

Self-Esteem among University Students: A Comparative Study of Japan and America

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Abstract

Self-esteem is defined as a person's overall emotional evaluation of his or her own worth. High or low self-esteem can be reflected in one's confidence or modesty. Thus, those who are confident are said to have high self-esteem, whereas those who are modest are considered to have low self-esteem. Americans have the image of being extremely confident, while Japanese are perceived to be very modest. In this study, together with reconsidering those images and investigating their validity, I examined in what ways self-esteem is influenced by one's society. I explored how self-esteem is related to behavior in the classroom and workplace, as well as how it is expressed in body language, image, and fashion. Interestingly, American and Japanese respondents showed similar levels of self-esteem, yet it was shown that their ways of expression are greatly influenced by their surroundings. Furthermore, it became clear how Japanese people's behavior is deeply affected by their traditional values and customs.

Introduction

Due to the similarity between self confidence and self-esteem, being confident in oneself is often perceived as having high self-esteem. Oppositely, those who behave modestly are thought to have low self-esteem. Thus, Americans are said to be the former, while Japanese are considered to be the latter. In addition, past studies have shown a tendency for Japanese people to evaluate themselves poorly, thus giving the image of low self-worth. Does behaving modestly truly mean one has low self-esteem? Or do people simply act according to what's expected in their culture?

1. Significance of the Study

During my time abroad in Japan, I read a thesis that proposed the stereotype was incorrect, and that people act confident or modest in order to follow cultural expectations. This was interesting to me, and I decided to look deeper into self-esteem and what connection it has with confidence and modesty.

2. Research Questions:

- 1) How do the levels of self-esteem differ between Japanese and American university students? How do the two express their self-esteem?
- 2) What factors have the most influence on self-esteem in each country?

3. Research Background

3.1. What is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is defined as “the extent to which one values oneself” (Brown, 2008). In relation to self-esteem, “self-enhancement” and “self-criticism” are known as thinking positively or negatively about oneself. Americans tend to be more self-enhancing whereas Japanese are more self-criticizing (Kitayama, 1997).

According to the psychological idea “Sociometer Theory”, self-esteem also has a correlation with “sense of acceptance” from others. In other words, the more one feels acceptance from others, the higher their self-esteem will be (Yamamoto, 2009).

3.2. Perceptions of the Self and Beliefs about Self-Esteem

Perceptions of the Self differ greatly between Japan and America. In America, the Self is seen as an independent identity, whereas Japanese focus on the group as opposed to the individual. High self-esteem is desired in America, yet viewed negatively in Japan, as many correlate it with selfishness and pride.

3.3. Comparative Studies on Self-Esteem

In Ishikawa’s study on “Communication Styles of University Students”, participants were asked to select traits they have confidence in from a list of twenty. Traits included fashion sense, humor, nice personality, and so on. This resulted in a big gap between American and Japanese students. American students selected most traits, yet Japanese students only selected a few. Ishikawa explains this result as follows. Americans pretend to be confident and Japanese pretend to be modest to conform to expected communication styles of their culture.

Next, Yamagishi’s study on “Modesty in Self-Presentation” had participants take a cognitive-skill test and rate their performance afterwards (controlled condition). 8 months later, they were asked to rate their performance again, this time receiving monetary compensation for honest evaluation (bonus condition). Interestingly, only 28% of the Japanese participants rated themselves above average in the controlled condition, whereas that number rose to 69% in the bonus condition. Yamagishi states that this is because Japanese participants answered modestly

in the controlled condition, and that tendency to be modest is a default action. When reason for honest evaluation is presented, this default action disappears.

4. The Study

4.1. Demographics

In this study, I surveyed 61 university students. This includes 31 Japanese (14 male, 17 female), and 30 American (17 male, 13 female) students.

4.2. Research Method

Data was collected online through English and Japanese surveys.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Research Question 1: How do the levels of self-esteem differ between Japanese and American university students? How do the two express their self-esteem?

In order to answer this question, I first had participants rate their self-esteem on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). Surprisingly, most Japanese rated themselves high, mostly ranging from 3-5. Next, I asked if they sometimes pretend to be modest or confident in front of others. In regards to modesty, more Japanese answered “yes” to being modest than Americans. Both groups said they behave modestly mostly towards unfamiliar people and people of higher status. Furthermore, most Americans stated their reason for doing so was so they don’t appear arrogant, whereas a majority of Japanese students said they do so in order to be considerate towards others.

