka, 2004a). It cannot automatically be assumed that “*manzokuteki de aru*” in Japanese means what “satisfied” means in English or that the condition of being “satisfied” with oneself has the same self-esteem implications in Japan that it does in North America. If they do not, claiming that the two expressions have the same meanings is problematic. For example, being dissatisfied with oneself might be a *source* of high self-esteem, rather than a *symptom* of low self-esteem. That this possibility is more than mere speculation is suggested by the spontaneous written comment of one female 19 year old participant, “*manzoku shitara owari dato omou*” (“I think that when one is satisfied, it’s over.”² The implication of this statement, according to Japanese informants, is “one shouldn’t lose the sense of challenge” [the English word *challenge* is used in Japanese as a nominal + the verb *suru* to mean “attempt to do something that one can’t already do or hasn’t already done”]. Not being satisfied with oneself in Japanese does not express a poor self-concept or negative self-affect. On the contrary, it may reflect a positive self-concept in that it implies that one is capable of accomplishing more. Incidentally, paying attention to the solicited or spontaneous comments of research participants may be an example of what Triandis (1999) has called for, that is, broadening the range of methods used in cross-cultural research to include interviews and perhaps observation in real world settings.

Other linguistic problems involving the RSES have been extensively discussed. In Japanese, and other non-English versions of the RSES, the item “I wish I could have more respect for myself” has frequently been found to exhibit low item to total correlations; Farruggia, Chen, Greenberger, Dmitrieva, & Macek, 2004; Feather & McKee 1993; Hori, 2003; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Lexical ambiguity in the meaning of the word “respect” (Japanese *sonkei*) may be implicated, and syntactic ambiguity may also be involved (Cheng and Hamid, 1995; Cheung, Kwang, & Zhang, 2003; Hamid & Cheng, 1995), particularly with regard to the interpretation of the expression “I wish that I could have more X”. Unlike the English expression, the Japanese translation (もう少し自分を尊敬できたらと思う) does not consistently imply a pre-existing lack of X. That is to say, speakers vary considerably in whether it does or does not imply lack of X. By way of illustration, in English “I wish I had more money” does not invariably imply that one has insufficient money at present, but merely that one would like even more. American billionaire Donald Trump could grammatically utter the above sentence without anyone thinking that he was on the verge of bankruptcy.

As Wierzbicka (2004b) remarks, responses to standardized questionnaire items cannot be meaningfully compared across linguistic, cultural, or other groups unless it can be established that the items convey the same meanings to the target groups. Unfortunately,, this has not often been done, to the detriment of cross-cultural psychological research.

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Appendix

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Hoshino (1970) translation.

1. 私は、自分にはいくつか見どころがあると思っている。
2. もう少し自分を尊敬できたらと思う。
3. 私は少なくとも自分が他人と同じレベルに立つだけの価値ある人だと思う。

4. 私にはあまり得意に思うことがない。
5. 私は自身に対して前向きな態度をとっている。
6. 私は時々たしかに自分が役立たずだと感じる。
7. どんなときでも例外なく、自分を失敗者だと思いがちだ。
8. 私はたいていの人がやれる程度には物事ができる。
9. 私はときどき、自分がてんでだめだと思う。
10. 私はすての点で自分に満足している。

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Footnotes

1. Other lexical elements present in the sentence or utterance can cue particular interpretations of null subjects. The author relies on his 23 years experience working with the Japanese and other languages (primarily, Korean, Portuguese, and Thai) in a variety of professional and social contexts for the linguistic information presented here. Readers may also refer to McClain (1981), Martin (1988), and Miller (1967) for details about Japanese pronouns.
2. Note that there is no subject pronoun in the cited sentence. The sentence final “...to *omou*” indicates that the implied subject is the speaker of the sentence, as in RSES items # 2 and # 7, see Hori, 2003.]