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The Association Between Negative Self-Descriptions and Depressive Symptomology: Does Culture Make a Difference?

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Abstract

Research findings that depressed Americans endorse more negative self-related adjectives than controls may be related to a shared self-enhancement cultural frame. This study examines the relationship between negative core self-descriptors and depressive symptoms in 79 Japanese and 50 American women. Americans had more positive self-descriptors and core self-descriptors; however, there were no cultural group differences in number of negative self-descriptors or core self-descriptors. There was a significant correlation between negative core self-descriptor and Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) for Americans only, explaining 10.6% of the BDI variance. Analysis of variance revealed that there was significant BDI group differences for American negative core self-descriptor only. Theoretical possibilities are discussed.

Depression is the fourth leading cause of illness-related disability and by 2020 is projected to be second (National Institute of Mental Health, 1998). It is essential to understand cultural differences in the sources of major depression so people from all cultures can be properly screened and treated. Early studies about the psychological causes of depression generally concluded that people with depression endorse more negative self-related adjectives and less positive self-related adjectives than normal controls (Bradley & Mathews, 1983; Derry & Kuiper, 1981; MacDonald & Kuiper, 1984, 1985; Prieto, Cole, & Tageson, 1992). Moreover, these studies demonstrated that schematic, or core self-descriptors, functioned to guide perception, affect, and behavior and that negative core self-cognitions were consistently more likely in depressed persons when compared with nondepressed persons.

From a cross-cultural point of view, the American subjects in these studies probably shared a cultural mandate for self-enhancement. Indeed, recent research is beginning to demonstrate that negative selves may not share the same meaning or function across cultures (Cheung, 1997; Cousins, 1989; Heine & Lehman, 1999; Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Kitayama & Markus, 1999), leaving room for rich cross-cultural research about the relationship between self-evaluation and depression. This present research investigates whether cultural frames determine the effect of negative core self-cognitions on psychological functioning, examining whether negative self-evaluation generates psychological distress within a Japanese group-enhancing cultural frame. Specifically, we hypothesize that the number of negative core self-cognitions will be positively related to the variability of Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) scores for Americans but not for the Japanese.

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CULTURE, CORE SELF-DESCRIPTIONS, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

Cognitive social psychology has described the “self” as a complex, malleable, and dynamic set of self-conceptions, images, emotions, and memories that are stored in long-term memory. At any given moment, a person can access the active, consciously available memory, often called the working memory. Some of the self-related material in working memory is associated with the transient conditions of the present time frame. However, some of these self-conceptions serve the important function of guiding perception, affect, and behavior. These are central or core self-conceptions (sometimes referred to as schemas). *Core* self-conceptions are stable and enduring self-conceptions that tend to endure over time, and are activated across situations. These core self-conceptions are psychologically important because they provide a consistent and predictable cognitive orientation and are used by a person as they consider the meaning of circumstances and choose how to behave. This perspective about the self in memory has been referred to as the self-structure (Markus, 1977; Stein, 1996; Stein & Markus, 1990). Besides the self-structural property of centrality, this cognitive theory of the self in memory proposes that self-related memory representations are not neutral, but rather carry with them an emotional quality or an evaluative tone, called *valence* (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Markus & Wurf, 1987; National Mental Health Advisory Council, 1995). Because self-evaluation is based on the prevailing norms and expectations of the cultural milieu, the meaning of the valence (or self-evaluation) component of core self-descriptions is likely to show cultural specificity.

Despite the obvious conclusion that the self-concept is developed within a cultural milieu, cultural psychology has faced the challenge that the concept of “culture” refers to social phenomena and, therefore, cannot be measured at the individual level. Culture is the pattern of social institutions, relationships, and expectations that guide the development of culturally competent individuals. Culture includes the myriad of institutions, messages, and social cues that together encourage people to share a coherent set of values, goals, and interpersonal behaviors (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996; Quinn & Holland, 1987). From this perspective, the individual self-concept develops within a cultural frame that is comprised of a limited range of social expectations and conditions. The self-concept should contain a culturally congruent set of core self-descriptions that function to guide culturally relevant perceptions, affect, and behavior. We believe that the presence of valenced core self-descriptions may be universal, and schema valence is an important cognitive factor that affects the individual's psychological health. However, we suspect that the psychological effects of negative core self-descriptions are likely to vary depending on the priorities, expectations, and goals within a given cultural environment.

