

## Self-Focused Attention and Self-Enhancement: How Negative Life Events Affect Well-being

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the well-being of individuals with positive illusions (i.e., self-enhancing individuals), mediated by a negative self-focusing task. From the findings, self-enhancing individuals in interpersonal attraction and social desirability showed some decrease in fulfillment in life with a self-focusing task, compared with those without the task. That is, the domain of well-being, closely related to the negative experience, was damaged expectedly even among self-enhancing individuals although other domains were unaffected. The present study also indicated the robustness of the self-enhancing tendency among Japanese, and the difficulty in manipulating self-focused attention.

Key words: Self-focused attention, Positive illusion, Well-being

### 抄 録

本研究の目的は、ポジティブ・イллюジョンを保有する被験者（自己高揚者）のウェルビーイングが否定的自己注目を媒介とした場合に、どの様に影響を受けるのかを検討することにある。調査の結果、自己注目あり群において対人魅力と社会的望ましさが人並み以上とする自己高揚者は、充実・生きがい度得点において、自己注目なし群よりも評価が低いことが確認された。これは、仮説で述べられたように、否定的経験と密接に関連があると思われるウェルビーイングの領域が影響を受けた結果と捉えることができる。また、関連の薄いその他の領域は影響を受けていなかった。さらに、本研究によって日本人の自己高揚傾向の堅牢性が認められたこと、自己注目操作への課題が浮き彫りとなったことも注目すべき点であろう。

キーワード：自己注目、ポジティブ・イллюジョン、ウェルビーイング

The relationship between self-focused attention and depressed individuals has been the target for empirical research. Self-focused attention mediates the increase in negative affect (Gibbons et al, 1985), judgment of the likelihood of negative life events (Pyszczynski et al, 1987), and the recall of previous negative life events (Pyszczynski et al, 1989), especially among depressed individuals. In fact, depressed individuals put attention on internal aspects of themselves more than the non-depressed individuals, and even possess a depressive self-focusing style (Greenberg et al, 1992; Pyszczynski et al, 1987; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Sakamoto, 1997).

Contrary to depressed individuals, non-depressed individuals are less affected by, or even conduct less self-focused attention across the findings. In this sense, non-depressed individuals are less attuned to their own internal bits of information, and more likely to engage in a balanced or positive understanding of themselves. The tendency for perceiving the self in a positive way is named positive illusion (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Toyama & Sakurai, 2000). It is understood as a cognitive bias derived from the self-enhancing motivation (Sedikides, 1993). Individuals with positive illusion are low in depression, and yield a positive correlation with psychological well-being (Toyama & Sakurai, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the well-being of individuals with positive illusions (i.e., self-enhancing individuals), mediated by a self-focusing task. According to a perspective by Buss (1980), self-focused attention after some negative experiences could decrease the level of self-evaluation on the domains that are not only related to the negative experiences but also unrelated. Likewise, self-focused attention after some positive experiences could increase the positive emotion about the experiences, and strengthen the internal attribution regarding those experiences. In this study, we will examine the former.

Because self-focused attention gives one a perfect opportunity to view accurate his/her self-image, we anticipate that focusing on negative experiences would undermine the positively biased evaluation (i.e., well-being) of those self-enhancing individuals, not only on the domain that are related to the particular experience, but also unrelated. For negative self-focusing task, we have turned to a study by Hida (1992), and considered that a heartbreak is considerably a typical negative experience for college students. Under the anticipation of heartbreaks, we intend to see how self-focused attention affects the well-being of self-enhancing individuals.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 212 undergraduate and technical school students (95 males and 117 females, the mean age of participants was 21.8 years old) in Kansai area, Japan.

### *Procedure*

Positive illusion was measured by the Self-Perception Scale (SPS). The SPS is comprised of 25 items from the scale originally developed by Toyama & Sakurai (2000). High factor loadings of 14 items were taken from the self domain, and the rest was taken from the optimism and personal control domains of the original scale. These items include positive/negative traits and future life events that are likely to happen. The participants were asked to rate themselves, compared to average college students. Responses to the items ranged from 1 (I really do not think so) to 5 (I really think so), with 3 being neither.

After the SPS, self-focused attention was measured by allocating approximately a half of participants into the heartbreaking thoughts inducing task. Randomly selected participants were asked to imagine breaking up with his/her girl friend/boy friend. For participants who did not date anyone at the time were asked to imagine a person in favor. Participants were then instructed to write about themselves in the state of heartbreak. 127 participants (55 males and 72 females) were in the heartbreak condition, and the rest of 85 participants (39 males and 46 females) were in the non-heartbreak condition.

Well-being was measured by the Fulfillment Sentiment Scale (FSS) and the Self-Acceptance Scale (SAS). The FSS is comprised of 20 items from the scale by Ohno (1984). The original scale consists of 4 factors (fulfillment-empty, independents-dependence, solidarity-loneliness, trust-distrust), and high factor loadings of five items were chosen from each factor. Responses to the items ranged from 1 (Not applicable to myself) to 5 (Extremely applicable to myself), with 3 being neither. The original SAS was developed by Sawazaki (1993), and consisted of 5 factors (physical self, psychological self, social self, role directed self, total self). For this study, 19 items were subjectively chosen from those factors. Responses to the items ranged from 1 (I really dislike it) to 5 (I like it and would like to keep it), with 3 being neither.

## Results

### *Factor analysis*

Principal factor analyses of three scales were conducted with Promax rotation. The number of factors with an Eigenvalue of larger than 1, the images of the Scree Plot, and item loadings from each factor were carefully reviewed. As a result, three factors were chosen from the SPS. Interpersonal attraction factor (5 items,  $\alpha = .87$ ) is based from the sociability and physical desirability factors from the self domain. Social desirability factor (6 items,  $\alpha = .80$ ) is based the sincerity and harmony factors also from the self domain. The third factor is called pessimism factor (8 items,  $\alpha = .76$ ), which was based on both the optimism and personal control domains. The FSS is composed of three factors: loneliness/boredom factor (7 items,  $\alpha = .81$ ), independence factor (5 items,  $\alpha = .80$ ), and fulfillment in life factor (7 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ). The SAS factor also made up three factors: external self, internal self, and role directed self. The external self factor (8 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ) is based on the physical and social self factors. The internal self factor (4 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ) is based on the psychological self. The role directed self factor (2 items,  $\alpha = .90$ ) is based on the role directed self.

### *Manipulation check*

In this study, the relative method (Toyama & Sakurai, 2001) was applied to measure the positive illusion among participants. In order to confirm that the high scores in the scale actually indicated self-enhancing tendency, participants were divided into two groups: high and low, based on the factor scores of the SPS for each factor. Because of the ultimate rule that the mean factor scores are always zero, participants in the high groups scored positive, and participants in the low groups scored negative. High groups were subject to t-test. The mean scores for the each factor were tested to see the difference from the mid-point of the 5-point scale (3). The difference between the mean scores of the high groups and the mid-point was all significant (Interpersonal attraction:  $M=3.14$ ,  $p<.01$ ; Social desirability:  $M=4.12$ ,  $p<.001$ ; Pessimism:  $M=2.66$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Although the mean score for the pessimism factor was below 3, the mean score below 3 was actually self-enhancing since the smaller ratings indicated less pessimism.

*Self-focused attention and self-enhancement*

To examine the effect of self-focused attention among self-enhancing individuals, we calculated the mean scores for each factor from the FSS and the SAS, and entered those scores into a 2 (Positive illusion: high and low) X 2 (Self-focused attention: heartbreak condition and non-heartbreak condition) ANOVA, in which all factors were between-participants. Since the SPS comprised of 3 factors, the same ANOVA was repeated three times to incorporate the importance of each factor.

According to the results, the main effect of the positive illusion on the interpersonal attraction was significant on loneliness/boredom, independence, fulfillment in life, external self, and internal self (all,  $p < .01$ ). That is, self-enhancing individuals on the interpersonal attraction possessed higher evaluation of the self on many aspects, relative to non self-enhancing individuals. In the case of the loneliness/boredom factor, the score of the high group was significantly lower than the low group, indicating that they were less lonely. A significant interaction effect was found on the fulfillment in life factor ( $F(1, 211) = 5.90$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As shown in Figure 1, within the non-heartbreak condition, the high group ( $M = 3.10$ ) and the low group ( $M = 2.56$ ) were significantly different ( $F(1, 84) = 13.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the subjects in the high group felt more fulfilled when not self-focusing, relative to the subjects in the low group. The difference however disappeared when self-focused. Moreover, among the high groups, the difference between the heartbreak condition ( $M = 2.79$ ) and the non-heartbreak condition ( $M = 3.10$ ) was significant ( $F(1, 103) = 5.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ). By focusing on the self, fulfillment in life actually decreased among the self-enhancing individuals.

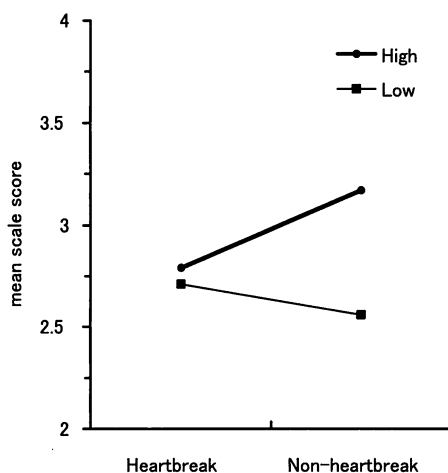


Figure 1 . Interaction effect found in the fulfillment in life factor.

The main effect of the positive illusion on the social desirability was significant on independence, fulfillment in life, external self, internal self, and role directed self (all,  $p < .01$ ). Self-enhancing individuals on the social desirability showed higher evaluation of the self on many aspects than non self-enhancing individuals. As shown in Figure 2, two interaction effects were found on the loneliness/boredom factor and the fulfillment in life factor (both,  $p < .1$ ). Within the non-heartbreak condition, the low group on the loneliness/boredom factor felt lonelier than the high group (high:  $M = 2.82$ ; low:  $M = 3.19$ ), and the high group on the fulfillment in life factor felt more fulfilled than the low group (high:  $M = 3.12$ ; low:  $M = 2.60$ ). However, those differences did not exist within the heartbreak condition, which clearly was the effect of the self-focused attention. Also, among the high groups on the fulfillment in life factor, the difference between the heartbreak condition ( $M = 2.80$ ) and the non-heartbreak condition ( $M = 3.12$ ) was significant ( $F(1, 104) = 4.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Self-enhancing individuals on the socially desirable traits felt less fulfilled in life when self-focused attention was deliberately induced.

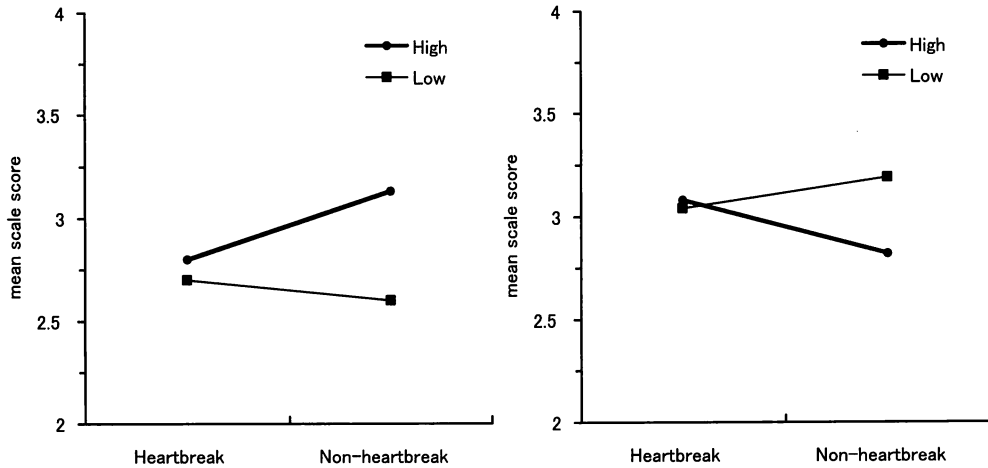


Figure 2 . Interaction effect found in the loneliness/boredom factor and the fulfillment in life factor.

The main effect of the positive illusion on the pessimism was significant on internal self ( $F(1, 211)=4.62, p<.05$ ). Non-pessimistic individuals ( $M=3.44$ ) scored higher than pessimistic individuals ( $M=3.15$ ). No interaction effect was found.

## Discussion

Unfortunately no main effect on the self-focused attention was found throughout the study, which at first we questioned the reliability of its manipulation as mentioned by Mor & Winquist (2002). We, however, did not dismiss it as ineffective. To summarize the results, some of the interaction effects indicated that self-enhancing individuals were vulnerable to self-focused attention, namely heart breaking thoughts inducing task. Self-focused attention affected the self-evaluation of self-enhancing individuals, especially with the fulfillment in life factor, in which measured a general life satisfaction via items such as "I am living a worthy life," and "I feel good about living." This general life satisfaction declined by focusing on the self; the self that was hurt by the lost love experience. We anticipated that self-focusing on the personally negative experience would not only decrease the related area of self-evaluation, but also the unrelated areas to the particular experience. But, that was not the case. The self-enhancing tendency might have protected unrelated areas.

Non self-enhancing individuals were consistently unaffected by the manipulation of self-focused attention. That does not simply indicate the ineffectiveness of self-focused

attention. Based on the finding that non self-enhancing individuals were lonelier than the self-enhancing individuals, they could have been moderately depressed. If so, then the depressive self-focusing style explains the ineffectiveness of self-focused attention. For non self-enhancing individuals, thinking about lost love could be a routine task, and are in the constant search of inferior aspects of the self that require efforts to overcome. For them, applying self-focusing tasks were meaningless because they do the task all the time, and thus their self-evaluation was stable at the low level. In a sense, they may represent the typical Japanese.

Across the findings from the numerous main effects, self-enhancing individuals showed relatively high evaluation of themselves. These findings indicate that self-enhancing individuals were consistently more self-enhancing than non self-enhancing individuals, regardless of the self-focused attention. Even though Japanese are usually more depressive and less self-enhancing than Westerners (Hymes & Akiyama, 1991), there were differences among Japanese, and some people really self-enhanced in the present study.

Further understanding the robustness of self-enhancing tendency and perceptual strategies among self-enhancing individuals may be a meaningful step toward the development of researches in the field.

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