

# **The Relationship between Self-Aggrandizement and Self-Esteem in Japanese and American University Students**

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## **Abstract**

"Better than average" self-evaluations co-occur with and are generally accepted as evidence of high self-esteem in North Americans, and this pattern has been viewed as universal. But studies in Japan have consistently failed to find high self-esteem and self-aggrandizement, leading some to question whether the tendency to self-aggrandize in the service of self-esteem is indeed universal. Seventy-two Japanese and 110 American college students assessed themselves in terms of overall competence relative to same-sex peers, and their self-feelings (positive, negative, or mixed), and also completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In both groups, evaluations of the self as better than average were associated with positive self-feelings and higher self-esteem, and evaluations of the self as worse than average were associated with negative self-feelings and lower self-esteem. However, the two groups differed in how they felt about being just average. In absolute terms, the Americans, but not the Japanese, felt bad about themselves and had lower self-esteem when they viewed themselves as average. In both groups however, "average" students felt worse about themselves and had lower self-esteem than above average students. The American participants in general described themselves in highly positive terms, while the Japanese participants described themselves in balanced terms.

**Key Word:** self-esteem, self-aggrandizement, averageness

Feeling good about oneself has been described as an American cultural imperative by Markus and Kitayama (2003), and as a universal human need or motivation by an extensive list of eminent observers of the human condition, dating back to Thomas Hobbes, if not earlier (see Pajares & Schunk, 2002, Rosenberg, 1989 Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989 for historical perspective). Much speculation and research has gone into explaining what purpose this otherwise mysterious need serves. One influential theory claims that self-esteem functions as a monitor of one's fitness for inclusion in relationships (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). That theory's primary competitor claims that self-esteem acts as a buffer against existential anxiety (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). But whatever purpose self-esteem serves, it is quite clear that people seek to have, and do in fact have, self-esteem in abundance (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). It has been well documented that people will attempt to create conditions that will allow them to feel good about themselves. They will also cognitively distort reality, if nec-

essary, to accomplish that same purpose (J. D. Brown, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994). One example of this is the tendency for people, Americans in particular, to evaluate themselves as "better than average." Being above average appears to make Americans feel good about themselves. But is being better than average positively related to feeling good about oneself outside of North America? Is it necessary to be better than average to feel good about oneself outside of "secular, middle-class Anglo-America"? (Markus & Kitayama, p. 280).

The results of previous research in Japan, to take one example, have not been unequivocal, primarily because Japanese do not typically view themselves as better than average, nor do they have positive self-views, at least as assessed by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (for reviews, see Heine, 2005, and Heine Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). The better than average effect, or "self-aggrandizement" (Paulus, 1998) is one type of self-enhancement. Self-aggrandizement is the tendency to evaluate oneself more favorably than one evaluates other people. Many studies have found low or absent self-aggrandizement in Japanese samples (for reviews, see Heine, 2005b; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005), while others have found self-aggrandizement under certain conditions. For example Brown and Kobayashi (2002: Study 3), and Ito (1999) found self-aggrandizement among Japanese participants for personally important traits, while Sedikides, Gaertner, and Toguchi (2003) found self-aggrandizement in Japanese samples for culturally important behaviors.

It would not be surprising to find that people everywhere do not, in general, enjoy or feel good about being sub par, or that they do feel good about being better than average (but see Exline & Lobel, 1999 for exceptions). But there are cultural differences in the implications of being neither above nor below average (that is, being average, ordinary, or typical). These may be related to the individualism-collectivism distinction (Triandis, 2000), in that individuals who are more invested in their social groups may be more motivated to be similar to other group members. Collectivists may also derive more of their sense of identity (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998) or self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) from their group memberships. North Americans apparently regard being average as undesirable (Alicke, et al., 1995) and "...like to assume that they are quite different from others..." (Markus & Smith, 1981). They feel better when they are distinctive (Fromkin, 1972). According to Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989, p. 1084), "... calling someone average often prompts the inference that the person is undesirable." As the bioethicist Carl Elliott says, "there is something terrifying about looking deep inside and discovering that you're no different from the guy next door" (Elliott, 2000, p. 9). As one social psychologist diplomatically summarizes it in a book intended for a general audience, "Many of us do not want to think that we are like the 'average person'" (Wilson, 2002, p. 184). Indeed, several noted cross-cultural self-esteem researchers scholars 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 contrast, Japanese have less need to stand out (Tafarodi, Marshall, & Katsura, 2004) and may actually value being ordinary and average (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004; Yoshida, Ura, & Kurokawa, 2004). The meaning and implications of being average and ordinary are clearly not the same in Japan and North America. Being below average or even just average is undesirable in