Cultural Frame and Individual Self-Evaluation

Cultures have been described in terms of the interpersonal values they socialize in their members. Some cultures value and enhance the group over the personal self and to value self-criticism for the goal of group harmony (referred to as a *group-enhancement cultural frame*). Some cultures value and enhance the personal self over the group (referred to as a *self-enhancement cultural frame*) (Heine et al., 2000; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). Although cross-cultural research has not examined the relationship between schema valence and psychological health directly, empirical tests of the influence of cultural frames on psychological processes have noted differences in the meaning of negative social feedback and self-discrepancies. For example, in examining the impact of negative social feedback in a sample of Japanese and Canadians, Heine et al. (2000) found that Canadians were reluctant to conclude that they had performed worse than their average classmate, whereas the Japanese were hesitant to conclude that they had performed better. This research suggests that the

meaning of negative social feedback varies depending on the cultural frame, and that striving for positive outcomes may be more important within a cultural frame that fosters and rewards personal achievement. The effect of negative selves on psychological distress has also been explored in self-discrepancy research. In a study comparing self-discrepancies in samples of Japanese, Asian Canadian, and European Canadian students, Heine and Lehman (1999) found that the discrepancies between the actual and the ideal self were larger for the Japanese than the other two groups. However, the relation between Zung depression scores and actual-ideal discrepancies was weaker for Japanese than for European Canadians.

These research findings suggest that cultural standards for competence, appropriate social behaviors, and social sanctions for undesired behaviors are internalized. This individual internalized set of cultural standards provides the frame for the evaluation of any given self-conception. Self-evaluation of any self-descriptor, or the valence of a self-descriptor, therefore, will depend on the cultural ideals and sanctions within the cultural frame. The group-enhancement cultural frames socialize their members to focus on personal self-development and self-criticism for the goal of social harmony. It is possible that the ability of an individual to recognize their negative traits is culturally articulated and valued in such a way that negative selves may not, in themselves, generate psychological distress. In contrast, self-enhancement cultural frames socialize their members to focus on personal strengths and competencies. Self-development is a kind of striving for personal desires and goals for individual achievement rather than for overall group needs. In such a cultural frame, recognition of negative selves can be a threat to feelings of success, achievement, and self-enhancement. This connection between negative self-evaluation and psychological distress within a self-enhancement cultural frame has been found repeatedly in self-schema research in American samples (Bradley & Mathews, 1983; Hammen & Goodman-Brown, 1990; Hammen, Marks, DeMayo, & Mayol, 1985; Kuiper & Derry, 1982; Kuiper, Olinger, MacDonald, & Shaw, 1985; MacDonald, Kuiper, & Olinger, 1985; McClain & Abramson, 1995; Pace & Dixon, 1993; Prieto et al., 1992; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977). However, no studies have directly investigated whether cultural frame may affect the relationship between depression and negative core self-descriptions. This present research investigates whether cultural frames affect the psychological impact of self-evaluation. Specifically, we hypothesize that the number of negative core self-descriptions will be positively related to variability of the BDI scores for Americans but not for Japanese.

METHODS

Design and Samples

This research is part of a larger study examining the relationships among culture, the self, and psychological distress. The samples included 79 female college students from a women's university in Tokyo, Japan ($M = 19.2$ years, $SD = .53$) and 50 female college students from a Midwestern university in the United States ($M = 22.56$ years, $SD = 4.11$). Ninety-two percent (92%) of the American women and all (100%) of the Japanese women were under 25 year of age. Five American women had children (10%); none of the Japanese women did. All the women in both samples were upper-division standing in their respective universities. Two of the women in the American sample were married (unfortunately, less than half of the Japanese women answered this question). We used either dollars or yen to estimate family income. Using the current conversion rate of about ¥100 per dollar, we found that one third of the women in both groups reported family incomes below or equivalent to \$60,000; around half of both groups reported family incomes between \$60,000 and \$100,000. Finally, the reported ethnic composition of the samples revealed that 90% of the American women identified themselves as white, whereas the remaining 10% included two Black women, two Asian/Pacific Islanders, and one Hispanic/other. All of the women in the Japan sample identified as Japanese.

Instruments

Beck Depression Inventory—We measured the current depressive symptomatology with the BDI (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988). The BDI is a depression screen that consists of 21-items designed measure depressive symptomatology level. Participants rate each item on a 0-to 3-point scale. The BDI has been shown to have acceptable reliability in a variety of culturally diverse samples, with reliability coefficients ranging from .77 to .89 (Abdel-Khalek, 1998; Bonicatto, Dew, & Soria, 1998; Shek, 1990). For the Japanese, Kojima et al. (2002) found reliability of .87 and an adequate correlation between the total score of the BDI and that of the CES-D ($r = .69, P .001$). Hasama and Fujii (1989) conducted a study that validated the BDI with a sample of 30 Japanese clinical patients with a diagnosis of major depressive disorder and an age-matched healthy sample. They determined that the with a BDI cutoff score of 11, there is a 90.0% sensitivity to major depressive disorder, an 83.3% specificity rate, a false-positive rate of 17.3%, and a false-negative rate of 10.0%. In our study, reliability of the BDI for the Japanese was .79, and for the Americans was .87. Because of the comparability of BDI scores across cultural groups, we used the cutoff scores recommended by Beck (Beck et al., 1988) for our analysis.

Self-Description Task—The self-description task (SDT) used for this research was adapted from the self-structure measure developed by Markus and Zajonc (Markus, 1977; Stein & Markus, 1990; Zajonc, 1960). Participants were asked to list freely up to 50 self-conceptions on a sheet of paper. After generating all the self-descriptors, participants were asked to judge the amount that each statement describes them on a scale from 1 to 11; next, the participants were asked to judge the amount that each statement is important to who they are on a scale from 1 to 11. Self-descriptors that were rated both as highly descriptive and highly important (with ratings from 8 to 11) were coded as core self-descriptors. Finally, the participants were asked to determine whether the self-descriptors are negative, positive, or neutral. This determination constituted the valence of the self-descriptors and core self-descriptors.

This self-structure measure has been used in studies about the concept of persons with borderline personality disorders (Stein, 1995), eating disorders (Stein, 1996), and in asymptomatic controls (Stein & Markus, 1990). Convergent validity includes correlations with the Linville self-complexity measure (Linville, 1987), revealing the expected positive correlation of .51 ($P = .001$). In addition, moderate test/retest reliability was shown for the number of self-descriptors at 18 months ($n = 36, r = .49, P = .01$) (Stein & Markus, 1990).

Procedure

All procedures and research instruments were in the participant's native language. All instruments were translated into Japanese, back-translated into English, and reviewed by expert Japanese researchers for accuracy and natural Japanese (Werner & Campbell, 1971). Junior, senior, and graduate students attending classes in psychology (Japan) and Nursing (United States) were invited to participate in the study. Procedures complied with Human Subject's Protection Standards and Protocols. Participants completed the instruments in groups of around 20 per session. The ample space of the large auditoriums provided privacy for the respondents. Women received a packet of instruments including an informational letter about the research, a demographic questionnaire, the BDI, and the SDT in either English or Japanese. Research assistants read the informational letter aloud to the participants in their native language. The entire procedure took about 1 hour to complete.

RESULTS

Depression Scores

The BDI scores for the Japanese sample ranged from 0 to 39 ($M = 12.66$, $SD = 7.05$). BDI scores for the American sample ranged from 0 to 29 ($M = 8.48$, $SD = 6.55$). Independent sample t test of these BDI means reveals that the Japanese sample was significantly more depressed, $t(127) = 3.39$, $P = .01$. There were no significant correlations between BDI scores by age or income for either group.