In regards to confidence, number of students who answered “yes” to acting confident was low in both countries, yet the percentage was greater in America than in Japan. Americans’ reasons included not wanting to appear weak, whereas many Japanese said that people without confidence seem unreliable. Interestingly, in both situations participants said that comfortability with others affects ability to express confidence.

5.2. Expressions of Self-Esteem

Participants were evaluated on how they express their self-esteem in four areas: in the classroom setting, social setting, workplace, and through self-image. Each area consisted of about 6-7 situational statements, to which participants were asked to choose their level of

agreement (1-5 scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Statements for *classroom* and *socializing* areas were written in a reserved tone (“I feel shy to...”, “I listen more than speak”, etc), thus suggesting that those who agreed had a tendency to be more shy in the chosen area. As a result, more Americans agreed to feeling shy in the classroom and socializing areas, while a large number of Japanese disagreed.

On the other hand, the *workplace* and *self-image* settings were written in an assertive tone, suggesting that those who agreed had more confidence in those areas. There was a clear difference in terms of self-image, where many Americans agreed to “dressing to stand out” whereas many Japanese disagreed. The same could be seen in the workplace where many Japanese disagreed to being respected by co-workers for asserting themselves.

5.3. Research Question 1 Summary

American and Japanese students had similar levels of self-esteem, but Japanese tend to be more modest than Americans. Japanese students have more confidence in the *classroom* and *socializing* settings, while Americans tend to be more confident and assertive in the *workplace* and *self-image* settings.

5.4. Research Question 2: What factors have the most influence on self-esteem in each country?

First, in order to find out what types of people influence one’s self-esteem, I created three groups: family, friends, and teachers/bosses. Then, participants were asked how often they were told things such as “be more confident” or “be more modest” by each of the groups. The statements that resulted in the biggest difference were “You should be more confident”, and “You should assert yourself”, where a large number of Japanese students said they were “never told” by each group. On the other hand, many Americans said they were often or always told, mostly by family and friends. In addition, I asked if students believed in the “cultural expectations” of their countries. That is, “Americans are expected to be independent” and “Japanese are expected to think of the group”. The numbers of students who agreed to these two beliefs were extremely high in both countries.

5.5. Media, Religion, and Education System

Next, I asked participants whether they felt their self-esteem is affected by the following three factors: media, religion, and education system. In both countries, about 50% of students answered “yes” to media, stating that unrealistic body images (of models/idols) lowered their self-esteem. However, only Japanese students said their self-esteem was affected positively by media, with reasons such as “Watching dramas or hearing a nice song makes me feel like I can do my best”.

Few students answered “yes” to religion, but the number of students who did so was greater in Japan than in America. This is mostly due to the Buddhist religion in Japan, which teaches modesty and consideration towards others.

Over half of the students answered “yes” to education system in both countries. There were many reasons for this. Americans stated getting good grades made them feel better about themselves, while some felt their self-esteem was lowered by being separated in the classroom due to proficiency level. In Japan, teachers have a large influence on students’ self-esteem, and many students said being compared to others and lack of individuality in school lowered their self-esteem.

5.6. Acceptance from others

Finally, in order to test the validity of the “Sociometer Theory”, I asked if being accepted by others influenced one’s self esteem. As a result, the number of students who agreed was incredibly high, reaching over 80% in both countries. With this, we can see that acceptance from others does indeed have a correlation with self-esteem, as the sociometer theory states.

5.7. Research Question 2 Summary

Americans are often told be confident and assertive, whereas Japanese are either rarely or never told. Both American and Japanese students believe in the cultural expectations of their countries. Education system, media, and acceptance from others also strongly influence one’s self-esteem.

6. Conclusion

Japanese are often said to have low self-esteem, yet according to the survey results, students of both countries have high self-esteem. From this, we can conclude that being modest does not mean having low self-esteem. Self-esteem and confidence are closely related, but having one does not necessarily mean having the other. It became clear that even those students with high self-esteem had areas they lacked confidence in. Also, it is evident that the group dynamic is still present in Japan. Moreover, the self-esteem of people in both countries is greatly influenced by factors such as education and media, and comfortability and acceptance from others.

7. Limitations of the Study and Future Study

As this was a study aimed towards university students, generalization cannot be made. As for future study, I would like to survey the self-esteem of different age groups, and explore any possible gender differences in self-esteem.

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