The Paradox of Japanese Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Self-Esteem, both high and low, has been linked with a wide variety of desirable and undesirable conditions and consequences, including happiness, mental health, and even physiological functioning in general. Most studies have been conducted in North America, and the few that have been conducted elsewhere tend to yield anomalous results. Specifically, measurements of Japanese samples invariably indicate low self-esteem. The present essay argues that apparently low Japanese self-esteem is the result of flaws in conceptualization, instrumentation, and interpretation, and does not necessarily reflect actual self-regard in Japan.

Self-esteem, once referred to as self-regard or self-estimation, was first discussed by William James in 1890. By the 1960's, self-esteem had entered the popular vocabulary in America, primarily by way of research inspired by Stanley Coopersmith's (1967) and Morris Rosenberg's (1965) pioneering studies of adolescent self-concepts. By the end of the 20th century, self-esteem had become such a familiar concept that it could be reliably measured merely by asking people if they have high self-esteem (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Until very recently, little doubt has been expressed that self-esteem (SE)-specifically, high SE (HSE) is important to have. Study after study has shown that HSE is associated with a wide variety of desirable conditions and consequences, while low SE (LSE) has been linked to undesirable conditions and consequences. HSE correlates with several varieties of self-enhancement, unrealistic optimism, and self-serving attributional biases, all of which have been linked to happiness (Taylor & Brown, 1988), and healthy mental and even physiological functioning in general (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003b). Accordingly, most people have moderate to high levels of SE (Dijksterhuis, 2004, citing Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Baumeiter, 1998; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). By implication, reasonably enough, most people are mentally healthy. The norm, in other words, is to be "mentally healthy." At least, this is the case in North America.

However, in Japan individuals typically score low in SE and their LSE scores are generally interrelated with lack of the same self-enhancement, unrealistic optimism, and self-serving attributional biases that North Americans routinely display (Brown 2003a; Brown 2003b; Brown & Kobayashi 2002; Kobayashi, & Greenwald, 2003; Kudo, & Numazaki, 2003; Kurman, 2003; Kurman, & Sriram, 2002 Muramoto, 2003; Norasakkunkit, & Kalik, 2002; Takata, 2003). This would seem to indicate that the majority of Japanese people are psychologically unhealthy and abnormal, judged by North American standards. Unfortunately, this is an implausible conclusion. A more likely explanation is that there is something amiss with either the conceptualization or interpretation of the SE construct and related phenomena when applied in non-North

American contexts.

What is SE and how is it measured?

SE comes in a variety of forms. It can be stable over time (Trait SE) or temporary (State SE), based on selfestimates of abilities, attributes, and accomplishments, for example (Specific SE), based on nothing in particular (Global SE), derived from individual traits and attributes (Personal SE), or derived from membership in groups (Collective SE). The most commonly used instrument for measuring SE is the Rosenberg 10-item Likert scored self-report, which assesses Global trait personal SE. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) places little or no emphasis on social or objective factors, but rather is concerned with how the individual feels about him or herself in general. The RSES consists of the following 10 items (those with * are reversed coded): "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", "At times I think I am no good at all"*, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities". "I am able to do things as well as most other people", "I feel I do not have much to be proud of"*., "I certainly feel useless at times"*,"I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others", "I wish I could have more respect for myself", "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure"*, and "I take a positive attitude toward myself'. The original version of the RSES used a 4-point scale. Subsequent versions have used, 5, 6, and 7-point scales. After the negatively phrased items are reversed, the items are summed. Higher scores represent higher SE. Typically, North Americans score well above the scale's theoretical midpoint. Neutral or even slightly positive scores indicate LSE, according to Brown & Dutton (1995), citing Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton (1989). By implication, scores substantially higher than the mid-point would indicate HSE. Such scores are typically obtained from samples of North Americans, but scores below the midpoint, or not significantly above it, are more typical of Japanese samples using Japanese versions of the RSES.