Self-Description Content

Content coding was used to determine whether the groups differed in the type of self-description content. The Japanese had 2340 self-descriptors and the Americans had 1683. The results of these analyses are depicted in Table 1. Although a detailed discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this article, the Japanese had more self-descriptor content related to communication, physical characteristics, and social relationships (defined as descriptors that referred to relationship oriented skills, preferences, and tendencies). Americans had more self-description content related to future aspirations, psychological traits, and social roles (defined as self-descriptors that referred to specific roles such as sister, student, daughter, or girlfriend). There were no differences between lifestyle preferences or values for the two groups.

Self-Descriptor Valence

This study found that the numbers of the negative core self-descriptions for the participants in the two culture groups varied in some expected ways. Independent sample t tests revealed that the Japanese had less self-descriptors ($M = 29.6$, $SD = 10.6$) than the Americans did ($M = 33.7$, $SD = 10.0$), $t(127) = -2.13$, $P = .033$. However, the Japanese had more core self-descriptors ($M = 29.6$, $SD = 10.6$) than the Americans did ($M = 21.7$, $SD = 9.7$), $t(127) = -7.137$, $P = .000$. Consistent with a self-enhancing cultural frame, the American group had more overall positive self-descriptors ($M = 21.8$, $SD = 8.1$) than the Japanese group did ($M = 14.6$, $SD = 6.5$), $t(127) = -5.58$, $P = .000$, and more positive core self-conceptions ($M = 17.5$, $SD = 8.0$) than the Japanese ($M = 6.8$, $SD = 4.9$), $t(127) = -9.36$, $P = .000$. There was no difference in mean numbers of negative self-descriptors between the Americans ($M = 7.8$, $SD = 5.2$) or the Japanese ($M = 9.8$, $SD = 6.4$) or between core negative self-conceptions for the Americans ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 3.9$) or the Japanese ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 4.0$).

Core Negative Self-Descriptions and Depression

This study aimed to examine the linear association between negative core self-descriptions and depression in two culturally distinct groups. Consistent with our prediction, there was a significant moderate positive correlation between negative core self-descriptors and the BDI for Americans ($r = .352$, $P = .012$), but there was no correlation between these variables for the Japanese ($r = .045$, $P = .662$). Next, we used bivariate regression to determine that 10.6% of the variance of the BDI could be accounted for by negative core self-descriptors for the Americans, $F(1, 48) = 6.78$, $P = .012$. Finally, we used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test whether there were group differences for valenced core self-descriptors for either Americans or Japanese. ANOVA results reveal that there was between-group differences for the negative core self-descriptors for the Americans only ($P = .023$) (see Table 2). There were no BDI group differences for positive core self-descriptors for either Japanese or Americans and no BDI group differences of negative core self-descriptors for the Japanese.

DISCUSSION

This study explored whether the Japanese group enhancement cultural frame might influence the effect of negative descriptions on psychological health for the Japanese. Specifically, it was presumed that the group enhancement cultural frame might make negative self-descriptions a valued experience and therefore would not be related to depression scores for the Japanese. In contrast, it was presumed that the association between negative self-descriptions and depression for Americans was because of the self-enhancement cultural frame, which values positive self-conceptions, thereby making negative self-descriptions a psychological threat. We explored this theoretical argument by comparing the relationships between negative core self-descriptions and BDI scores for American and Japanese women.

The unexpected finding that the Americans had more self-descriptors than the Japanese but that the Japanese had more core self-descriptors than the Americans is theoretically interesting. It is unknown whether Japanese use the same estimation when asked to evaluate whether a self-descriptor describes them or is important to who they are. Therefore, we cannot be certain that the SDT measures the same cognitive property. However, the Japanese coauthors of this study believe that the translation of the instructions was valid and would produce similar results across cultures. Although not the focus of this study, we suspect that American culture (and the Western cultural frame in general) encourages the delineation and verbal articulation of the personality, labeling various aspects of the self. It is possible that the larger number of self-descriptors reflects this cultural training. However, Western culture also encourages the person to abstract the “self” from the “situation,” recognizing how the “self” exists across different situations. Said another way, the American self is culturally trained to be stable or “the same” regardless of the situation. The greater number of schematic self-descriptors for the Japanese may reflect a different cultural priority from that in America.

In Japanese culture, on the other hand, the self depends, in part, on the social context. Of course, the Japanese person has stable core selves, but the way of being “oneself” may depend on the relationship one has with those in the immediate social milieu. In that sense, perhaps the Japanese person has more core selves than the American person, and the self that is called on depends on the context (Kondo, 1990,1992;Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Japanese selves may be context dependent, but core selves are predictable guides to behavior in the specific contexts. Perhaps a flaw in Western psychology has been to consider only those selves that transcend a given situation as “stable” or core selves. When we understand that the stable self is a predictable pattern of self-identification and behavior in a variety of contexts, we can recognize that the context dependent selves that are often seen in people from group enhancement cultural frames are also stable selves.

The American women in this study had more positive self-descriptors and more positive core self-descriptions than the Japanese. This finding is consistent with the self-enhancing cultural frame hypothesis, suggesting that positive self-description may be more valued in American culture than in Japanese culture. The finding that the Japanese and the American women in this study had similar numbers of negative self-descriptors and core self-descriptions is equally interesting. Although the self-enhancement cultural frame fosters positive self-appraisal, these data suggest that the opposite trend cannot be presumed. The group enhancement cultural frame does not necessarily foster negative or critical self-appraisal. Kitayama et al. (2000) has suggested that the group enhancement cultural frame fosters self-criticism as a method of fitting into the group. However, we found that both groups of women were equally negative or critical about themselves. Perhaps, American women also have a gendered social mandate to enhance the group (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002;Oyserman, Kimmelmeier, & Coon, 2002).

The American data revealed the expected relationship between the number of negative core self-descriptions and BDI scores. The Japanese did not show this relationship. This trend is consistent with the self-enhancement cultural frame, such that the presence of negative self-appraisal is a psychological threat for the Americans. However, this trend may not be so in the group-enhancement cultural frame shared by the Japanese.

Negative core self-descriptions explained only a small amount of variance of the BDI scores for Americans and did not relate to BDI at all for the Japanese. It is likely that important dimensions of the self were not captured by the simple dichotomy of negative and positive valence. For example, in the self-discrepancy model (Higgins, Klein & Strauman, 1987; Marsh, 1999; Moretti & Higgins, 1990), there is the notion of desired cultural characteristics or ideals against which the self is measured. Recent additions to this model have asserted that the perceived closeness of the actual self to feared selves (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999; Cheung, 1997; Ogilvie, 1987) might be a variable that is important in understanding psychological distress and mental illness.

These findings have implications for research that uses cultural theories about the cultural construction of the self to test the cross-cultural applicability of Western derived theories about mental health and mental illness. Despite the limitations of a small sample size and limited generalizability, this study suggests that the state of nursing science is sufficiently developed that we can begin to critically evaluate our theories, and test them in diverse populations. This kind of critique is necessary to provide culturally relevant psychiatric assessment and practice.

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Table 1

Independent Sample *t* Test for Self-Description Content

Self-descriptor content	Japanese		American		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Communication	1.42	1.36	.56	.86	4.40*
Future worries/aspirations	.51	.99	1.62	1.81	-4.52*
Lifestyle preference	2.56	3.01	2.22	2.89	.63
Physical characteristics	4.00	3.43	2.88	2.35	2.20*
Pure psychological	12.82	5.97	15.86	7.42	-2.56*
Social relationships	7.72	4.39	5.78	3.86	2.56*
Social roles	.41	.90	3.44	3.47	-6.06*
Values	.14	.42	.06	.24	1.37

* Significant at .05 or higher.

Table 2
ANOVA of BDI Scores and Valenced Core Self-Descriptors

	BDI	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Japanese</i> Positive	0–9	29	7.2	5.1
	10–15	24	5.8	4.5
	<15	26	7.3	5.2
Negative	0–9	29	2.8	4.1
	10–15	24	1.8	2.5
	<15	26	3.2	4.9
<i>American</i> Positive	0–9	34	18.6	8.2
	10–15	7	16.3	5.6
	<15	9	14.0	8.3
Negative	0–9	34	1.9	2.9
	10–15	7	5.3	5.6
	<15	9	5.0	4.8