North America and is accordingly related to (low) self-esteem. If being average in Japan is a desirable condition, then it might be positively related to self-esteem. However, if being average is neutral, then an association between being average and self-esteem would not be expected and therefore self-aggrandizement would not be an appropriate measure of self-esteem nor could it be said to serve self-esteem maintenance purpose. In other words, if people believe that most people are average and ordinary (which is probably the case, simply by definition), than being average and ordinary would be normal and not a distinction that could contribute to or compromise self-esteem. To put it another way, if everyone is unique and special, then everyone is the same in being unique and special and the differences that make them unique and special are necessarily too trivial to enhance self-esteem.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) has been the instrument of choice in self-esteem studies (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) has also been widely used in Japan, since first translated by Hoshino (1970), and the studies described below that assessed self-aggrandizement and self-esteem, all used Japanese versions of the RSES and some version of the better than average (BTA) paradigm.

Yamamoto, Matsui, & Yamanari (1982) used the RSES to assess the extent to which *jiko-hyoka* (self-value) is associated with self-concept (*jiko-gainen*) and self-knowledge (*jiko-ninchī*) in 11 personal characteristic domains (social skills, intelligence, sex, niceness, sports ability, looks, economic power, lifestyle, seriousness, academic standing, taste and special talents). They found that the male students had higher self-value than the female students, and that the male and female students differed significantly in their self-concept in nine of the 11 domains (all but niceness and seriousness), that self-value and self-concept were associated for five domains in the case of the males, and for four domains in the case of the females. In only two domains did the correlations differ significantly ( $p < .05$ ). These were niceness (the females self-value was more impacted by niceness) and knowledge (the males self-value was more impacted by intelligence). The individual correlations were small, the average of the nine significant correlations being .20. However, the pooled correlations were .429 and .449, for the males and females respectively.

Endo (1995, Study 1) used the RSES to test whether self-esteem and self-enhancing self-descriptions in a version of the Pelham and Swann (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ) were sensitive to competitive versus non-competitive context, and to the specificity of the comparison persons (specific people known to the participants versus *hitonami*, "average people"). In Study 1, Endo found that high self-esteem participants evaluated themselves as about equal to specific reference others in non-competitive contexts, while low self-esteem participants evaluated themselves less favorably. In competitive contexts, both high and low self-esteem participants evaluated themselves less favorably than specific reference others. Thus, self-assessments relative to average others were not self-aggrandizing regardless of context, and were self-effacing for both high and low self-esteem participants in competitive contexts, where presumably the accuracy of the interpersonal comparisons could become known.

Heine & Lehman (1997) used a Japanese version of the RSES in a study designed to ascer-

tain whether collective level self-enhancement was sensitive to the independent versus interdependent dimension of target traits. They found that it is not.

Ito (1999) administered the RSES to determine if self-esteem is related to self-aggrandizement, using the Yamamoto, Matsui, and Matsunari (1982) paradigm (described above) among Japanese college students and obtained mixed results. Participants rated themselves more positively on traits that they had described as more important, and rated themselves lower in traits that they had described as less important. Moreover, four of the 10 traits were associated with RSES scores. Ito repeated the study with a partially different set of traits, using the BTA paradigm and obtained similar results. Ito notes that the self-ascribed important traits (niceness, seriousness) were those for which there are no commonly agreed upon objective standards, compared to the less important traits (appearance, academic performance, wealth, sports ability, etc), and speculates that participants rated as more important the traits that they felt they could safely attribute to the self.

Endo, Heine, and Lehman (2000) found that self-esteem in Japanese, Canadian, and Asian Canadian college students was related to self-evaluations on 20 positive personal characteristics, but was not associated with the tendency to evaluate one's relationship partners more positively than oneself. While both groups of Canadians rated themselves significantly better than the average student, the Japanese rated themselves less positively than the average student.

