

# **The Effect of Anonymity on Self-Evaluations in Japanese College Students**

**R. A. Brown**

## **Abstract**

A considerable part of the debate over whether Japanese do or do not self-enhance, and hence whether self-enhancement universally serves the purpose of self-esteem maintenance, revolves around the question of the “veridicality” of the responses of the Japanese participants. Participants are generally promised anonymity in exchange for honesty. However, in such cases, there typically is no comparison group. The present article reports a study in which 19 self-evaluations of anonymous Japanese college student respondents are compared with the self-evaluations of non-anonymous respondents. Results indicate that the responses of the two groups did not differ in any significant way and that therefore “feigned modesty” is not greatly influencing the veridicality of Japanese self-reports.

A considerable part of the debate over whether Japanese do or do not self-enhance, and hence whether self-enhancement universally serves the purpose of self-esteem maintenance, revolves around the question of the “veridicality” of the responses of the Japanese participants (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000). When Japanese participants describe themselves as average or even worse than average, do they actually believe that they are average or worse than average, or are they merely being modest, or self-critical? Heine and his colleagues have argued in a series of investigations that Japanese responses are indeed veridical and that therefore Japanese are self-critical rather than merely modest (Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; see also Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Noraskkunit, 1997). They argue that because Japanese participants have been assured of anonymity, they have no incentive to attempt to appear modest and so their responses probably reflect what they truly believe. Kurman (2001) points out that “anonymity is the rule for most studies...” and therefore that assuring participants that their responses will be kept confidential may have little or no impact on their willingness to reply “veridically” beyond that which would result from simply collecting the questionnaires in such a way that participants can see that identification would be problematic. What would seem to be needed is a more sharply defined comparison group, in short, a group of participants who have on the contrary been assured that their responses will not be anonymous. If response patterns vary depending on the possibility of public scrutiny, then veridicality is questionable. If they do not vary, then one can reasonably conclude that public self-representations genuinely reflect private self-evaluations.

Modesty has been described both as a personality characteristic and as a self-presentational and impression management strategy. Similarly, self-criticism has been described in both public and private terms. But for the most part, the discourse has assumed that modesty is public and self-criticism is private, that modesty is

motivated by a dual desire to avoid social disapproval and gain social approval, while self-criticism is motivated by a desire for self-improvement. Ultimately, both have interpersonal objectives, those of interacting successfully with other people.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1.

Relations between Private and Public Self-Evaluations of Japanese College Students and Self-Esteem Implications.

Private	Public	Implication
BTA	BTA	Veridical
BTA	Average	Self-Effacing
BTA	WTA	Self-Effacing
Average	BTA	Self-Enhancing
Average	Average	Veridical
Average	WTA	Self-Effacing
WTA	BTA	Self-Enhancing
WTA	Average	Self-Enhancing
WTA	WTA	Veridical

*Note.* BTA = better than average, WTA = worse than average.

Based on past research, it was hypothesized that participants would make more self-effacing self-evaluations in the relatively more public condition, compared to the relatively anonymous condition.

## METHOD

### *Participants and Instrument.*

Participants were 102 Japanese university students enrolled in an introductory psychology and English courses at a mid-sized university in the Yokohama, Japan area. Initial analyses revealed that eight (seven males and one female) students failed to complete the questionnaire adequately (in most cases, by using the same neutral response option for all of the items), leaving a final sample size of 94 (59 males and 33 females, 2 unspecified with an average age of 19.4 ( $SD = 1.2$ )). Participation was voluntary, no compensation was offered, and participants were informed that the study concerned personal impressions of the self and other people. No deception or manipulation was involved. Questionnaires were administered to two groups of students, one by the author and one by a Japanese colleague, during the month of May, 2005. The first group of 61 students (38 males, 22 females, 1 unspecified) filled out and returned the questionnaire under anonymous conditions in large groups and no personally identifying information was requested. The second group of 32 students (21 males, 11 females, 1 unspecified) filled the questionnaire out under non-anonymous conditions, in small groups and personally returned the questionnaire to the author, who was well acquainted with each of them, having been their English teacher for the previous ten weeks. Students also wrote their student ID numbers and names in

