

Self-Esteem Instability and Expectation for the Future amongst Italian Students

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From September to November 2010, I stayed in Rome in order to study and research at University of Rome “La Sapienza”. During the stay, I conducted a survey targeting Italian university students. The survey examines the relation between self-esteem instability and expectation for the future in order to know how Italian people with vulnerable self-esteem react to negative events. According to Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, and Harlow (1993), self-esteem instability is defined as the extent to which individuals’ state self-esteem level changes across situations. It is said that people with unstable self-esteem are sensitive to the results of evaluative events (Kernis & Goldman, 2003). So, for example, people with unstable self-esteem are sensitive to the result of an exam and perceive that the result shows their general ability. That is, the ego of people with unstable self-esteem is easily threatened by negative events.

Because the ego of people with unstable self-esteem is vulnerable to threats, those people are strongly motivated to protect their ego from the threats (e.g., Kernis et al., 1993). Previous studies in the U.S. have shown that people with unstable self-esteem tend to react to failure in extrapunitive ways, such as attributing their failure to external factors such as the difficulty of the task (Kernis et al., 1993; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1992) and derogating the person who gave them the negative feedback (Kernis et al., 1993).

However, our previous research demonstrated that self-esteem instability was not significantly related to extrapunitive reactions in a culture in which those reactions are not appropriate (Fukuzawa & Yamaguchi, in press). Therefore, it is necessary to focus on a culturally universal reaction other than extrapunitive one. In addition, the previous findings about self-esteem instability 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 the future. In our daily lives, individuals often continue to work even after they experience something negative. For example, when students fail in one exam, it does not mean they have no chance to take an exam for the same subject any more. Therefore, if they have a chance to continue studying that subject, and have high expectation for achievement, they might not need extrapunitive reactions after only one failure. Indeed, previous research suggested that expectation for the future can function to decrease the damage by a failure (Kobayashi, 2004). Therefore, I argue that expectation for the future can be a non-extrapunitive reaction of those with unstable self-esteem.

This study examines the relation between self-esteem instability and expectation for the future among Italian students, in order to test a culturally universal reaction after negative events. I hypothesize that people with unstable self-esteem will have high

expectation for the future for two reasons. First, previous research (Kobayashi, 2004) suggested that heightening expectation for the future has function to decrease the damage by a negative event. Second, as mentioned earlier, people with unstable self-esteem are sensitive to evaluative events, so that they have more necessity for decreasing the damage by negative events than people with stable self-esteem. Therefore, it is hypothesized that people with unstable self-esteem will have high expectation for the future, especially after they experience negative events.

Two hundred and sixty six Italian students (57 males and 209 females) enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Rome University participated in this study. First, I conducted a diary survey. Daily self-esteem was measured with a modified version of Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (1965). At the same time, daily events (10 negative events and 9 positive events) and expectation for the next day (expectation for the next day achievement, daily optimism, daily positive orientation) were measured for six consecutive days. Two days after the diary survey, I measured expectation for their achievement in five years later. The average of the six daily self-esteem scores yielded the self-esteem level score, and the standard deviation of the six daily self-esteem scores yielded the self-esteem instability score. Likewise, the average of the six positive/negative events scores, and six daily expectation scores yielded the index of positive events, negative events, expectation for the next day achievement, daily optimism, and daily positive orientation.

The results of regression analysis supported the hypothesis. Among people who frequently experienced negative events, self-esteem instability was positively related to the expectation for five years later achievement. Also, after experiencing frequent negative events, self-esteem instability was positively related to the expectation for the next day achievement among those with low level of self-esteem. In addition, among people who did not frequently experience positive events, self-esteem instability was positively related to optimism and positive orientation for next days. In sum, Italian people with unstable self-esteem heightened expectation for five years later and the next day, especially after experiencing negative events, and also after experiencing few positive events.

These findings suggest that heightening the expectation for the future can function to reduce the threats to ego among people with unstable self-esteem. Because people with unstable self-esteem need to protect their ego more than those with stable self-esteem, they tend to maintain psychological well-being by having high expectation for the future. This function would work both when people experienced frequent negative events, and when people did not experience a lot of positive events. Therefore,

it is plausible that when people are in a situation which has a chance to have high expectation, people do not show expunitive reactions even if they have vulnerable ego. Those findings show the positive consequence of self-esteem instability, which has never been demonstrated in the previous studies. People with unstable self-esteem are sensitive to evaluative events, but at the same time, that sensitivity has a possibility to lead to positive consequences in the long-term. In order to test the cultural universality of these results, future research among Japanese people is necessary.