Kobayashi & Brown (2003) administered the RSES in a study to test whether the self-descriptions of Japanese and American college students relative to other people is sensitive to the personal importance of the target traits and varies with self-esteem. They found that in all groups (high self-esteem, low self-esteem, Japanese, Canadians), ". . . the link between self-other bias was "stronger for important than for unimportant traits." Additionally, all groups evaluated themselves more positively than "most other students" (with the exception of the low self-esteem Japanese, who evaluated themselves as less "competent").

R. A. Brown (2006b, Study 2) found that Japanese college student participants were on average neither self-aggrandizing nor self-effacing, rating themselves as "average" with respect to 12 positive and 11 negative indigenously meaningful traits, and that their RSES scores were in the moderate range. Although participants were not in general self-aggrandizing, those few who did self-aggrandize had significantly higher self-esteem scores.

## **Overview**

In light of the vast literature establishing the link between self-aggrandizement and self-esteem in North America (see Baumeister et al., 2003 for a review), I expected that above average self-assessments would be associated with positive self-feelings and higher self-esteem while average or below average self-assessments would be associated with less positive feelings and lower self-esteem in the American participants. In light of the findings reported and cited above that Japanese value being ordinary and average but are ashamed to be below average, I expected that above average and average self-assessments would be associated with positive self-feelings and higher self-esteem, while below average self-assessments would be associated with less positive self-feelings and lower self-esteem. In other words, it was predicted that both American and Japanese participants who regarded themselves as above average would feel positively about themselves

and have higher self-esteem, and that those who regarded themselves as below average would feel less positively and would have lower self-esteem. However, a difference was predicted among those who regarded themselves as average. It was predicted that self-assessed average American students would have less positive self-feelings and self-esteem than self-assessed above average students, but more positive self-feelings and higher self-esteem than self-assessed below average students. Among the Japanese, it was predicted that self-assessed average students would not have less positive self-feelings or lower self-esteem than self-assessed above average students, but would have more positive feelings and higher self-esteem than self-assessed below average students.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants were 110 American college students from Des Moines, Iowa, USA, and 72 Japanese college students from a city in the Tokyo, Japan area. The American sample consisted of 29 males and 81 females, with an average age of 20.6 ( $SD = .50$ ). Two foreign students also completed the questionnaire. Their data were not analyzed. The Japanese sample consisted of 43 males and 29 females with an average age of 19.24 ( $SD = 1.76$ ). Although the Japanese sample in particular is small it is not appreciably smaller than others than have provided the basis for important generalizations, for examples, Brown & Kobayashi, 2002, Study 2; Endo, 1995, Study 2; Hornsey, 2003, Study 2; Kudo & Numazaki, 2003). Participation by both groups of students was voluntary and anonymous; no deception or manipulation was involved.

### *Instrument and Procedure*

The questionnaire was originally written in Japanese and then translated into English by the author. The original Rosenberg items were used in the English version and the Hoshino (1970) translations used in the Japanese version. Both samples completed a questionnaire that contained the RSES and several unrelated filler items. The American participants used a 7-point rating scale. The Japanese participants used a 5-point rating scale. In addition, two other questions were included. The first asked participants whether, everything considered, and as rationally and objectively as they could assess themselves, they regarded themselves as (1) above average, (2) below average, or (3) or just average in ability, intelligence, talent, experience, diligence, etc. This item was intended as a single-item, face valid, global assessment of self-competence. For exploratory purposes, as Crystal (1999) also observes, it is often sufficient to use a single highly face-valid item—a direct question, as it were. Ohashi & Yamaguchi (2004) assessed the degree to which participants regarded themselves as "ordinary" by asking them precisely this same single question, and Brown & Williams (1984) assessed a rather related construct (identification with the in-group) using essentially the same procedure. Similarly, in cases where the construct is unidimensional and highly "available," a single item can in some ways preferable to an admittedly more reliable multi-item measure (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). The second asked participants to disregard logic, and describe how they generally felt about themselves. Five response options were offered. These were: (1) My feelings about my self are basically positive, (2) My feelings about myself are mixed, about half positive and half negative, (3) My feelings about myself are basically negative, (4) I'm not sure how I feel about myself, and (5) I don't have any feelings about myself.<sup>1</sup> This item was intend-

ed as a single-item, face valid measure of global self-affect, but one that does not require the language and culture specific expression "self-esteem" as does the single-item Robins, Hendin, and Trzesniewski self-esteem measure.

### Results

The RSES had a Cronbach's alpha of .81 and .87 in the Japanese and American samples respectively, both adequate for the present purpose (Nunnally, 1978; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The mean for the American RSES was 5.33 ( $SD = 0.94$ ); the mean for the Japanese RSES was 2.85 ( $SD = 0.68$ ). Gender differences in both samples were non-significant. The American mean was significantly higher than the scale mid-point,  $t(109) = 14.84, p < .0001$ . The Japanese mean was slightly, but non-significantly lower, than the hypothetical scale mid-point,  $t(70) -1.90, p < .06$ . The results of the two global assessment items are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Responses to "How do you objectively view yourself?" and "How do you feel about yourself?", Japanese and American participants. Percentages in parentheses.

	Japanese		Americans	
<i>Think</i>				
Above Average	14	(19%)	66	(60%)
Average	39	(54%)	44	(40%)
Below Average	19	(26%)	00	-----
<i>Feel</i>				
Positive	10	(14%)	70	(64%)
Mixed	37	(51%)	35	(32%)
Negative	17	(24%)	02	(02%)
Not Sure	06	(08%)	03	(03%)
None	02	(03%)	00	-----

*Note.* *Think* = how do you regard yourself objectively? *Feel* = how do you feel about yourself? *Feel* included the response option "I don't have any feelings about myself." No one from either sample selected this response.

A chi-square test indicated that the global competence self-assessments of the Japanese and American samples differed significantly,  $\chi^2(2,182) = 47.23, p < .0001$ . Sixty percent of the American participants evaluated themselves as above average, while not a single individual regarded him or herself as below average (40% rated themselves as average). The Japanese participants, in contrast, evaluated their global self-competence in a more statistically plausible way. Fifty-four percent evaluated themselves as average, with about equal numbers above (19%) and below (26%) average. Another chi-square test indicated that the American and Japanese samples also differed in global self-affect,  $\chi^2(2,171) = 49.20, p < .0001$ . (Responses of "not sure" and "no feelings" were not ana-

lyzed.) Twice as many American participants reported basically positive feelings about themselves compared to those who reported mixed feelings, and only two reported negative feelings. In contrast, the majority of Japanese participants reported mixed feelings, and more reported negative than positive feelings. In both samples, relatively few claimed to be unsure how they felt and only two of the Japanese participants claimed to have no feelings about themselves. This is an important consideration, as it suggests that the "mixed feeling" and "average" self-ratings represent true self-assessments and self-feelings. Students who did not wish to participate, as Nunnally (1978) suggested, could have done so more decisively by selecting the "not sure" or "no feelings" options. As with the global self-competence item, the responses in the American sample are skewed in a positive direction, while the Japanese responses more nearly resemble a normal distribution. In both samples global self-competence assessments were associated with global self-affect, Japanese  $\chi^2(2,64) = 18.41, p < .0001$ , American  $\chi^2(2,110) = 113.20, p < .0001$ .

Unfortunately, the association between self-esteem and global self competence and global self-affect could not be fully explored due to the fact that so few American participants assessed themselves as below average or had negative self-feelings. In America those who regarded themselves as above average had higher self-esteem scores than those who regarded themselves as average,  $M = 5.67, SD = 0.79$ , and  $M = 4.83, SD = 0.93$ , respectively,  $t(108) = 5.03, p < .0001$ . The association between below average self-assessments and self-feelings and self-esteem could not be calculated because no student regarded him/herself as below average. Those whose self-feelings were basically positive also had significantly higher self-esteem ( $M = 5.77, SD = .65$ ) than those whose feelings were mixed ( $M = 4.68, SD = .89$ ), independent-sample  $t(103) = 7.20, p < .0001$ . Among the Japanese participants, self-esteem was associated with global self-competence. A one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that the three groups differed,  $F(2,69) = 15.81, p < .0001$ , and post hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that participants who regarded themselves as above average had higher self-esteem ( $M = 3.43, SD = 0.72$ ) than those who regarded themselves as average ( $M = 2.91, SD = 0.53$ ), and those who regarded themselves as average had higher self-esteem than those who regarded themselves as below average ( $M = 2.32, SD = 0.52$ ), both  $p < .05$ .

Is global self-affect related to self-esteem? Among the Japanese participants it is. As can be seen in Table 2 below, participants whose self feelings were basically positive had higher self-esteem than those whose self-feelings were mixed, who in turn had higher self-esteem than those whose self-feelings were basically negative (as mentioned above, the participants who were not sure how they felt or had no self-feelings were not analyzed).

Among the American participants, too few participants had negative self-feelings to make a three way contrast meaningful, so an independent-sample  $t$  test was performed, comparing the self-esteem scores of the positive self-feeling group and mixed feelings group. As can be seen in Table 2, participants who viewed themselves as above average had higher self-esteem scores than those who viewed themselves as average. However the self-esteem of the lower self-esteem American participants, but not the Japanese participants, was on average higher than the scale mid-point,  $t(43) = 5.93, p < .0001$  and  $t(38) -1.06, ns$ , respectively. One might hypothesize that, had there been any, American participants who viewed themselves as below average would have had the lowest

self-esteem scores, which however would still have been above the scale mid-point. Apparently such people are uncommon in North America. They are apparently not rare in Japan, as one would expect if self-esteem were normally distributed. The Japanese participants who viewed themselves as below average in competence had self-esteem score that were significantly lower than the scale mid-point,  $t(18) = -5.75, p < .0001$ .

Table 2. Self-esteem in above average, below average, and average self-evaluations, Japanese and American participants..

	Above Average	Average	Below Average	
Japanese	3.43 <sub>a</sub> (0.72)	2.91 <sub>b</sub> (0.53)	2.32 <sub>c</sub> (0.52)	*
Americans	5.67 <sub>a</sub> (0.79)	4.83 <sub>b</sub> (0.93)	-----	***

*Note.* Within each row means with different subscripts are significantly different at \*  $p < .02$ , \*\*\*  $p < .0001$ .

### Discussion

American and Japanese college students, judging from these samples, are rather similar in the structures of their self-concepts, at least with regard to the interrelationships between global self-competence, global self-affect, and self-esteem. Participants in both countries tend to feel good about themselves and have higher self-esteem when they view themselves as above average, and they tend to feel bad about themselves and have lower self-esteem when they view themselves as below average. Interestingly, the American participants had high self-esteem (i.e., significantly above the scale mid-point) even when they viewed themselves as average and had mixed self-feelings. The Japanese participants who similarly viewed themselves as average and had mixed self-feelings, had self-esteem that was neither high nor low, and similar to the scores typically recorded in Japanese samples (Heine et al., 1999; Schmitt & Allik). The Japanese who viewed themselves as below average also had basically negative self-affect, and low self-esteem (i.e., significantly lower than the scale mid-point). In this respect, the two samples are rather similar. Where they differ clearly is in the distribution. The American participants were reluctant to describe themselves as being average or having mixed feelings, and virtually unanimous in rejecting the possibility that they were below average, or had negative self-feelings, or low self-esteem. The Japanese participants, on the contrary, appeared to accept average self-competence assessments, mixed self-feelings, and moderate self-esteem in a reasonably realistic manner. As has been noted before, not everyone can be above average, and the Japanese participants' self assessments seem to reflect this reality. Thus, the apparent paradox of Japanese self-esteem can readily be explained by reference to the tendency of Japanese samples to describe themselves in relatively accurate terms. Some individuals believe that they are above average, others believe that they are below average and their RSES scores are related to these beliefs in the same way that they are related in America. As in America, it feels good to be above average and feels bad to be below average. However, the majori-



ty of Japanese believe that they are "average" and seemingly do not feel bad about that fact. A relevant question is why.

If one believes that most people are average, one would not have any special reason for feeling bad about being the same as most other people. As indicated above, being average in Japan implies that one has met expected standards of performance, which does not have negative implications. In America, "average" implies "inferior." Two final points might be added. First is that in view of the infrequency with which Japanese college students describe themselves as other than average and their self-feelings as other than mixed, it is clear that sample sizes considerably larger than are typically used in such cross-cultural research may be needed to detect certain effects. Second, to the degree that Japanese personal judgments are less illusory than are Americans', in the sense discussed by J. D. Brown (1986), and Taylor and Brown (1988; 1994), perhaps their judgments should be taken as the standard by which American judgments should be assessed, rather than vice-versa. Moreover, in view of the patent fact that Japanese self-judgments are less illusory, perhaps they are also more "veridical" (Heine, et al., 1999). In other words, it may not be necessary to seek out special evidence to disconfirm the hypothesis that Japanese are practicing "feigned modesty" when they complete instruments such as the RSES or social comparison tasks (see R. A. Brown, 2006f for discussion of the feigned modesty issue). A more parsimonious hypothesis is that American respondents are exhibiting an exaggerated, if not feigned, sense of self-confidence, self-competence, and self-liking. To put it concretely, most Japanese believe that they are average, which in fact most Japanese are by definition, while most Americans believe that they are above average which most Americans by definition cannot be. Apodictically, Japanese judgments are less illusory, and therefore may be more veridical.

### ***The Meaning of Being Average in Japan***

A number of intuitively related concepts have been invoked to explain why Japanese may fail to self-enhance. It has been claimed for example that compared to North Americans, Japanese typically have less need or desire to be unique (Yamaguchi, 1994; Yamaoka, 1994), distinctive (Tafarodi, Marshall, & Katsura, 2004), and more need or desire to be ordinary (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004), and average (Yoshida, Ura, & Kurokawa, 2004). Yamaoka has shown that uniqueness and self-esteem are positively related in Japan. Tafarodi et al. showed that Japanese have less need for vertical distinctiveness (i.e., being better or worse than others, rather than merely different) than Canadians, and moreover that the gains from positive distinctiveness are less, relative to the losses from negative distinctiveness, for Japanese compared to Canadians. Ohashi and Yamaguchi argued that being ordinary is so desirable in Japan that people often claim to be more ordinary than average and that such "super-ordinary" perceptions influence predictions about future life events. Endo (1995, citing Inoue (1977) claims that in Japan "being below an average [*hitonami*, or "most people"] is considered as very disgraceful or shameful." In the United States, where competition and achievement are cultural obsessions (Sternberg, 1997; see also Covington, 1989, cited in Kahne, 1996) to be less than "above average" is a form of failure (Alicke, et al., 1995). In Japan, in contrast, being average, or "ordinary" (Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004) is a less negative, and possibly even positive, condition (R. A. Brown, 2005b) and implies lack of failure rather than

lack of success. In some Asian and other collectivistic cultures, Japan in particular, avoiding failure is stressed more than achieving success (Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, & Sheldon, 2001; Miyake & Yamazaki, 1995, cited in Kurman, Yoshihara-Tanaka, & Elkoshi, 2003) and failure has a greater impact on self-feelings than success does (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Noraskkunit, 1997). In Japan, "not falling behind" is regarded as a more attainable goal than "getting ahead." Being "average" means that one has kept up and thereby successfully avoided failure.

It would be exaggerating to say that being average is a positive ambition for Japanese. The desire to be average is no more the norm in Japan (or at least, among 19 year old university students), than it is in America. In a one study, a group of Japanese students ( $n = 81$ ) and a group of American students ( $n = 49$ ), from the same schools as described above and demographically equivalent, were asked whether they agreed with the statement "I would be satisfied if I could be just average in most ways" (the full study is described in Brown, 2006e<sup>2</sup>). Among the Japanese students, 44 (54%) disagreed, 22 (27%) agreed, and 15 (18%) weren't sure. Among the American students, 35 (71%) disagreed, 12 (24%) agreed, and 2 (4%) weren't sure. Chi square tests indicated that these distributions differed at  $p < .05$  when the "don't know" option was included,  $\chi^2(2,130) = 6.42, p < .05$ , but not when it was omitted,  $\chi^2(1,113) = 0.47, ns$ . But in both groups, ignoring the students who didn't know how they feel about being average, the students who would not be satisfied to be average significantly outnumber those who would be. Binomial tests against an expected proportion of .5 showed that significantly more Japanese students would not be satisfied and significantly more American students also would not be satisfied, than would be satisfied (both  $ps < .01$ ). Thus, Japanese and American students may not be so different in their aspirations, but may simply differ in how realistic they are. Japanese students do not want to be average any more than American students do, but they are more accepting of the fact that they are. And this may be, as suggested above, because while it is desirable to be above average in both cultures, it is less undesirable to be average in Japan than America.

### **General Discussion**

The present study examined the connection between global self-competence assessments, global self-affect, and self-esteem in North America and Japan. Positivity of self-feelings and self-esteem appeared to be related to perceptions that one is generally above average in both North American and Japanese samples. Thus, being above average appears to make college students feel good about themselves in Japan as well as in North America. What seems to differ culturally is in the implications of being average. Although the present sample size is not sufficient to justify firm conclusions, it appears that perceiving oneself as average has a negative impact on North American students' self-feelings and self-esteem. It does not appear to have such an impact on Japanese college students.

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, and 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.

However, rather than asking why Japanese self-beliefs are approximately veridical, it may be more revealing to ask why American beliefs are not. The importance of having positive self-feelings (R. A. Brown, 2006e) and emotions (Olson, Kashiwagi, & Crystal, 2001) is not assumed in Japan and so the motivation to self-aggrandize in order to promote, maintain, or restore them is attenuated or absent. The right to be happy (or rather, to pursue happiness) is a self-evidently true and inalienable right for Americans, according to The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies, issued July 4, 1776, and it is possible that Americans can not be happy unless they feel good about themselves, and cannot feel good about themselves unless they are better than most other people. This may motivate them to cognitively eliminate one source of bad feelings, namely the perception that they are not above average. Japanese do not believe that they have a right to happiness, and on the contrary are somewhat ambivalent about it, believing that happiness comes at a cost which can sometimes be excessive (Lebra, 1976; Plath, 1980; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). Too, Japanese apparently do not feel particularly bad about successfully achieving the culturally mandated goal of avoiding failure (as being average implies), hence they have little need to seek illusory ways to view themselves as above average.

In sum, the data above suggest that people feel good about being above average in both North America and in Japan, but the Japanese participants appear to differ from their North American counterparts primarily in the extent to which they accept and are not overly psychologically distressed by the fact that they are similar to most other people in being average.

### ***Concluding Comments***

Some limitations in the present research should be remarked. First, as with all studies of this type, participants were not drawn randomly from their respective populations and therefore may not represent those populations. Second, the data are correlational and accordingly conclusions about causation can not be confidently drawn. Finally, it is generally impossible to distinguish between response styles and attitudes based on questionnaire responses alone. Participants may be feigning modesty (Heine et al., 1999), or may be overstating their cognitions and feelings of self-worth, or simply may be selectively using the middle or extreme parts of the scales (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Cheung & Rensvold, 2000; Hui & Triandis, 1989; Paulus, 1991), or as Nunnally (1978) suggests, may not want to participate in the research. In any event, as philosophers tell us (Hyslop, 2005), there is no way to know what other people think or feel, other than via the sort of intuition or "theory of mind" that all normal human beings are endowed with (Dorris, Espie, Knott, & Salt, 2004), and self-reported data are probably as reliable as any other source of information, provided that obvious faking and response styles are taken into consideration (Nederhof, 1985). R. A. Brown (2006a) reports results indicating that Japanese students' self-descriptions under anonymous conditions do not differ significantly from the self-descriptions of participants provided under non-anonymous conditions. This could justify the conclusion that participants are faking under anonymous conditions, or that they are responding veridically under non-anonymous conditions. Distinguishing between these two possibilities would require additional investigation and doubtless

would require closer attention to individual cases, as recommended by Matsumoto (1999). It must be noted that there is a certain ethnocentric bias in the assumption that Western participants are responding truthfully when they strongly endorse positive self-esteem statements, but Japanese participants may be responding falsely when they do not strongly endorse the same statements. Although the opposite conclusion is equally plausible, it has not been seriously argued that American self-esteem scores are the result of "feigned self-appreciation and self-affection." However, as a tentative conclusion, it can be said that Japanese participants who are willing to disclose their self-evaluations and self-feelings appear to be fundamentally similar to North Americans, once allowances are made for cultural differences in the meanings of certain key concepts, as described above.

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### Footnotes

1. The Japanese version of the questionnaire is available from the author.
2. In this study, participants responded using a 7-point Likert type scale. To circumvent questions of response style, discussed at length in Brown 2006e, the results are herein discussed in categorical (*agree, disagree, don't know*) terms.