Japanese and English. Stimulus materials were 10 positive and 9 negative trait descriptions (based on evaluative ratings provided by samples of similar students (Brown, 2005a), and were also assessed by the participants in the present study, to confirm that their semantic judgments were consistent with those of larger samples of demographically similar students (Brown, 2005a). The positive traits were *youshinfukai* (prudent), *kokorogahiroi* (open), *teineina* (polite), *kenson suru* (modest), *seijitsuna* (sincere), *yasashi* (nice), *odayaka* (calm), *kashikoi* (intelligent), *kappatsu* (active), and *shitashimiyasui* (friendly). The negative traits<sup>2</sup> were, *jiman suru* (boastful), *rikkutsuppoi* (argumentative), *hikanteki* (pessimistic), *jikochuushinteki* (self-centered), *usotsuki* (untruthful), *zurukashikoi* (cunning), *deshabari* (pushy), *gouman suru* (arrogant), and *shitsukoi* (insistent). The negative traits were reverse coded so that higher scores indicate more positive self-evaluations.

Participants assessed the degree to which each trait was applicable to self relative to other people of their own age and sex on a 7-point scale with each step explicitly labeled as follows: 1 = considerably below average, 2 = below average, 3 = a little below average, 4 = average, 5 = a little above average, 6 = above average, 7 = considerably above average). They then assessed each of the traits for desirability in general on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (= very bad) to 7 (= very good). The questionnaire was composed in Japanese, hence translation issues are not a concern.

### Results

In view of the small sample size and in particular the small number of females in the non-anonymous condition, independent-sample *t* tests were conducted, contrasting the male and female mean self-evaluations on all 19 traits. The conventional alpha level of  $p < .05$  was selected, adjusted to  $p < .003$  using the Bonferroni method to hold the Type I error rate constant over the 19 tests. None of the 19 contrasts proved significant at  $p < .003$  hence, the male and female data were pooled and independent-sample *t* tests were conducted contrasting the means for the 19 self-evaluations in the anonymous and non-anonymous conditions.

Table 2.

Self-evaluations on 19 traits, means and standard deviations in anonymous and non-anonymous conditions

	<i>Anonymous</i>		<i>Non-Anonymous</i>		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Cautious	4.23	1.56	4.06	1.75	.479
Open-Minded	4.07	1.32	4.27	1.10	.443
Polite	3.82	1.41	4.15	1.06	.240
Modest	4.25	1.19	3.94	1.03	.216
Sincere	4.18	1.34	4.09	1.01	.738
Nice	4.46	1.12	4.58	1.09	.627
Calm	4.34	1.46	4.33	1.05	.970
Intelligent	3.64	1.24	3.45	1.06	.471
Active	3.79	1.30	4.27	1.64	.120
Friendly	4.02	1.32	4.09	1.23	.790
Boastful	4.57	1.90	4.67	1.22	.721
Argumentative	3.67	1.40	4.06	1.75	.243
Pessimistic	3.87	1.64	4.18	1.40	.928
Self-centered	4.00	1.18	4.21	1.32	.797
Untruthful	3.88	1.56	4.30	1.21	1.33
Cunning	3.92	1.68	4.36	1.41	1.30
Pushy	4.92	1.41	4.70	1.40	.724
Arrogant	4.75	1.12	4.54	1.46	.854
Insistent	4.15	1.28	4.00	1.41	.515

Again independent-sample *t* tests were conducted using the Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of  $p < .003$ . As Table 2 shows, none of the 19 self-evaluations differed according to whether the questionnaires were filled out anonymously or non-anonymously.

As Table 3 below shows, 14 of the pooled self-evaluations did not differ from the scale midpoint. Four of the five that did differ were in a self-flattering direction and refer to interpersonal characteristics, while the one that was in a self-critical direction belongs to the competence related class of traits (the only one used in the present study). Thus, consistent with several past studies (Brown, 2005b; Endo, 1995; Ito, 1999), Japanese participants viewed themselves as overwhelmingly average, but with a slight positive bias.

Table 3.

Pooled self-evaluations across anonymous and non-anonymous conditions, compared to scale midpoint.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cautious	4.17	1.62
Open-Minded	4.14	1.24
Polite	3.94	1.30
Modest	4.14	1.14
Sincere	4.15	1.23
Nice	4.50	1.10 **
Calm	4.34	1.32
Intelligent	3.57	1.18 *
Active	3.96	1.44
Friendly	4.04	1.29
Boastful	4.61	1.19 **
Argumentative	3.81	1.53
Pessimistic	3.98	1.56
Self-centered	4.07	1.23
Untruthful	4.03	1.46
Cunning	4.07	1.59
Pushy	4.84	1.41 **
Arrogant	4.68	1.13 **
Insistent	4.10	1.32

Note. Significantly different from scale midpoint \*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*\*  $p < .0001$

## Discussion

The Japanese participants were consistent in their self-evaluations across the two conditions, suggesting that promises of anonymity may not have much impact on student self-evaluations. Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton (1989) and more recently, Schlenker & Wowra (2003) have pointed out that individuals are apt to maintain their self-presentational stance even under the type of anonymity that obtains in the typical questionnaire situation. It is unclear to what extent students' self-presentational stances derive from their privately held self-conceptions. It does not seem implausible that at least some individuals, in some circumstances,<sup>3</sup> may come to view themselves in more or less the way that they present themselves to real, imagined, present, or non-present others or as they believe that they are viewed by others (McKillop, Berzonsky, & Schlenker, 1992). Japanese participants did not in the present study depict themselves more flatteringly under conditions where modesty would serve no obvious impression management purpose. That is, they had no incentives for responding modestly or disincentives for responding immodestly (or veridically, as the case may be). One therefore must assume either that the participants are being honest under both conditions or that they are being self-deceptive under both

conditions. The most parsimonious operating assumption would seem to be that what Japanese students say about themselves is what they genuinely believe. If so, it can be concluded that the typical, average Japanese college student regards him or herself as about average, or slightly above, as Endo (1995) and Ito (1999) also observe. This does not reflect self-effacement or psychological maladjustment (other than by comparison with North American norms, see Taylor & Brown, 1994; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). On the contrary, viewing oneself as generally about average in Japan may be the very ideal of psychological health and social adjustment, as well as being statistically accurate. The more intriguing question is why North Americans do not.

The present research suffers from a number of limitations. The sample size was small, and the target trait list was both small and non-representative of the full range of personal characteristic terms available in the Japanese language. Moreover, 18 or the 19 traits referred to the inter-personal dimension. If more competence related traits had been included, it is likely that overall self-evaluations would have been less positive. As Ito (1999) pointed out, the self-flattering self-evaluations of Japanese college students seem to center on traits for which no objective, quantifiable standard of measurement is available, niceness as opposed to intelligence, for example. Future research should recruit larger samples, use more competence related trait terms<sup>4</sup>, and perhaps as well, employ even more exaggerated non-anonymity conditions, to increase the size of the observed effect. Perhaps asking participants to read their self-evaluations publicly would create the ultimate non-anonymous condition. Finally it must be noted that the fact the anonymous and non-anonymous respondents do not differ in their self-evaluations is consistent with the possibility that anonymity does not have a substantial impact on Japanese college students' propensity to dissemble in public self-evaluations. The results reported above suggest that anonymity does not affect the way students portray themselves, but they do not guarantee the veridicality of the self-descriptions. Unfortunately, there is no mass administered method for ascertaining the contents of other people's minds.

## References

- Baumeister, R.F., Tice, D.M. & Hutton, D.G.(1989). Self-presentational motivations and personality differences in self-esteem. *Journal of Personality*, 57, 547-79.
- Brown, R.A., (2005a). Evaluative ratings of selected Japanese emic trait descriptors. *Information & Communication Studies*, 33, 13-26, Department of Information Sciences, Bunkyo University, Chigasaki, Japan.
- Brown, R. A. (2005b). *Self-Aggrandizement and Self-Esteem in Japan*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Brown, R. A., & Ferrara, M. S. (2004). Interpersonal and Intergroup bias in Japanese and Turkish University students. *Information and Communication Studies*, 34, 21-32, Department of Information Sciences, Bunkyo University, Chigasaki, Japan.
- Endo, Y. (1995). A false modesty/other-enhancing bias among Japanese. *Psychologia*, 38, 59-69.
- Heine, S.J., Kitayama, S., & Lehman, D.R. (2001). Cultural differences in self-evaluation: Japanese readily accept negative self-relevant information. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 4, 434-443.
- Heine, S.J., Lehman, D.R., Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1999). Is there a universal need for positive self-esteem? *Psychological Review*, 106, 766-794.

- Heine, S.J., Takata, T., & Lehman, D.R. (2000). Beyond self-presentation: Evidence for self-criticism among Japanese. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 71-78.
- Ito, T. (1999). 社会的比較における自己効用傾向—平均位女効果の検討 [Self-enhancement tendency and other evaluations: An examination of “better-than-average effect”]. *Japanese Journal of Psychology*, 70, 367-374.
- Kitayama, S., Markus, H.R., Matsumoto, H., & Noraskkunit, V. (1997). Individual and collective processes in the construction of self: Self-enhancement in the United States and self-criticism in Japan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1245-1267.
- Kurman, J. (2001). Is self-enhancement related to modesty or to individualism-collectivism? A test with four Israeli groups. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 4, 225-237.
- McKillop, K.J., Berzonsky, M. D., & Schlenker, B. D. (1992). The impact of self-presentation on self-beliefs: Effects of social identity and self-presentational context. *Journal of Personality*, 60, 789-808.
- Schlenker, B. R. & Wowra, S. A. (2003). Carryover effects of feeling socially transparent or impenetrable on strategic self-presentation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 871-880.
- Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J.D. (1994). Positive illusions and well-being revisited: Separating fact from fantasy. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116, 21-27.
- Taylor, S. E., Lerner, J. S., Sherman, D. K., Sage, R. M., & McDowell, N. K. (2003). Are self-enhancing cognitions associated with health or unhealthy biological profiles? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 605-615.

### Author Note

R.A. Brown, Chigasaki, Japan.

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

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to R.A. Brown, 1-2-22 East Heights # 103, Higashi Kaigan Kita, Chigasaki-shi 253-0053 Japan. Electronic mail may be sent via internet to RABrown\_05@hotmail.com

### Footnotes

1. Modesty and self-criticism seem to have overlapping motivational sources. For example, public self-criticism may be motivated by a desire to avoid public disapproval in addition to a desire for self-improvement, but it does not seem likely that modesty would be motivated by self-improvement. Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman (2001) argue that self-criticism promotes self-improvement, which in turn “...serves to aid Japanese in fulfilling their role obligations and thereby affirming their sense of belongingness with other group members”. In either case however, both presuppose a disassociation between private thoughts and public expressions.
2. One additional negative trait, *hishakoteki* (unsocial) was also included, However, preliminary analyses and interviews with selected participants revealed that the combination of the negative prefix “*hi*” in the context of “below average” self-evaluations was confusing. This item was omitted from the subsequent analysis.

3. McKillop, Berxonsky, & Scchlenker (1992) demonstrated that individuals tend to incorporate into their personal self-views the roles they play, even when they are instructed to portray themselves in ways that they do not initially believe to be representative of their real selves. The effect depends on whether the fraudulent self-presentation is face-to-face or anonymous and whether the individual is high or low in Social Identity (“the tendency to root identity in social sources of experience”). As Social Identity was not assessed in the present study, I will not discuss it further.
4. It should however be pointed out that if participants do not use a particular class of trait terms in their own self-evaluations, then including them in the list will not capture their self-views accurately. And there is some evidence that students such as those involved in the present study do not typically use competence related terms to describe themselves.