



## Review of "Self-esteem of Japanese College Students: Suggestions based on Research on How to Foster Their Self-esteem"

『自信力が学生を変える：大學生意識調査からの提言』

<b>Title</b>	Self-esteem of Japanese college students: Suggestions based on re- search on how to foster their self-esteem 『自信力が学生を変える：大學生意識調査からの提言』
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### Reviewed by Ryoko Suzuki

This is a new book by Kawachi focusing on *Jishin-ryoku* (her coinage, literally meaning 'confidence-power'), or self-esteem, of present-day Japanese university students living in the metropolitan Tokyo area. The book is, in a sense, a sequel to her previous book (Kawachi, 2003), in which she comparatively analyzes the self-esteem of junior-high students from four different countries (Japan, the US, Sweden and China). Being a sociologist who has been keen on issues surrounding social minorities (e.g. women, African-Americans, teenagers), she is also a foreign language educator teaching content courses in English at Keio University. Her proposals could be applicable and quite useful in the classrooms and, as a result, this type of work will benefit language educators in Asia. Furthermore, her portrayal of current Japanese university students can be an inspiring classroom topic for cross-cultural comparison. As the book is written for the general public, it can be an accessible reader for advanced level Japanese learners.

The introduction presents an overview of the entire book. Kawachi points out that the long-standing stereotype of Japanese university students – that they rarely go to classes and only do part-time jobs – no longer holds. Her survey covered 2100 students from nine universities, and the follow-up interviews of ninety-three students reveal that many of them suffer from low self-esteem. The score to measure the self-esteem reveals that it is much lower for Japanese university students than for junior-high students in Sweden, the U.S., and China, but she states that the Japanese students are struggling to change their self-image for the better. Therefore, this book is intended to give concrete suggestions to students for improving their self-esteem, and also to their teachers, parents and universities who can assist these students.

The format of the following five chapters is quite creative and unique. The author divides each page into two sections: the upper section shows her analyses of and comments on the survey statistics and interview results; the lower section features the actual comments by many students in the interviews, which serves as evidence for her analyses. The students' voices provide diverse

viewpoints regarding university curriculum, friendship, self-image, relationships with parents, and job interviews. In the classroom, educators do not normally have time to listen to students' individual voices, so the lower section of the page is especially instructive for teachers.

Chapter 1 presents the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the current thinking of today's university students. Contrary to the general image of university students (that they do not study at all), the author's survey shows that more than half say that studying is their first priority, but only 25% of them say they study hard consistently. Interestingly, the results indicate that the students receive more satisfaction from courses with heavier workloads, with older students being more inclined to feel this way. She also points out that students silently ignore some boring teachers by sending mobile-phone messages during class. In the lower column, one female student says, "In high-school classes, instructors try hard to make the content more accessible for students. But in the university, I don't think it is the case. It is unbelievable that the professors are not held accountable for how they teach courses" (p. 42). She makes a bi-directional proposal that instructors should make their courses more demanding and rewarding and that the students should directly communicate to instructors their needs and wants related to the courses.

Chapter 2 first defines the key term of this book: self-esteem. It is the positive evaluation of self, or feeling of self-respect (pp. 58-59). The author shows that the higher their self-esteem, the more fulfilled and rewarded the students feel towards their university life. The three causes of a lower self-esteem are as follows: (1) traumatic past experiences, e.g., being bullied or never having one's achievements properly acknowledged by parents; (2) negative self-image, e.g. shy, obedient, not outspoken; and (3) the fact that s/he is not facing reality, e.g. not spending time on studying, over-prioritizing one's part-time job. Notice that the traditional personality traits that Japanese society had valued (i.e. being silent, shy, obedient) are negatively evaluated by today's students overall. In order to deal with reality (that students attend university in order to study) and gain self-assurance, the author recommends that students take action to re-establish the habit of keeping regular hours. The comments of students whose self-esteem is low and those with high self-esteem are strikingly different. It is easy to imagine how these two groups of students would do in job interviews where they are expected to present themselves as able, motivated, risk-taking, friendly candidates. The level of self-esteem clearly has a huge impact on daily life.