SE can be assessed in a more specific way, by asking people to describe themselves using check-lists of positive and negative traits. Positivity of self-descriptions, either in absolute or relative (to other people) terms, generally correlates with SE (Rosenberg, 1965). HSE North Americans tend to describe themselves more in positive than in negative terms and this has sometimes been used as a direct measure of SE. Related to SE is self -enhancement, specifically the propensity to describe oneself as better than average (or better than others). One could have more positive traits than others for example, or higher levels of the trait, depending on how the evaluation task is posed. Consistent with the linkage between SE and positive self-evaluation, North Americans typically describe themselves as "better than average" on almost every conceivable trait, behavior, ability, or accomplishment. Japanese typically do not, and often describe themselves as "worse than average" or just "average".

Researchers have puzzled over this seemingly paradoxical pattern of responses. Do Japanese really not "feel good" about themselves? Do they really believe they are worse than average? Two explanations have been suggested. One is that indeed, Japanese do not feel good about themselves and do believe that they are worse than average. The reason is that they do not care about feeling good about themselves or being better than others but rather care about more closely approximating cultural ideals and this form of "self-criticism" better serves that purpose. The other explanation is that Japanese are really like North Americans, but they are more modest.

I would like to propose an alternative account, which takes issue with both the conceptualization of SE and the interpretation of the results typically obtained. First, it is worth recalling that the expression *self-esteem* is English, and while the Japanese have never been shy about borrowing English terminology (or inventing new English "words"), they have not borrowed the expression "self-esteem". This could of explained if a synonym

exists in Japanese. Kitayama, Mavkus, Matsumoto, & Novaskkvnit (1997). claim that *jisonshin* (自尊心) is the Japanese equivalent. In fact, the meanings are similar, but different. Like self-esteem, *jisonshin* has a positive connotation (Brown, 2004g). But self-esteem is "schematic" for large numbers of North Americans (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001) and is believed to be diagnostic of a number of problem behaviors and psychological disorders, for which higher SE is the logical remedy. This is not true for *jisonshin*. For some native speakers of Japanese, *jisonshin* connotes "pride" or "vanity" and expressions of *jisonshin* can be read as indications of deficient *kenson* and *hikaeme*, both of which are expected in respectable adults and schoolchildren beyond a certain age. Whatever one may privately think about one's qualities or abilities, it would strike many Japanese as childish to boldly assert (i.e., to strongly agree with the statement) that, for examples, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" or "I am able to do things as well as most other people". A typical mean score for most items on the RSES with a neutral response option will be very close to the scale mid-point. This could indicate uncertainty, or ambivalence, or unwillingness to make a strong positive assertion. It does not necessarily indicate that the respondent does not feel good about him or herself.

Repeated administrations of the RSES to Japanese samples indicate that the scale retains adequate internal reliabilities when translated into Japanese (Cronbach's alphas generally near .80). However, factor analyses, when they are reported (Campbell, et al., 1996; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama, et al., 1997), do not generally reveal a single factor. This suggests that SE is not unidimensional in Japan. To put it another way, the 10 RSES items, although highly intercorrelated, do not necessarily assess a stable psychological characteristic of Japanese people.

Modesty has been suggested as an explanation for typically low SE scores in Japan and other cultures where modesty is appreciated. Modesty was significantly correlated with SE in at least one sample of 158 Japanese college students (Brown, 2004d). Students who were more modest had lower SE scores. Modesty is undoubtedly one source of low SE scores (rather than LSE as such), and has been identified in non-Japanese samples as well (Kurman, 2001; Kurman, 2003). However, the average modesty score among the Japanese student sample in question was significantly lower than the scale mid-point (indicating immodesty), while the average SE score was not significantly higher than the scale mid-point (indicating low SE). Therefore, generally low levels of SE in Japan cannot be due to modesty alone.

But as William James' suggested in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, it can sometimes help to illuminate a problem by turning it on its head. In the present case, it might be more productive to ask why North Americans typically have high SE rather than why Japanese do not.

What would account for the relatively higher levels of SE in North America than in Japan is the simple fact that SE has become schematic for the people whose SE is typically measured, combined with popular cultural level assumptions that HSE is good and LSE is bad. It is not difficult to see how this could happen when state government budgets are applied to the purpose of identifying and increasing LSE in students at almost all grade levels K-12 (Braverman, 1996). As Nunnally (1978) noted long ago, people tend to respond to self-reports in socially desirable ways. Accordingly, North Americans report that they endorse questionnaire items that express HSE and reject items that express LSE. There is, as it were, a form of "response inflation" at work. If Japanese also respond in socially desirable ways, they will probably respond self-effacingly, in a "deflationary" response style. It is still possible to distinguish between individuals, of course, but it makes comparison of samples from different populations problematic.

Better than Average

Most studies have reported that Japanese describe themselves as average, below average, or worse than average (however, Brown 2004e reports contrary results). If self-enhancement is designed to help one feel good about oneself, then HSE individuals should evaluate themselves more positively than average (and LSE individuals should evaluate themselves as worse than average, or merely average). And they do. This assumes that North Americans feel good about being better than average and bad about being worse than average or even merely average. This may be due, in part, to the fact that North Americans tend to understand "average" as meaning "subpar" (Alicke, et al., 1995; Brown, 2004e), and in addition, that being better than (and therefore necessarily different from) other people is something to feel good about. This makes sense in America where status and financial success depend largely on competitive accomplishment (of the sort that can be quantified and measured in objectively scored multiple choice tests). Success is a limited resource, and therefore being good is never enough; one must be better than the other reward seekers.

Being average does not have a negative connotation for Japanese. On the contrary, it has a positive connotation (Brown, 2004g). Being better than average may (or may not) be better than being average, but there is nothing inherently bad about being average. Being average in Japan implies that a certain standard has been met and Japanese schools are geared to helping students meet that standard. It is assumed that every student will, or at least can, do so. Being average in America implies that excellence has not been attained. Some, but far from all, American schools are geared to helping students become excellent. It is not assumed that all students will or even can become excellent, but on the contrary, by the nature of the competitive system, it is taken for granted that the majority will not and cannot.

In short, the difference between the American and Japanese interpretation of being average is that for Americans average implies not succeeding, while for Japanese it implies not failing. Being average is not a bad thing in Japan, and accordingly individuals are not motivated to respond as though it were, as apparently is the case in North America. It should also be noted that while the "better than average" effect in North America is clearly illusory, in that the majority of people cannot be better than average (or worse than average for that matter). The "same as average" effect in Japan is not necessarily illusory – it is entirely possible, if not unavoidable, for the majority of people in a given group to be "average". Hence, despite the alleged healthy effects of illusional cognition (Dijksterhuis, 2004; Taylor & Brown, 1988: Taylor et al., 2003a; Taylor et al. 2003 b), it would appear that the Japanese are more closely in tune with objective reality.

Japanese tend not to describe themselves as better than average for two reasons. The first is that it doesn't make them feel better about themselves to be better than average. The second is that they don't generally believe that they are, on the whole, better than average.

What is Japanese Self-Regard?

Self-esteem, as previously mentioned, has been defined in various ways. William James (1890) defined it as the difference between what one has accomplished and what one wants to accomplish. This is a rational and calculative belief-based view. The most common definition however, and the one that is assessed by the commonly used RSES, is that SE is a positive regard for oneself, more specifically, positive feelings for, rather than beliefs about, oneself, or as Brown & Dutton (1995) express it, "global feelings of affection for oneself". This rather strange notion presupposes a degree of introspectiveness that ordinary Japanese typically do not have or encourage in others. (The often cited example of *hansei* 反省 [self-criticism] is in fact a social activity

specific to school performance; White, 1987). It is difficult to imagine how it would naturally occur to anyone to think about making themselves an object of their own affections prior to having this possibility spelled out and its benefits extolled. Nevertheless it has been spelled out and its benefits have been extolled in North America, but not in Japan. Japanese Children are taught to be concerned with what other people think about them, rather than what kind of person they are and how they feel about themselves. It is for this reason that Japanese self-descriptions tend to be of attributes that are visible to outside observers, rather than introspectively accessible personality traits.

American students tend to describe themselves in terms of "internal, abstract traits and attitudes", perhaps because, as Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus (2001) suggest, they have been socialized to believe that they must project a stable, unique, internal, and predominately positive "self". Japanese students however, more often describe themselves in terms of preferences, activities, and possessions. and physical features. One recent study (Brown & Ferrara, 2004) used an abbreviated version of the Twenty Statements Test (TST). The standard TST asks respondents to write down 20 self-descriptive statements, which are then content analyzed. In the Brown & Ferrara study, 57 first year Japanese college students were asked to write down a mere three self-descriptions. Yet fewer than 50% of the participants were able, or willing, to write three self-descriptions. Nineteen percent offered only a single self-description (the self-descriptions were written in Japan but are in English). Examples were "tangerine", "liberal", "easily embarrassed", "seems healthy", "ordinary Japanese", "like sports", "curious", "cold", "untalkative", "bright", "dark") of which at least four have no obvious relation to personality. Nine percent of the 57 students could not or were not willing to offer even a single self-description of any type. Self-esteem assessing instruments essentially set tasks that require introspection and a type of self-categorization that Americans, but not Japanese, are already well acquainted with. (Japanese are more inclined to ask "who are we Japanese?" than "who am I?" (See Brown, 1989, and Miller, 1989 for discussion). The question "who am I?" is one that Americans apparently find meaningful. Japanese are more likely to find such questions perplexing, and indeed perhaps like certain types of Zen koan (Cleary, 1992). Zen-like questions often inspire Zen-like answers, as appendices 1 and 2 suggest.

What is LSE? (or, Absence of HSE does not necessarily = LSE).

RSE scores near the theoretical mid-point indicate LSE in North America. And such scores, or those slightly lower, are typically obtained from Japanese samples. But these scores can equally well indicate cautious, conservative scale use, or non-self-evaluation, both of which would predispose to a preponderance of individual item scores at or near the neutral step, rather than low-self-evaluation. Individuals may select the neutral scale response option because they "don't know" how they feel about themselves, or because they don't have stable, consistent, situation-independent feelings about themselves. Absence of something is not the same as low amounts of it. Moreover, having an image of oneself, or being able to describe oneself, does not presuppose affect toward that image or self-description. Neither does it mean that evaluations of that image or self-description are necessarily felt to be most legitimately supplied by the "self". Thus, the paradox of low Japanese SE is not explained, but rather is dissolved, simply by not assuming that there is any such entity as SE in Japan. Finally, it must be observed that the RSES is only one way to measure self-regard. The RSES was developed in

America for Americans. Cross-cultural validity cannot be assumed. More often than not when the RSES is used with Japanese samples, reliability information is not reported (Campbell et al. 1996; Heine & Lehman, 1997: Kitayama et al., 1997; Kobayashi & Brown, 2003; Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003; Kurman, 2003). In fact, the

RSES appears to have adequate reliability in at least one Japanese translation (Brown, 2004c, Brown 2004d; Brown 2004e). But reliability, while necessary to establish validity, is not sufficient. It is within the realm of conceivability that the particular phrasing of the RSES predisposes to reticent responding, leading to moderate scores and attendant inferences of LSE based on American norms. Indeed, an indigenously developed alternative to the RSES yields less anomalous results (less in the sense that it need not be concluded that a majority of a population is psychologically unhealthy, based on RSES scores). This alternative instrument, the Self-Regard Scale (SRS), consists of five items, has a unidimensional internal structure, internal reliability equal to or better than the RSES, correlates significantly and positively, with the RSES and with positivity of self-descriptions (this scale is described in more detail in Brown, 2004f). However, the same sample that has LSE when assessed by the RSES has HSE when assessed by the SRS. Thus, the conclusion seems to be that while Japanese have "low self-esteem", they do not feel badly about themselves and may even feel good about themselves. This makes them eminently "normal" human beings. They may of course feel good about themselves for very different reasons than Americans feel good about themselves. That is a matter for further investigation.

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Appendix 1. Self-descriptions arranged by content (English translations).

