

# **Self-Esteem, Modest Responding, Sandbagging, Fear of Negative Evaluation, and Self-Concept Clarity in Japan**

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## **Abstract**

Japanese people typically score low on explicit measures of self-esteem, such as the Rosenberg self-esteem scale. Modest self-presentation has been offered as a possible explanation. The present research provides evidence that modesty is indeed implicated, but is not solely responsible for low Japanese self-esteem scores. Samples of 449 and 122 Japanese college students participated. Results indicate that modesty is a highly valued characteristic, while immodesty is disdained and that modesty, sandbagging, fear of negative evaluation, and self-concept clarity were significantly associated with self-esteem. It is concluded that expressions of Japanese self-esteem may be impacted by a variety of factors, including but not limited to self-concept clarity, sandbagging, modesty, and fear of negative evaluation.

**Key Words:** self-esteem, modesty, self-concept clarity, fear of negative evaluation

High self-esteem is regarded by many influential American theorists as essential for good mental health and psychological functioning, and even for life outcomes. The need for high self-esteem has even been postulated to be a human universal, as important as food and shelter. Accordingly, few Americans do not claim to have high self-esteem. Problematically however, most Japanese do not. In fact, Japanese self-esteem scores on the widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale tend to be moderate rather than high and indeed moderate scores are regarded as indicative of “low” self-esteem in America. (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Campbell, et al. 1996; Carter & Dinnell, 1997; Endo, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1995; Heine, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2005; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000; Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003; Kudo, & Numazaki, 2003; Kurman, 2003; Kurman, & Sriram, 2002; Muramoto, 2003; Norasakkunkit, & Kalik, 2002; Takata, 2003; Yamamoto, Matsui, & Yamanari, 1982). Some researchers (for example, Heine et al.) have argued that Japanese self-esteem really is low, that Japanese society values self-improvement rather than self-satisfaction and therefore Japanese individuals derive feelings of self-worth from being self-critical. Other researchers (for example, Kurman & Sriram) find this position contradictory, in that it appears to claim that Japanese feel good about being inadequate. Instead, they argue, Japanese have the same motivation to feel good about themselves. However they do not truthfully express their self-feelings due to modesty. To be more concrete, they decline to

strongly endorse the positive RSES items, and do not strongly reject the negative items. They may respond that they are unsure of how they think and feel about themselves.

Modesty is only one reason Japanese individuals may not express high self-esteem. Among other reasons, they may fear the consequences of expressing self-esteem, if they believe that such expressions are disliked by other people. They may also be unsure of what they think about themselves. That is, their self-concepts may be “unclear.” Or, in a superficially similar but fundamentally different way, they may be very clear about the situation-specificity of their—and other people’s—behavior, personalities, and selves. In this case, peoples will tend to avoid extreme context-independent descriptions of people in general and themselves in particular. And they may also simply respond to Likert type assessment devices moderately for reasons unrelated to their self-concepts. The present research was designed to investigate these possibilities.

Low self-esteem scores could fail to indicate actual self feelings for a variety of reasons. Response biases and styles, and modesty, are two possible reasons that have been considered. For example, respondents may avoid extreme responses, or they may respond differently to positive versus negative items, and so on (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Hui & Triandis, 1989; Scmitt & Allik, 2005). If the response pattern manifests itself even in cases where self-presentation is not involved, then this may be seen as a “response bias” or “response style” (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994, p. 339-340). If the situation involves self-presentation, then respondents may express modesty or other socially desirable characteristics (Nunnally, 1978; Paulhus, 1991) by denying or declining to endorse self-positive statements or by affirming self-negative statements.