Chapter 3 deals with the role of the university, not as the educational institution providing academic knowledge and skills, but as the environment in which the self-esteem of each student is fostered. According to the author's survey, the majority of students (65%), despite their awareness that studying is important, passively attend classes, study only before the exam period or only if they take a demanding course (p. 95). Curiously, the survey also shows that students want instructors to actively communicate with them as their mentors, and also that they would like to enroll in more interactive courses. For instance, courses involving frequent presentations, weekly reports with instructor feedback, group discussions and debates, and communication using bulletin boards on course websites are much more welcomed than courses in which the instructor simply lectures throughout. The comments from the interviews show that students want to speak up and actively participate in the classroom to get the most out of the course, though this is a huge challenge for many of them because they are afraid of making mistakes and being embarrassed in front of peers.

The author suggests that the Japanese college classrooms can and should facilitate active participation by students, and by doing so, help boost the self-esteem of the students (there is a clear correlation between the self-esteem ratio and how many times they raise their hands and speak up in class). She states that instructors should, for example: (1) give opportunities to students to work cooperatively in order to generate a friendly atmosphere in class; (2) constantly communicate to students that by sharing their comments and questions they will contribute to the quality and amount of knowledge that everyone gains from the course; and (3) give feedback on students' work, whether oral or written. These proposals come from her experience with junior high classrooms in Stockholm and New York, where the adults constantly encourage teenage students to speak up, ask questions, and think and act as individuals rather than becoming selfless members of a group (p. 130). The interviews seem to suggest that traditional Japanese virtues such as silence and non-argumentativeness are gradually becoming outdated.

Speaking up in class is the result of long-term socialization to a norm in a particular culture; hence it is a difficult habit to change instantly. However, I think it may be achieved more easily in a foreign language classroom, because *students are not expected to be fluent or perfect* when they speak. The language educators in Japanese universities should more strongly emphasize this point to their young-adult learners.

Chapter 4 deals with the endpoint of college life – job-search. Though the Japanese economy is showing signs of recovery, the job-search for undergraduates is still extremely difficult. These days, students send their resumes to over 50 companies, and spend several months going to job interviews, usually from the end of their junior year until the first half of their senior year. Some students featured in Chapter 2, who used to have low self-esteem, were again interviewed after they received a job offer and are quoted in this chapter. These narratives vividly depict how the entire job-search process is tough but rewarding. Each student experienced depression from receiving multiple rejections, but dealt with the reality by considering themselves and their futures seriously, ultimately restoring their confidence by accepting who they really were. This chapter stresses the necessity for students to build self-confidence before beginning the job-search, and also suggests that all universities should offer internship programs and networking opportunities so that the students themselves realize and accept their talents, interests and goals in life.

The concluding chapter summarizes her suggestions: 1) students themselves should improve their self-esteem in the classroom, on campus, and before the job search; 2) teachers and universities should welcome and encourage the students' input in the classroom, curriculum planning and other domains in college life (which will lead to the students' sense of achievement and higher self-esteem); and 3) parents should become less controlling, more distant mentors, who respect their children's decisions (which will result in the students' self-assurance).

The lower column across the four chapters features the voices of over eighty students. For teachers who interact with students mainly in the classroom, individual students' narratives related to inner struggles and self-discovery are indeed enlightening. These interviews may not necessarily constitute typical views of current university students in Japan, but we should take these voices seriously in order for Japanese universities to evolve into more *confident* and competitive organizations in the international scene.

Overall, I highly recommend this book, because I believe it will stimulate constructive discussions in various communities of readers, such as educators, students and their parents, university administrators, researchers (esp. sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists), and the general public both in and outside of Japan. I strongly hope that this book will be the starting point for systematic cross-cultural comparison of the self-esteem of college students, especially those in Asia.

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### **Reference**

Kawachi, K. (2003). *Jishin-ryoku wa dou sodatsuka: sishunki no kodomo sekai 4 toshi choosa kara no teigen* (Self-Esteem of 15 Year-Old Children in Beijing, New York, Stockholm and Tokyo: suggestions based on research on how to foster their self-esteem). Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha.