Assumed-Competence Based on Undervaluing Others as a Determinant of Emotions: Focusing on Anger and Sadness

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The purpose of this study is to examine whether a new construct “Assumed-Competence based on undervaluing others (AC)” could be a determinant of anger and sadness for contemporary Japanese adolescents. A set of questionnaires was administered to 584 high school students, who rated ACS-2 (Assumed-Competence Scale, second version), Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale, in relation to their perceived emotional reactions toward certain negative personal and social events, and other scales. The results indicated that the students who got angry at personal events were likely to have high AC. However, those who felt neither anger nor sadness in relation to such social events were likely to have high AC. The role of AC in emotional reactions and suggestions for future research was also discussed.

Key Words: assumed-competence, self-esteem, anger, sadness

The Japanese word, 'kireru', which means to get angry easily, is frequently used when one talks about the characteristics of Japanese adolescents today. For example, when high school students are scolded or insulted by someone, their immediate reactions may be to retaliate with verbal remarks or impulsive physical attacks toward the opponents. In addition, the interviews with 68 elementary and junior high school teachers conducted by Hayamizu and Niwa (2002), found that present-day children and early adolescents were less likely to feel sad even when they lost a class-match or a team competition in comparison to those of the previous generation. What can be the cause of such indifference? Why do present-day Japanese early adolescents tend to lose their temper easily and have a lesser tendency to feel sad? This study seeks to explore the determinants of these emotional reactions.

It is said that both sadness and anger can be felt when a person is not able to achieve his/her goal. Research by Roseman (1984) and Smith and Ellsworth (1987) indicated that in the presence of an undesirable outcome, the person involved tended to get angry when he/she put the blame on someone else, and conversely, he/she would tend to feel sad when he/she attributed the undesirable outcome to the situation. Sakagami (1999) also suggested that one would experience more sadness when one realized that a goal was unattainable, whereas one would be more likely to feel anger when he/she foresaw the potential of attaining the goal and yet failed to achieve it. In other words, those who possess high potential may be more likely to react with anger in times of failure. From these findings, it can be suggested that in facing negative events, students who perceive themselves as...
competent will be more likely to attribute the cause of the events to others and to get angry, whereas students who consider their competence lower will be more likely to attribute the events as their own faults or other fatalistic elements and to feel sad. If this hypothesis is true, can it be said that young Japanese adolescents of today perceive themselves as competent and confident individuals? There is no affirmative answer to this question as some international surveys about students’ competence revealed that Japanese students possessed a lower level of competence (Kosawa, 2000) and self-esteem (Kawachi, 2003) compared to students in other countries.

Hayamizu, Kino and Takagi (2003) proposed a new psychological construct “Assumed-Competence based on undervaluing others (AC)” to explain the anger and sadness of present-day adolescents in Japan. AC is a form of illusory competence which one gains by demeaning others. It is a façade one unconsciously puts up that seems to portray one’s true competence. AC differs from self-esteem that may manifest itself in true competence.

The following may be one of the explanations for the AC phenomenon. With the advancement of scientific technology, manual work is reduced, and thus the necessity for collaboration with others to attain goals declines. As a consequence, concern and respect for each other was also diluted, and people tend to undervalue others, especially those whom they are unfamiliar with, because of the lack of information for discreet evaluation of their ability. This seems to be evident among Japanese youths as they are found to be more self-centered (Sengoku, 2001) and such a characteristic may further evoke AC in them. In Japanese society, students are exposed to severe competition such as entrance examinations and in job-hunting, and youngsters may experience a sense of failure rather than success as an outcome of these highly competitive situations. Those who fail to achieve their goals are likely to employ a self-protection mechanism to protect their confidence and ego with their AC by undervaluing others. Thus, AC may have an ego-defensive purpose in threatening situations.

Considering these characteristics of AC, Hayamizu, Kino and Takagi (2003) constructed a scale to measure AC. As adolescents themselves are often unaware of their AC, it is difficult to measure it through direct questions. Therefore items were prepared to measure the tendency of the adolescents to undervalue others. It has been assumed that the way one evaluates and perceives others closely reflects how one evaluates and perceives oneself. In other words, in the process of undervaluing others, one unknowingly gains AC.

In order to confirm this inference, university students were asked to list the associated characteristics of the person described in the items of ACS-2 (Assumed-Competence Scale, second version). Approximately 80 percent of the students listed characteristics such as over-confidence and firm belief in one’s competence. These descriptions corresponded to the characteristics of AC. This tended to support the content validity of ACS-2.

Before examining the relationship between emotion and AC, the validity of ACS-2 should be examined in greater detail. In particular, it is important to distinguish AC from self-esteem. The frequency of positive and negative experiences (e.g., academic and interpersonal successes/ failures) reported by participants was used as a criterion of validity. It was hypothesized that self-esteem was directly influenced by personal experiences (Takahira, 1998) whereas AC was not. To test this hypothesis, the relation of AC and self-esteem with personal experiences was examined. If AC and self-esteem differ in their relation to personal positive and negative experiences, a discriminating validity of ACS-2 will be supported.

The main purpose of this study is to examine whether AC and self-esteem determine Japanese adolescents’ emotional reactions toward negative events. In the present study, a special focus was given to the relative strength of anger and sadness as emotional reactions to negative events. In addition, Horoiwa (2001) indicated that Japanese children were less likely to feel any emotions in general. Therefore it was assumed that there were some adolescents who were less prone to anger and sadness. As mentioned before, anger and sadness seem to be caused by different psychological mechanisms although both were identified as similar negative emotions. It was also considered that the influence of AC and self-esteem on the emotional reactions (i.e. no emotion and relative strength of anger and sadness) would differ depending on the type of negative events. Thus, in this study the negative events were dealt with separately as personal and social events.

Concerning negative personal events, adolescents who have high AC would be more likely to get angry because they tend to attribute the cause of the negative events to others instead of to themselves. However, in the case of individuals with low AC, it seems that they would be less likely to blame others for the occurrence of the negative event. Therefore, they would feel more sadness than anger compared to those with high AC. Negative social events, which are indirectly related to the participants, evoke different emotional responses as compared to negative