Low self-esteem scores can result from other factors as well. Lack of self-knowledge and lack of certainty about one’s characteristics and capabilities have been found to manifest themselves in low self-esteem scores in North Americans (Baumgardner, 1990). Campbell (1990) describes this as self-concept clarity, which is “. . . the extent to which the contents of an individual’s self-concept. . . are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell, p. 4). As Miyamoto et al. (2001, p. 161) point out, unstable or neutral scores may also reflect the transitory nature of pre-adult self-evaluations. Similarly, people who are sensitive to the pervasive situation-specificity of most forms of human behavior and personality (Klein, Comrides, Murray, & Tooby, 2004; Mischel, 2004), will tend to use the less committal portions of most commonly used rating scales. In the case of self-assessments this may make them appear to have lower self-concept clarity and lower self-esteem. Low self-concept clarity can produce low self-esteem scores if “low” self-esteem is interpreted, as it is in North America, as self-esteem that is not “high” (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Beauregard & Dunning, 2001; Brown & Dutton, 1995). Moderate self-esteem scores are by definition “low.” People who are sure that they are average, and people who are unsure about their self-characteristics, will both have moderate self-esteem scores and will therefore be classified as having low self-esteem. Low Japanese self-esteem is therefore low only by definition. Thus, in assessing the effect of modesty on self-esteem scores, self-concept clarity must also be considered.

Expressing self-esteem, whether publicly or privately, is a form of self-presentation, given that people do form impressions of other people based on how they describe themselves. People who

are concerned with the impressions they make on other people may attempt to behave in ways that elicit favorable impressions. Describing oneself, even in the context of a seemingly anonymous questionnaire is a form a self-presentation (Kitayama & Uchida, 2003) and therefore concerns about the evaluation that could potentially be elicited by one's self-description might be expected to nudge the respondents' responses in a more socially desirable direction. Leary describes this sort of concern as "fear of negative evaluation" (Leary 1991). Fear of negative evaluation may encourage modesty, but it may encourage self-assertion, depending on what the respondent believes the people who he or she fears being evaluated by value (MacDonald, Saltzman, & Leary, 2003). Modesty may be correlated with, and in fact motivated by, fear of negative evaluation, but it need not be, depending on cultural and other contexts. Therefore it was deemed appropriate to assess modesty and fear of negative evaluation independently. Gibson and Sachau (2000) focused more specifically on the public impression management facet of the sort of evaluation anxiety described by Leary. They refer to this as "sandbagging." Sandbagging is similar to modesty but occurs prior to performance while modesty occurs subsequent to performance. More importantly, sandbagging is an explicit self-presentational strategy designed to quell performance anxiety by reducing audience expectations.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the degree to which modesty, fear of negative evaluation, sandbagging, and self-concept clarity contribute to global, trait self-esteem, as measured specifically by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In the Main Study, I used the Whetstone, Okun, and Cialdi (1992) Modest Responding Scale (MRS) cited in Kurman (2003), Leary's Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNES) (Leary, 1991; Leary & Kowalski, 1995), Gibson and Sachau's (2000) Sandbagging Scale (SBS), and Campbell's (1990) Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS) to assess modesty, fear of negative evaluation, and self-concept clarity, respectively and Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) to assess global self-esteem. (It should be pointed out that the MRS is explicitly a measure of modest responding, rather than trait modesty.) These will be described more fully below. Preliminary to the main study I conducted a study designed to establish evaluative base-rates for the key concepts involved, in particular the concepts of modesty (*kenson*), and arrogance (*gouman*). I did this by asking samples of students similar to those in the main study to evaluate a number of words that refer to personality and expressions of personality, including *kenson* and *gouman*.

## **Preliminary Study**

### ***Method***

#### *Participants and Instrument*

Participants were 449 first year students of the same approximate age and from the same university as the participants in Main Study 1. who were asked to provide desirability ratings on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very bad*) to 7 (*very good*), with 4 labeled *neither good nor bad*, for a number of Japanese person related descriptive words, of which ten are relevant here (equivalent to *modest*, *boastful*, *conceited*, *typical*, *reserved*, *self-centered*, *pushy*, *selfish*, *arrogant*, and *self-*

*respect*). (Since the ratings were collected over a period of time and different groups of students participated, the actual sample size for each rating varies from 290 to 449.) Students participated voluntarily; and no deception, coercion, or manipulation was involved. Participants were told that the questionnaire concerned people's opinions about different kinds of personal characteristics. The seven characteristics below were embedded in questionnaires that contained a wide variety of others (see R.A. Brown, 2005d for details). The questionnaire was composed in Japanese.

