Relation between Self-Esteem Instability and Expectation and Motivation After Failure Among Japanese University Students

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown that people with unstable self-esteem react to failure in extrapunitive ways (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1992). However, competitive situations in daily life often involve several tasks. Therefore, not only the relation between self-esteem instability and the reaction after one failure, but the relation between self-esteem instability and expectation and motivation for future tasks should also be examined. In addition, because extrapunitive reactions such as excuse making are not appropriate in Japanese culture, self-esteem instability may not be related to excuse making in this culture and may instead be related to alternative reactions after failure. Therefore, we hypothesized that at least among Japanese participants, self-esteem instability would be negatively related to expectations for future examinations. Sixty one undergraduate students (16 males and 45 females) participated in the survey. Self-esteem instability was not significantly related to excuse making. Rather, self-esteem instability was negatively related to expectations for the final examination, especially when self-evaluation of the midterm scores was low. On the other hand, self-esteem instability was not significantly related to the motivation to perform well on the final examination. We interpreted these findings as indicating that lowered expectations functioned as a tactic to prevent failure and promote ego protection.

Taylor and Brown (1988) claimed that higher self-esteem is associated with better psychological well-being. Against this well-accepted view, some researchers argue that high self-esteem has negative effects as well. For example, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) argued that high self-esteem can cause violence and aggression when one's high self-esteem is threatened. More recently, Crocker and Park (2004) insisted that the pursuit of self-esteem is costly in terms of autonomy, competence, interpersonal relationship, self-regulation, and even physical health.

In order to resolve this apparent paradox, Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, and Harlow (1993) proposed an index of self-esteem, self-esteem instability, which is independent of the level of self-esteem. According to Kernis et al. (1993), self-esteem instability is defined as the extent to which individuals' self-esteem changes across situations. The important characteristics of people with unstable self-esteem have been classified into three categories (Kernis & Goldman, 2003): (a) attentional component (the tendency to care about experiencing failure and success); (b) bias component (the tendency to perceive an event as evaluative even if the event is not); and (c) generalization component (the tendency to generalize one evaluative event to the individuals' general self-evaluation). So, for example, people with unstable self-esteem are sensitive to the result of an exam, perceive that the result of the exam shows their general ability, and feel that they have little ability after they fail in that exam.

Because the ego of people with unstable self-esteem is vulnerable to threats, those people are especially motivated to protect their ego from the threats (e.g., Kernis et al., 1993). Indeed, previous studies in the U.S. have shown that people with unstable self-esteem tend to react to failure in extrapunitive ways. First, people with unstable self-esteem make excessive excuses after experiencing failure by attributing their failure to external factors such as the difficulty of the task (Kernis et al., 1993; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1992). Second, after experiencing failure, people with unstable self-esteem tend to derogate the person who gave them the negative feedback (Kernis et al., 1993).

The previous findings about self-esteem instability, however, are limited in the sense that they are concerned only with reactions to the result of performance on a one-shot task, and do not consider reactions concerning future tasks. In our daily lives, individuals often continue to work on the one task. For example, when students fail in one exam, it does not mean they can forget about it and never take the exam again. Usually, they need to continue studying the same subject and take the final exam for credits. In those situations, people not only protect their ego after failure, but also have to make a tactic for the future task. Therefore, this study examines the relation between self-esteem instability and the reaction at the time when participants finish the first task and anticipate a second related task in the future. We argue that people with unstable self-esteem will show a reaction other than extrapunitive reactions when they anticipate future performance after a failure. In this study, we predicted that participants with unstable self-esteem would lower their expectations for performance on the future task, in response to the failure.

Lowering one's expectations is a useful tactic in competitive situations for two reasons. First, according to Norem and Cantor (1986), lowering expectations for future performance makes people prepare for the future task by "harnessing anxiety as motivation" (p. 1208). In other words, when people expect that they will fail in a task, they become careful and make efforts in order to prevent the expected negative outcome. Second, lowering expectations allows individuals to mentally prepare for the anticipated failure and thus protect their ego. For example, Shepperd, Ouellette, and Fernandez (1996) demonstrated that although participants had high expectations for the score before an examination, they lowered their expectation just before they got the score. Shepperd et al. (1996) interpreted this finding as indicating that by lowering the expectation for the future performance, the participants lessened the potential damage of the anticipated failure to their ego.