Physical appearance: tall, black hair, thin, seems healthy, short, male, 19, looks young, small, bad eyes, tall, glasses *Preferences*: like volleyball, like sports, like TV, soccer fan, likes music, likes game, like sports, like games, like bike, like sports, like piano, hate winter, like soccer, like reading, like fun things

Activities: gamer, commutes from Omiya, not enough exercise

Social role: Japanese, college student, college student, adolescent, ordinary Japanese, college student

Capabilities: can't speak English, strong

Behavior late riser

Miscellaneous: tangerine, I believe, do something wrong, self, name is nagashima, from Hiroshima

Personality: liberal, positive, passive, optimistic, sincere, cold, serious, easily depressed, selfish, weak-willed, curious, cold, friendly, nervous, liberal, self-respect, intelligent, pessimistic, docile, weak-willed, unconfident, shy, quiet, quiet, active, positive, short tempered, selfish, self-centered, serious, nervous, cunning, nervous, pensive, unstable

Interpersonal Style: quiet, interesting guy, fool, interesting, unusual, relaxed, unsociable, makes effort, untalkative, rough, insensitive, calm, , overconfident, fool, slow, lazy, loud, active, talkative, sociable, bright, , fast, healthy & active, simple, rough, calm, tries hard, idiot, good guy, boring, , active, noisy, talkative, bright, gloomy

Respondent	First Self-Description	Second Self-Description	Third Self-Description
1	みかん, <i>mikan,</i> tangerine		
2			
3	自由, jiyuu, liberal		
4	よくわからない, <i>yoku wakaranai,</i> don't know		
5	恥ずかしがりや, <i>hazukashigariya,</i> easily embarrassed		
6	日本人, Nihonjin, Japanese	静か, shizuka, quiet	
7	前向き, <i>maemuki</i> , positive thinking	おもしろい奴, omoshiroi yatsu, interesting guy	ゲーマー, gamer
8	消極的, shoukyokuteki, passive	背が高い, <i>seigatakai,</i> tall	大宮から通ってる, <i>Oomiya kara kayotteru,</i> commute from Omiya
9	髪が黒い, <i>kami ga kuroi,</i> black hair	体が細い, karada ga hosoi, thin	
10	バカ, <i>baka</i> , fool	おもしろい, omoshiroi, interesting	めずらしい, <i>mezurashii</i> , unusual
11	のんき, <i>nonki</i> , relaxed	楽天的, rakutenteki, optimistic	
12	バレーボールが好き, <i>volleyball ga suki,</i> like vollyball	スポーツが好き, <i>sports ga suki,</i> like sports	TV好き, <i>TV zuki,</i> like TV
13	サッカーファン, soccer fan	誠実, seijitsu, sincere	信じる, shinjiru, I believe
14	健康そう, kenkousou, seems healthy		
15	非社交的, hishakouteki, unsociable	努力する, doryokusuru, makes effort	
16	無口, mukuchi, untalkative	さめてる, <i>sameteru</i> , not warm	
17	目が悪い, <i>me ga warui,</i> bad eyes	バイクが好き, <i>bike ga suki,</i> like Bike	最近運動不足, saikinundoubusoku, not enough excersize lately

Appendix 2. Self-Descriptions Generated by each of 57 Respondents

Respondent	First Self-Description	Second Self-Description	Third Self-Description
18	友好的な,	神経質な,	自由,
	<i>yuukoutekina</i> , friendly	<i>sinkeishitsu</i> , nervous	<i>jiyuu</i> , liberal
19	普通の日本人, <i>futsuuno Nihonjin,</i> ordinary Japanese		
20	活発,	ベらべらしゃべる,	社交的,
	kappatsu, active	<i>berabera shaberu</i> , talkative	shakouteki, sociable
21			
22	明るい,	スポーツが好き,	ピアノを弾くことが好き,
	<i>akarui,</i>	<i>sports ga suki,</i>	<i>piano wo hiku koto ga suki,</i>
	bright	like sports	like to play piano
23	考える, <i>kangaeru</i> , thoughtful, pensive	起伏, <i>kifuku,</i> up and down (unstable)	自尊心, jison shin, self respect
24	冬嫌い,	すばやい,	朝が弱い,
	<i>fuyukirai</i> , hate winter	<i>subayai,</i> fast	asa ga yowai, late riser
25	元気・活発,	単純,	大ざっぱ,
	<i>genki * kappatsu</i> ,	<i>tanjun,</i>	<i>oozappa,</i>
	healthy&active	simple	rough
26	とてもおとなしい, totemo otonashii, very calm	りこう, <i>rikou</i> , intelligent	
27	素直, sunao, not obstinate	悲観的, hikanteki, pessimistic	
28	意志が弱い,	自信がない,	努力する,
	<i>ishigayowai,</i>	<i>jishin ga nai,</i>	doryokusuru,
	weak willed	no self confidence	makes effort
29	とてもシャイ, totemo shyai, very shy	とても無口, <i>totemo mukuchi,</i> very untalkative	
30	背が低い,	まじめ,	落ちこみやすい,
	se ga hikui,	<i>majime,</i>	ochikomiyasui,
	short	serious	easily depressed
31	男,	19才,	大学生,
	otoko, male	19 sai, 19 years old	daigakusei, college student
32	大ざっぱ,	ずぶとい,	自分勝手,
	<i>oozappa,</i> rough	<i>zubutoi</i> , nsensitive, impudent	jibunkatte, selfish

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Respondent	First Self-Description	Second Self-Description	Third Self-Description
33	おとなしい, <i>otonashii,</i> calm	神経質, shinkeishitsu, nervous	自信過剰, <i>jishinkajou</i> , overconfident
34	大学生, daigakusei, college student	音楽が好き, <i>ongaku ga suki,</i> like music	広島出身, Hiroshima shushin, from Hiroshima
35	何かをまちがっている, <i>nanika wo machigatteiru,</i> do something wrong	lばか, <i>baka,</i> fool	
36	気が弱い, ki ga yowai, weak willed	ゲームが好き, game ga suki, like games	
37	おさなく見える, <i>osanakumieru</i> , looks younger	おそい, <i>osoi,</i> slow	小さい, <i>chisai,</i> small
38	スポーツ好き, sports ga suki, like sports		
39	私は好奇心が強い, watakushi wa koukishin ga tsuyoi, curious		
40	冷めてる, sameteru, cold		
41	自分, jibun, self	名前"長島", name"Nagashima"	青年, seinen, adolescent
42	なまけもの, namakemono, lazy	ゲーム好き, game ga suki, like games	ボケてる, <i>boketeru</i> , forgetful
43	体が大きい, <i>karada ga ookii,</i> big body	いつも眠い, <i>itsumo nemui,</i> always sleepy	声が大きい, <i>koe ga ookii</i> , loud voice
44	無口, mukuchi, untalkative		
45	大学生, daigakusei, college student	サッカー好き, <i>soccer suki</i> , like soccer	
46	愚か者, orokamono, idiot	いいやつ, <i>ii yatsu</i> , good guy	
47	積極的, seikyokuteki, active	前向き, <i>maemuki</i> , positive thinking	
48	読書好き, dokushozuki, like reading	短気, <i>tanki</i> , short tempered	

Respondent	First Self-Description	Second Self-Description	Third Self-Description
49	自分勝手, <i>jibunkatte</i> , selfish	自我が強い, <i>jiga ga tsuyoi,</i> self centered	楽しいものが大好き, omoshiroimono ga daisuki, like fun things
50			
51	たいくつ, <i>taikutsu,</i> boring	英語を話せない, eigo wo hanasenai, can't speak English	ずる賢い, <i>zurugashikoi,</i> cunning
52	背が高い, se ga takai, tall	めがね, megane, glasses	
53			
54	活動的な, katsudouteki, active	力強い, chikarazuyoi, strong	うるさい, <i>urusai</i> , noisy
55	まじめ, <i>majime</i> , serious	おしゃべり, <i>oshaberi</i> , talkative	神経質, shinkeishitsu, nervous
56	明るい, <i>akarui,</i> bright (cheerful, cheery)		
57	暗い, <i>kurai,</i> dark (gloomy)		

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Note. Blank cells indicate no response.