Table 1. Favorability Ratings for Japanese Personality Descriptive Words.

Word	Translation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Jisonshin	Self-respect	5.01 ***	1.22	357
Kenson	Modesty	4.73 ***	1.05	376
Hikaeme	Moderateness	4.05	0.98	449
Tenkeiteki	Typical	4.00	0.90	357
Jiman	Boastfulness	3.41 ***	1.09	358
Deshabari	Pushy	3.07 ***	1.02	367
Gouman	Arrogance	2.84 ***	1.20	365
Unuborenotsuyoi	Conceited	2.69 ***	1.03	290
Wagamama	Selfish	2.60 ***	1.07	357
Jikochuushin	Self-centered	2.46 ***	1.21	449

Note. \*\*\* Significantly different from scale midpoint at  $p < .001$ .

As expected, modesty was rated favorably, and boastfulness, pushiness, arrogance, conceit, selfishness, and self-centeredness were rated unfavorably. Three traits received somewhat unexpected ratings. *Reserved* which is often closely associated with modesty, was rated as neither good nor bad, *Typical*, which would appear to be related to averageness, ordinariness, non-uniqueness, which have been argued to be positive qualities and cultural desiderata in East Asian cultures (Kim & Markus, 1999; Ohashi & Yamaguchi, 2004; Yamaguchi, 1994; Yamaoka, 1994) was also rated as neither good nor bad. Finally, *self-respect*, which has been used as an equivalent for "self-esteem" in a number of studies (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkun, 1997; Hori, 2003) was rated highly favorably. This is surprising only in the sense that it makes low self-esteem scores (to be discussed below) somewhat paradoxical. If self-respect is equivalent to self-esteem, and like self-esteem, is a favorable quality to have, why are the SE scores of students like these invariably "low"?

### ***Results and Discussion***

*Modesty* and *self-respect* were rated significantly above the midpoint; *boastful*, *conceited*, and *arrogant*, *pushy*, *selfish*, and *self-centered* were rated below. These six negative traits words

formed a stable scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ) with item to total correlations ranging from .36 to .49. *Average* and *reserved* were rated neither above nor below. Means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

## **Main Study**

### *Predictions*

1. Modest Responding is negatively related to Self-Esteem. People who endorse modesty norms more will express lower Self-Esteem.
2. Self-Concept Clarity is negatively related to Self-Esteem. People who are unclear about who and what they are will express lower Self-Esteem.
3. Fear of Negative Evaluation is negatively related to Self-Esteem. People who fear negative evaluation will avoid behaviors that they believe will be negatively evaluated, and therefore will express lower Self-Esteem.
4. Sandbagging is negatively related to Self-Esteem. People who are motivated to understate their strengths will express lower Self-Esteem.

## **Method**

*Instrument and Participants.* Participants were 122 Japanese college students (29 males and 93 females) with an average age of 18.8 ( $SD = 0.8$ ), enrolled in various English and other classes at a small non-elite university in the Tokyo area. The students filled out the questionnaire during class in groups of 30-50 students, voluntarily, and anonymously. Background questions included gender, age, and several others that are not relevant here (such as whether the student had a part-time job, whether he or she had traveled overseas, etc.). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a 10-item self-report, Likert scored inventory, with five positive and five negative self-referential statements was used to assess Self-Esteem. Sample items on the RSES are “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” and “I feel I do not have much to be proud of” (reverse keyed). A 20-item version of Whetstone et al.’s Modest Responding Scale (MRS) was used to assess Modest Responding. Sample items on the MRS are “It’s difficult for me to talk about my strengths to others even when I know I possess them” and “If I’ve done something well, I like to tell people about it” (reverse keyed). The 12-item version of the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNES), was used to assess fear of negative evaluation. Sample items include “Other people’s opinions of me do not bother me” (reverse keyed) and “When I am talking to someone, I worry about what they may be thinking about me.” The 12-item Sandbagging Scale (SBS) was used to assess sandbagging self-presentational propensities.<sup>1</sup> Sample items are “The less others expect of me, the better I like it” and “I understate my skills, ability, and knowledge.” Campbell’s Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS) was used to assess Self-Concept Clarity. The SCCS includes such items as “I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality” and “I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am” (reverse keyed). The well-established Hoshino (1970) translation of the RSES was used.

The remainder of the questionnaire was translated by a professional translator and checked by several bilingual students to ensure accuracy, as recommended by Behling & Law (2000). All items were answered using a 7-point scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*).

## Results

*Self-Esteem.* Cronbach's alpha for the RSES scale was .78, indicating acceptable reliability. The mean SE score for both groups together was 3.94 ( $SD = 0.93$ ), which was marginally lower than the scale midpoint,  $t(121) = 1.85, p < .07$ , due mostly to lower female means. The male and female means did not differ significantly from each other; the female means, but not the male means, were lower than the scale midpoint ( $p < .05$ ).

*Modest Responding.* Cronbach's alpha for the MRS, was .88, indicating adequate internal reliability. The male and female students did not differ significantly from each other. The combined mean MR score was 3.64 ( $SD = 0.87$ ), which was significantly lower than the scale mid-point,  $t(118) = -4.58, p < .0001$ . This would seem to indicate relatively low levels of modesty.

*Self-Concept Clarity.* At .68, the SCCS had a somewhat lower than recommended alpha (Nunnally, 1978), but in view of the exploratory nature of this study, it is adequate for present purposes. Male and female means did not differ,  $t(155) = 1.27, p = .205$ . The SCC mean (4.23,  $SD = 0.78$ ) was slightly higher,  $t(121) = 3.23, p < .01$ , than the scale midpoint.

*Fear of Negative Evaluation.* Cronbach's alpha for the FNES was .87. Male and female did not differ significantly and the combined mean was 4.57 ( $SD = 1.03$ ) which was significantly higher than the scale midpoint,  $t(120) = 6.07, p < .0001$ .

*Sandbagging.* Cronbach's alpha for the SBS was .72. Male and female scores did not differ significantly and the combined mean was 4.70 ( $SD = 0.85$ ) which was significantly higher than the scale midpoint,  $t(121) = 9.0, p < .0001$ .

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for SE, MR, SB, SCC, and FNE

	M	SD
SE	3.84	0.93
MR	3.64	0.87 ****
SB	4.70	0.85 ****
SCC	4.23	0.79 **
FNE	4.57	1.03 ****

Note. Significantly different from scale midpoint at \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < .0001$ .

Due in part no doubt to the relatively small male sub-sample size, none of the correlations differed significantly between the males and females. The combined correlations are shown in Table 3.

Table. 3. Correlations between self-esteem, sandbagging, fear of negative evaluation, self-concept clarity, and modest responding for Japanese college students (N = 122).

	SB	FNE	SCC	MR
SE	-.28 ****	-.45 ****	-.44 ****	-.45 ****

Note: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients, \*\* significant at  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < .0001$

Hypothesis 1 was supported: More modest participants expressed lower SE. Hypothesis 2 was supported: Students lower in SCC expressed lower SE. Hypothesis 3 was supported: Students higher in FNE expressed lower SE. Hypothesis 4 was supported: Students higher in SB expressed lower SE.

### ***Discussion and Concluding Comments***

Our results can be summarized succinctly. First, Japanese university students do in fact, as is stereotypically believed, regard modesty favorably and immodesty and related behaviors or traits unfavorably. Extreme levels of modesty however are not universal characteristics of the current generation of 19 year old students. Second, the RSES scores typically obtained from samples of 19 year old Japanese university students may be the result of any combination of self-concept unclarity, modesty, sandbagging, and fear of negative evaluation. It goes without saying that the data reported in the present study are correlational and it is not possible to tell whether self-esteem derives from modesty, self-concept clarity, sandbagging, and fear of negative evaluation, or vice versa, or whether they are all the result of an independent, or higher-order factor. One possibility is that scores are systematically related across scales due to individual-level differences in willingness to respond, (or to participate in the study, as Nunnally, 1978, put it), or confusion as to what the investigator is asking, or what the questions mean, literally or otherwise. Schwarz and Oyserman (2001) point out that respondents assume rational communicative intent on the part of the questionnaire writer and attempt to provide an interpretation that preserves the assumption of Gricean cooperativeness (Grice, 1975). However, that interpretation may be at odds with the one intended by the researcher. This problem is one that has been discussed extensively by Schwarz (1999) and his colleagues (Igou, Bless, & Schwarz, 2002; Norenzayan & Schwarz, 1999), who demonstrate that participants' responses are often influenced by their "tacit inferences about the researcher's epistemic goals" (Norenzayan & Schwarz). If the questionnaire items or study instructions do not offer sufficient information to form a plausible hypothesis concerning the researcher's interests, participants will attempt to infer it from *any* information that is available from the context or from their personal or cultural theories about human psychology. In one study, for example, the researchers

asked participants to explain the causes of a mass murder. In one condition, the researcher was indirectly identified as a social scientist. In the other condition, he was identified as a personality psychologist. As predicted, participants in the first conditions provided more situational explanations, while those in the second condition provided more dispositional explanations. In a more general way, it is obvious that participants know that they are involved in a research project. It is possible that they have hypotheses about the objective of the study. However, it is unclear what they think that those objectives are and of course, participant hypotheses may vary widely, just as their interpretations of particular items in some cases do (see Brown, 2006d and Scmitt & Allik, 2005 for examples). It is also possible that they have no idea what the study is about. Fiske (2002) makes an even more telling point:

If norms and values are defined contextually and are meaningful only with respect to situationally defined factors, it does not make sense to ask respondents to answer global questions that require them to average over contexts.

If the questions are asked despite this, it seems likely that respondents, striving to cooperate with the researcher (Orne, 1962) would select the most non-committal options available, and this indeed may be one reason, if not the whole reason, for the well-established tendency of Japanese participants to use the middle scale steps (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995). If for example, the correct answer to a question “depends on the situation” (*baai no yotte*) and that response option is not available then participants could either answer that they “don’t know” (because the relevant situation is not specified), or they could imagine their own situation within which the question could be truthfully answered. The problem of course is that the researcher does not know what situation the participant imagined. And there is evidence that Japanese are among the people who are particularly context sensitive when rendering evaluations of the self and others, as Cousins (1989) showed in one of the first empirical studies of the Japanese self. These are problems associated with questionnaires and experiments of many kinds, and therefore, as recommended by Fiske, (2002) Matsumoto (1999), and Triandis (1999), and put into practice by Miller, Wang, Sandel, and Cho (2002), and Cho, Sandel, Miller, and Wang (2005), indigenous concepts of self and identity should also be investigated using techniques borrowed from other disciplines, including but not limited to participant-observation and interviews.

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### Notes

1. It may be objected that MR and SB are essentially the same. In fact, the correlation between SB and MR was only moderate,  $r(119) = .34, p < .0001$ . The correlation between SB and FNE was actually larger,  $r(121) = .47, p < .0001$ . Thus, as in Gibson and Sachau's original study, SB is conceptually distinct from MR, and merits independent assessment.