Those two reasons are more relevant to people with unstable self-esteem than to people with stable self-esteem. As mentioned earlier, people with unstable self-esteem tend to be sensitive to the results of competitive situations. Therefore, people with unstable self-esteem would carefully prepare for future performance because the importance of the performance is high for them. Thus, the tendency to try to prevent negative outcomes would be higher for people with unstable self-esteem than for people with stable self-esteem. In addition, after experiencing a failure, the perceived possibility of failing again is likely to be high. Therefore, it becomes important to prevent negative outcomes and mentally prepare for the anticipated failure in that situation. We hypothesized that people with unstable self-esteem would lower their expectations for future performance, especially after failing in the previous tasks. That is, lowering the expectation for the future performance can work for ego protection.

On the other hand, we expected extrapunitive reactions such as external attributions and derogation after failure would be absent in Japan for two reasons. First, one need not use a socially maladaptive tactic when another more adaptive tactic is available. Second, external attributions and derogation can have higher interpersonal relationship costs in Japan, because they are inconsistent with the modesty norm prevalent in Japanese culture. In addition, we predicted that people with unstable self-esteem would lower expectations for their future performance only when they fail, but not when they succeed. As mentioned earlier, we predicted that people with unstable self-esteem would lower their expectations for future performance especially when they fail in the previous performance because they are more likely to expect to fail in related future performances in that situation. Therefore, when they succeed in the previous performance, they do not need to protect their ego by lowering their expectations.

In this study, we examined the hypothesis in a realistic setting involving a mid-term exam and final exam in a statistics course. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. At Time1, three weeks before the final exam, self-esteem instability was measured with a diary survey. At Time2, one week to two days before the final exam, self-evaluation of the results of the midterm, excuse making for the results of mid-term, expectations and motivation for future performance on the final exam were measured. We predicted that self-esteem instability would be negatively related to high expectations for the performance on the final exam especially when the self-evaluation of the midterm performance was low, but that self-esteem instability would not be related to excuse making.

Method

Participants

Sixty one undergraduate students (16 males and 45 females, mean age = 19.16, SD = 0.96) enrolled in an introductory statistics course for psychology majors at a private university in Tokyo voluntarily participated in this study.

Measures and Procedure

Time1. Three weeks before the final exam. Daily self-esteem was measured with a modified version of Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (1965). The scale included 10 modified items such as "Today I felt I was useless". We asked the participants "How much are each of the sentences consistent with your evaluation of yourself today?" The participants answered each question on a four-point scale (1 = not at all to 4 = absolutely) for seven consecutive days. The average of the seven daily self-esteem scores yielded the self-esteem level index, and the standard deviation of the seven daily self-esteem scores yielded the self-esteem instability index.

Time2. One week to two days before the final exam. About one week after the final day of the diary survey, we asked questions about the participants' midterm test scores. In the statistics course, students were required to take four midterm exams and one final exam. The students had been instructed that the final score would be determined based upon the total score of the four mid-term exams and the final exam.

Self-evaluation of the midterm exams: The self-evaluation of the mid-term exams was measured by asking "In total, how good or bad was your result on the midterm exams?" The participants answered on a seven-point scale; 1 = very bad to 7 = very good.

Reactions to the result of the midterm exams: We asked questions about the participants' midterm exams. (a) Excuses for the midterm results: We asked the participants how much they thought the difficulty of the class and the quality of the instructor influenced their midterm exam scores on a seven-point scale (1 = did not influence at all to 7 = influenced a lot). (b) Expectation for the final score: The participants were asked how well they expected to perform on the final exam, on a seven-point scale (1 = become much worse to 7 = become much better). (c) Motivation for the final exam: The participants were asked how long they would study for the final exam on a seven-point scale (1 = very short time to 7 = very long time).

Results

Correlations between the Variables

Table1 shows the correlations between the variables. As can be seen in this table, self-esteem instability was negatively correlated with expected performance on the final exam, indicating that self-esteem instability is related to the expectation for performance on the final exam regardless of the self-evaluation of the midterm exams.

Table1

Correlations between the Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Self-Esteem Level	1						
2. Self- Esteem Instability	-.16	1					
3. Self-Evaluation of the Midterm	.21	.15	1				
4. Expectation for the Final	.17	-.28 *	-.16	1			
5. Motivation for the Final	.00	-.02	.18	.22 †	1		
6. Attribution (Difficulty of the Exam)	-.03	-.02	.00	.02	.19	1	
7. Attribution (Quality of the Instructor)	.06	-.01	.25 †	-.37 **	-.04	.47 **	1

$*p < .05, **p < .01, † p < .10$

Expectation for the Final Examination

A regression analysis was conducted on the expectation for performance on the exam (Table2). As can be seen there were significant effects for the main effect of self-esteem instability, the interaction effect between self-esteem instability and the self-evaluation of the midterm performance, the main effect of self-evaluation on the midterm exam, and the interaction effect between self-esteem level and self-evaluation of the midterm performance. The result of the post-hoc test (Aiken & West, 1991) indicated that when the self-evaluation of the midterm was low (one standard deviation below the mean), self-esteem instability was negatively related to the expectation for the final exam ($\beta = -.85, p < .001$). On the other hand, when the self-evaluation of the midterm performance was high (one standard deviation above the mean), self-esteem instability was not significantly related to the expectation for the final exam ($\beta = .07$, n.s.). These results support our hypothesis predicting that self-esteem instability would be negatively related to expectations for the final exam especially when the self-evaluation of the midterm performance was low.

Motivation for the Final Examination

The result of the analysis on motivation for the final exam (holding constant the effects of self-esteem instability, self-evaluation on the midterm exam, and the interaction between the two) showed no significant effects on the motivation to study for the final exam. The interpretation for this result will be discussed in the following section.

Table 2

Regression Analysis Summary for Self-esteem Instability and the Result of the Midterm Examination Predicting the Expectation for the Final Exam and the Motivation to study f or the Final Examination

Dependant Variables	Expectation for the Final Exam	Motivation for the Final Exam
Self-Esteem Level	.11	-.05
Self-Esteem Instability	-.34 **	-.03
Self-Evaluation of the Midterm Exam	-.28 *	.14
Self-Esteem level x Instability	.15	-.17
Self-Esteem Instability x Midterm	.37 **	-.08
Self-Esteem Level x Midterm	-.33 *	-.24
Level x Instability x Midterm	-.13	.08
R	.67	.33
R^2	.46 **	.11
adjusted R^2	.37	-.03

*p<.05, **p<.01, † p<.10

Excuse Making for the Results of the Midterm Exams

In order to examine the relation between self-esteem instability and excuse making, we conducted two separate regression analyses, because we had two indices of excuse making: attribution to the difficulty of the class and the quality of the instructor. The regression models were not significant ($F (7, 46) = 0.51$, n.s.; $F (7, 46) = 1.05$, n.s.). In addition, the results yielded no significant effects for the relationship between self-esteem instability and the two indices of excuse ($\beta = -.06$, n.s.; $\beta = -.02$, n.s.). These results are consistent with our predictions.

Discussion

This study tested the relationship between self-esteem instability and reactions to task performance in a realistic setting. As predicted, among Japanese participants, self-esteem instability was not significantly related to extrapunitive reactions such as attributing failure to the difficulty of the class or the quality of the instructor.

Instead, self-esteem instability was negatively related to expectations for future performance, and this relation was especially salient when self-evaluations of midterm exam performances were low. This finding suggests that after failure, people with unstable self-esteem lower their expectations for future performances. However, this finding should not be interpreted as indicating that people with unstable self-esteem lower their motivation to study for the final exam, because instability of self-esteem was not related to the level of motivation for the final exam. That is, the findings in this study can be interpreted as indicating that among Japanese participants, lowering expectations is not a reaction which lowers motivation and the amount of effort expended, but is a reaction which is used as a tactic to protect the ego before future performance on a related task. These findings are consistent with our prediction that Japanese students with unstable self-esteem would strategically lower their expectations for future performance in place of extrapunitive reactions.

Future research needs to examine the cross-cultural universality of the findings of the present study. Lowering expectations after failure may be a unique phenomenon in Japan, where excuse making is not well regarded. Alternatively, individuals in the West may also lower expectations (in addition to excuse making) to protect ego when they anticipate future task.

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