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Impact on Self-Esteem by Cultural Differences in Educational and Interpersonal Contexts

Naoko Oura  
Northwestern College - Orange City, naoko0229@hotmail.co.jp

Terry Chi  
Northwestern College - Orange City, terry.chi@nwciowa.edu

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Abstract
The current study investigated the effects of cultural self-construal, interpersonal relationship harmony, and high school environment on self-esteem. One-hundred and one American participants and 99 Japanese participants completed self-report surveys to assess each construct. Results showed that self-esteem of students who value harmonious relationships was protected from controlling teaching in both American and Japanese students, whereas self-esteem of students who value personal interests over harmonious relationships was protected in the same context, but only among Japanese and not American students.

About the Author
Naoko Oura is a former student of Dr. Chi’s, and she graduated from Northwestern College's psychology program in 2015.

At Northwestern College, Dr. Chi has been primarily responsible for teaching General Psychology, Theories of Personality, Psychopathology, and Research Design and Introductory Statistics. His articles have appeared in peer-reviewed publications that include the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, the Journal of Attention Disorders, the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, and the Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment. Dr. Chi has also presented his research at the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy, the Association for Psychological Science, the International Society for Research in Child and Adolescent Psychopathology, the Midwestern Psychological Association, the Society for Research in Adolescence, and the Society for Research in Child Development.

Dr. Chi has a strong record of involving students in collaborative research. Since 2000, he has worked with approximately 50 undergraduate research assistants. Most of them have continued onto M.A./Ph.D. training in counseling, clinical psychology, or experimental psychology.

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Impact on Self-Esteem by Cultural Differences in Educational and Interpersonal Contexts

Naoko Oura and Terry C. Chi, PhD
Northwestern College

Abstract
The current study investigated the effects of cultural self-construal, interpersonal relationship harmony, and high school environment on self-esteem. One-hundred and one American participants and 99 Japanese participants completed self-report surveys to assess each construct. Results showed that self-esteem of students who value harmonious relationships was protected from controlling teaching in both American and Japanese students, whereas self-esteem of students who value personal interests over harmonious relationships was protected in the same context, but only among Japanese and not American students.

Introduction
An appropriate level of self-esteem is an important contributor to our health. It involves self-acceptance and functions as a subjective sensor that predicts how much we are valued by others. Cultural self-construal consists of four categories—vertical-individualism (VI), horizontal-individualism (HI), vertical-collectivism (VC), and horizontal-collectivism (HC); for the current study, we focus on VI and VC. People in VI cultures, such as the United States, focus on improving personal status through competition whereas those in VC cultures, such as Japan, emphasize on interpersonal relationship harmony and values of in-groups. Prior research findings report that while individualism correlates with higher self-esteem in various cultures, interpersonal relationship harmony also positively affects one’s self-esteem in collectivistic cultures. Conversely, the experiences in the years between middle school and mid-twenties contribute to one’s personal development. Previous research report that autonomy teaching experienced during these years is positively associated with higher self-esteem while controlling teaching is negatively associated with self-esteem. Cast and Burke’s (2002) identity theory says that identifying the self through social interaction protects self-esteem when it is challenged by authority figures. Therefore positive interpersonal relationships are expected to function as a protector of self-esteem against the effect of controlling teaching.

Hypotheses: (1) High levels of interpersonal relationship harmony protects one’s self-esteem from controlling teaching in individuals who value harmonious relationships, and (2) interpersonal relationship harmony does not protect one’s self-esteem from controlling teaching in individuals who value personal interests over harmonious relationships.

Participants
One hundred and one Americans (73.3% females; age range 18-24), the majority of whom were Caucasians, and 99 Japanese (53.5 male; age range 17-44) were recruited via classroom recruitment in a small rural liberal arts college in the U.S. and a college in Japan, social networking sites, online postings, and word-of-mouth communication. The study was approved by the IRB of both institutions.

Measures of Key Constructs
All participants digitally signed an online informed consent form prior to participation. Participants then completed a series of four online surveys. The surveys included the following:
- Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism Scale
- Interpersonal Relationship Harmony Inventory
- Learning Climate Questionnaire
- Self-Esteem Scale

Data Analysis
Moderation Analysis and Aiken and West’s method
Predictor: Teaching style
Moderator: Interpersonal relationship harmony
Interaction: Teaching style and interpersonal relationship harmony
Outcome: Self-esteem

3 steps:
1) Regression of teaching style and self-esteem
2) Regression of interpersonal relationship harmony and self-esteem
3) Regression of interaction of controlling teaching and relationship harmony and self-esteem

Results
Hypothesis 1: Supported
RH was shown not to be a moderator of the effect of teaching style on SE
Path A – statistically significant ($b = 1.35; p = 0.02$)
Path B – statistically significant ($b = 0.65; p = 0.04$)
Path C – statistically significant ($b = -0.18; p = 0.06$)

Hypothesis 2: Partially supported
Japan
Path A – statistically significant ($b = 2.48; p = 0.006$)
Path B – statistically significant ($b = 0.74; p = 0.006$)
Path C – statistically significant ($b = -0.45; p = 0.006$)

U.S.
Path A – statistically not significant ($b = 0.12; p = 0.447$)
Path B – statistically not significant ($b = 0.36; p = 0.170$)
Path C – statistically not significant ($b = 0.09; p = 0.693$)

Conclusions
The present study found that having stable and agreeable relationships with significant others protects self-esteem of the students who value harmonious relationships from controlling teaching. Contrary to what we expected, explanatory analysis showed that relationship harmony seems to protect self-esteem of Japanese students who highly value interpersonal goals and interests, but the same pattern was not shown among Americans. In other words, relationship harmony protects self-esteem of Japanese regardless of individualistic or collectivistic characteristics they possess, whereas Americans who show collectivistic characteristics benefit from relationship harmony in the same context.

What does this mean? Harmonious relationships protects one’s self-esteem when it is damaged by authoritarian teachers. When one values the self that was achieved and identified through his or her in-group, such positive interpersonal relationships are beneficial for the self-esteem development. Therefore, both in the U.S. and Japan, collectivistic characteristics contribute to maintaining self-esteem in the school settings.