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# A Comparative Study of *Jajonshim* and Self-Esteem

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## Abstract

The Korean dictionary of psychology terms includes the word *jajonshim*, which means “self-esteem.” However, the meaning of *jajonshim* as Koreans use it is different from the meaning of self-esteem. Thus, we perform two studies to clarify the concept of *jajonshim* and to demonstrate how it differs from self-esteem. The purpose of Study 1 is to determine the socio-cultural meanings of *jajonshim* by examining its shared social representation in Korean culture. We ask open-ended questions and conduct a literature review related to *jajonshim*. The results of the text analysis show that Koreans perceive *jajonshim* as something that a person should have and maintain no matter who he or she is. At the same time, they believe that excessive *jajonshim* can be harmful. From the contextual analysis, we find four kinds of contexts (damaged, maintained, recovered, and abandoned). In Study 2, we conduct in-depth interviews and collect data that we analyze through the grounded theory paradigm model. On the basis of the results, we discuss differences between *jajonshim* and self-esteem and suggest that *jajonshim* is not limited to Korean culture. In further research, we develop the concept of *jajonshim* more clearly and find cultural differences.

## Introduction

Two words in the Korean language can be translated into the English term “self-esteem”: *jajonshim* and *jajongam*. Academic works tend to prefer the word *jajongam* and use it more frequently because the word *jajonshim* can be used in a different way and has unique meaning related to daily life. Indeed, when translating the term “self-esteem” into *jajonshim*, not only is the meaning of “self-esteem” activated in Koreans’ minds but the unique and specific socio-cultural meaning of *jajongshim* is as well. Therefore, if the term *jajonshim* is used as a translation of the English term “self-esteem,” two concepts are activated. For example, if a study uses the term *jajonshim* to explain self-esteem, there would likely be problems related to the uniqueness of *jajonshim* being inferred in the results analysis. In other words, *jajonshim* can be a confounded variable. However, research studies conducted on the concept of *jajonshim* in Korea have used the two terms (*jajonshim* and self-esteem) interchangeably. Moreover, both *jajongam* (which is the equivalent of self-esteem in Korean) and *jajonshim* (which has its own meaning) can be used in the same article. This interchange between *jajongam* and *jajonshim* shows that even researchers are confused about the two terms or do not differentiate between them (Hong, Kim, & Han, 2003; Lee & Jang, 2011); yet *jajongam* and *jajonshim* are clearly different. Whereas *jajongam* is limited to self-esteem, the term *jajonshim* goes beyond self-esteem to crystalize the socio-cultural specificity of Korean psychological characteristics. However, because translating this indigenous term is difficult, it is de-

defined as “self-esteem” in dictionaries and even on the Korean Psychology Association’s website (<http://www.koreanpsychology.or.kr>).

To gain a better understanding of the concept of *jajonshim*, we designed two studies. Study 1 focuses on the meaning of *jajonshim*, and Study 2 centers on how Koreans experience and use the term *jajonshim* in their daily lives. Furthermore, building on the results of these studies, we attempt to explain the differences between self-esteem and *jajonshim*.

## Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 is to examine the concept of *jajonshim* in accordance with social representation theory. This theory delineates how individuals from a social community share the same cognitive system, the same language, and the same logical system to provide an objective explanation of their social reality (Moscovici, 1988). Most studies on the theory have emphasized the importance of language and used a linguistic context to analyze those social representations (Rommetveit, 1984). Indeed, building on social representation theory, we analyze how Koreans use the word *jajonshim* in their daily lives to determine its cognitive implication, how it is experienced, and its cultural meaning.

### Method

To examine the use of the word *jajonshim* by Koreans in daily life, we reviewed the pertinent literature and conducted an open-ended survey. For the literature review, we consulted a website specialized on the research of scientific articles ([www.riss4u.kr](http://www.riss4u.kr)). We used keyword *jajonshim* and selected 24 articles. For the open-ended questionnaire, we asked 22 participants (2 men and 20 women,  $M = 42.27$ ,  $SD = 10.47$ ) to write briefly about the meaning of the word *jajonshim* and, from these participants, collected 30 short paragraphs (e.g., “*Jajonshim* is not something that is constructed and given to me by others, but something I construct by myself”; “I’m being damaged because of his/her *jajonshim*”).

### Data Analysis

We organized the data collected from the literature and the open-ended surveys as units of analysis by sentences or paragraphs that contained the word *jajonshim*. Then, from those units, we performed a relevant context analysis to determine the proprieties of *jajonshim*. For example, we categorized the sentence “Because I have *jajonshim*, I feel meaning in my life” as “*jajonshim* makes life meaningful.” Another example was “Even though I am poor, I have high *jajonshim*. *Jajonshim* is not just for the rich. I feel morally superior to the rich.” We categorized this paragraph as “No matter what, anyone can have *jajonshim*.” After this, by analyzing *jajonshim* with associated words written in the individual units of data, we confirmed *jajonshim* and its related contexts and examined the characteristics of *jajonshim*.

## Results and Discussion

*Representations of the cultural meaning of jajonshim.* To understand the cultural meaning of *jajonshim*, in Table 1 we provide the positive and negative attributes of *jajonshim*. First, Koreans attribute a positive meaning to *jajonshim*. This meaning is mainly associated with human dignity. It is assumed that all individuals have *jajonshim* and it should be protected. *Jajonshim* pertains not only to being proud of one's life but also to an individual's ability to develop him- or herself. Furthermore, disregarding social position, anyone can have *jajonshim*. For example, even underprivileged people need to protect their *jajonshim*. For them, *jajonshim* symbolizes their pride, life, and dignity. If they were to lose it, they would, in effect, lose their humanity.

**Table 1**  
*Jajonshim attributes*

<b>Positive meaning</b>	<b>Negative meaning</b>
Should be preserved by all means	Can be discarded
Considered as shameful without it	Makes one lose something
Defines one's values or identity	Makes one do something unnecessary
Gives power to live	Causes one to be stubborn
The last resort to retain the self	Makes one lose something important
Maintains one's dignity	Should not be excessive
One's pride, dignity and spirit	Arrogance and stubbornness

Second, Koreans attribute a negative meaning to *jajonshim*. This negative meaning is mainly associated with excessive *jajonshim*. *Jajonshim* draws disapproval if too much of it is shown to others; an individual with excessive *jajonshim* is perceived as an irrational, arrogant, or stubborn person.

*Representations of the context of jajonshim.* In a second analysis, we examined which contexts and which expressions Koreans use to show their *jajonshim*. From the results, we confirmed several characteristics of *jajonshim* (see Table 2). First, we found and categorized four contextual situations as damaging, maintaining, recovering, and abandoning *jajonshim*. Specifically, when *jajonshim* is damaged, participants reported expressions such as “damage,” “lose,” “hurt,” and so forth. The reason Koreans employed these expressions lies in *jajonshim* characteristics, which include “individual's primary possession,” “being flawless,” and “being clean-cut.” The second situation involves maintaining *jajonshim*. This situation is characterized by Koreans' desire to overcome external pressures and to protect their own values. In such circumstances, participants widely used expressions such as “human dignity,” “pride,” and “dignity.” The third situation is the recovery of *jajonshim*. This is the most important situation in which *jajonshim* is expressed. The participants often used expressions such as “restoring one's *jajonshim*,” “adopting,” or “receiving compensation”; thus, after being damaged, people

work to restore *jajonshim*. The fourth situation pertains to individuals who decided to abandon their *jajonshim*. Participants reported words and expressions such as “I give up” and “to disregard.” Koreans’ use of these expressions is related to specific circumstances that may occur in which maintenance of other values are perceived as more important than *jajonshim*. Therefore, when Koreans confront situations in which certain values are more important than *jajonshim*, they sometimes choose these values and abandon their *jajonshim*.

**Table 2***Jajonshim contexts*

<b>Contexts</b>	<b>Expressions</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Damaged	Damage, lose, hurt...	Negative emotions and behaviors
Maintained	Preserve, show, protect...	Dignity maintained
Recovered	Regain, restore...	Dignity recovered
Abandoned	Discard, abandon, put down...	More important values adopted

The results of Study 1 suggest that Koreans’ psychological state can be affected if they cannot protect their primary *jajonshim*. In this perspective, the experience of their *jajonshim* being hurt comes as a terrible shock to Koreans, because *jajonshim* is related to their self-awareness. Studies investigating the self and positive illusions have proposed that similar to people from individualist cultures (e.g., the United States, Canada), Koreans show positive illusions, even if the Korean culture is collectivist in nature (Inumiya, Choi, Yoon, Seo, & Han, 1999; Jeong & Han, 2005). Koreans’ positive illusions stem from their high level of self-confidence and the strong value they hold of their own reputations. Han and Han (2007) propose that Koreans’ sense of value is based on the desire to reach their ideal self-image rather than their current self. Therefore, the motivation to reach the ideal self-image helps explain why people even from a collectivist culture can possess positive illusions. Thus, *jajonshim* reflects Koreans’ specific awareness of their sense of value.

## Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 is to understand *jajonshim* more clearly by directly examining the process of experiencing *jajonshim* in daily life. Specifically, we conduct in-depth interviews to collect more detailed data on how people experience *jajonshim*.

### Method

We conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews between the researcher and each participant. Ten adults (4 men and 6 women,  $M = 42.25$ ,  $SD = 3.59$ ) took part in the interviews, which took approximately one hour for each participant. The interviews were recorded with participants’ consent, and the recorded data were used for analysis.

## Data Analysis

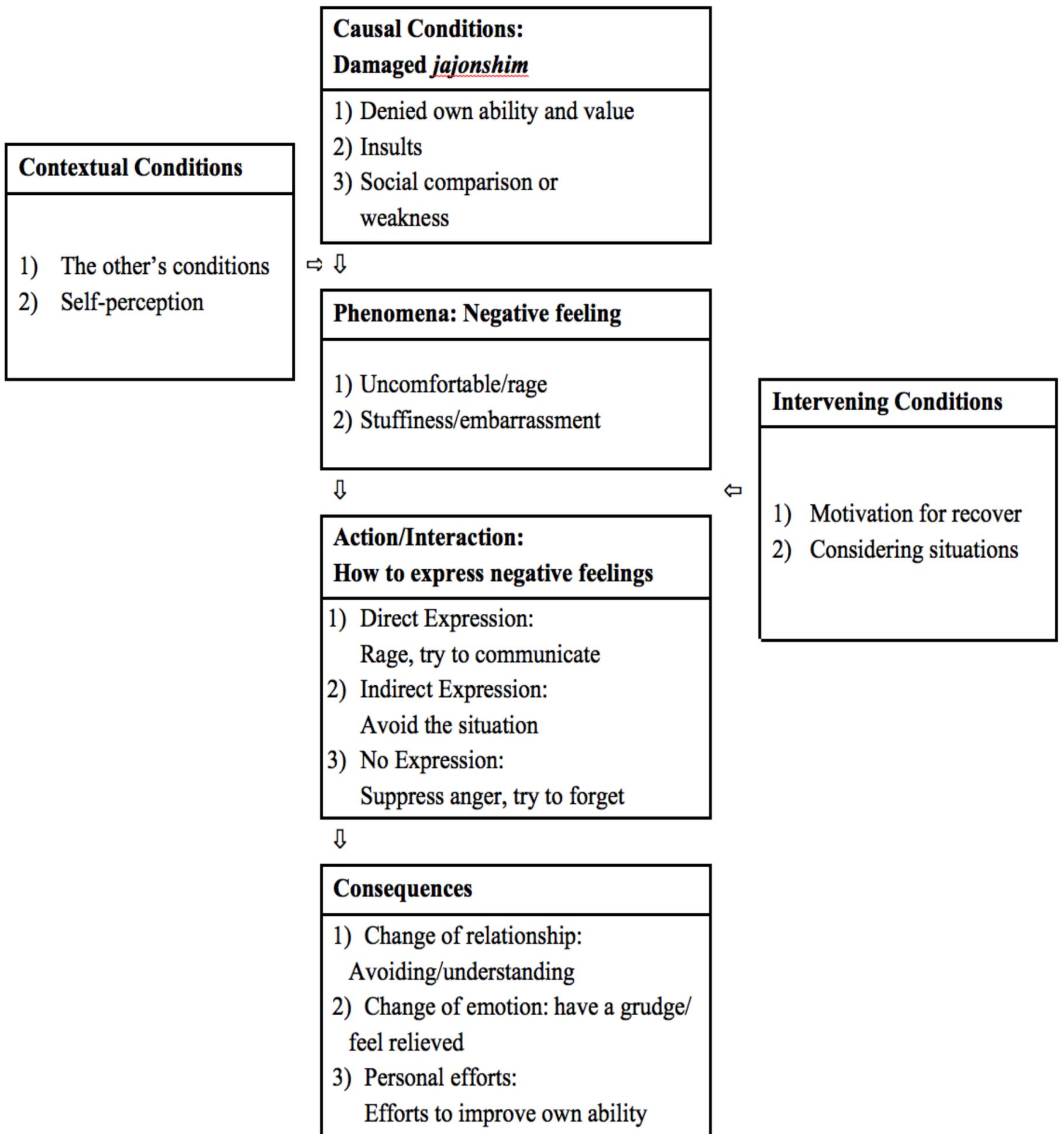
In line with the grounded theory methodology, we carried out open coding, which is the data conceptualization and categorization process; axial coding, which forms relationships between categories; and selective coding, which selects a core category. With axial coding, we determined the structure of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and the action/interaction strategies and consequences surrounding *jajonshim*, using “an analysis of the paradigm model,” and we investigated the process of experiencing *jajonshim*.

## Results and Discussion

We drew 64 concepts, 30 subcategories, and 20 categories from the analysis. As Figure 1 shows, the central phenomenon was a negative emotion participants experienced when their *jajonshim* was hurt.

*Causal conditions.* Causal conditions consist of incidents and affairs leading to the occurrence of a phenomenon and become a cause of the phenomenon. Regarding the causal condition of *jajonshim*, we drew “damage to self-worth” from the data. *Jajonshim* is usually not perceived on a daily basis but only when a hurtful incident occurs. Incidents that hurt one’s *jajonshim* include “disapproval of self-worth,” meaning that one’s ability or value is not recognized or is ignored, and “damage to self-worth,” meaning that one’s ability or value is negatively compared with the other party’s or that one’s character is insulted.

*Phenomena.* A phenomenon indicates “what is occurring now” and represents a central incident. The *jajonshim* phenomena can include emotions felt when one’s *jajonshim* is hurt. As a result, people feel displeasure, injustice, and anger and try to attack the object that hurt their *jajonshim* (an expressed emotion). Often people experience negative emotions, such as sorrow, despondency, and bitterness and are overcome by shame (a depressed emotion).



**Figure 1**  
Paradigm model of *jajonshim*

*Contextual conditions.* Contextual conditions are those that strengthen or weaken a phenomenon, which helps account for the reason this phenomenon lasts. Interviewers mentioned contextual conditions of *jajonshim* such as “the other’s characteristics” and “recognition of the usual self.” The former context means that one’s *jajonshim* was hurt from another person’s more authoritative nature or higher rank (e.g., boss at the office, husband’s in-laws). The latter context occurs when a person senses inferiority at a cer-

tain point and someone ignores or points out such inferiority.

*Action/interaction strategy.* Action/interaction strategy is an intentional behavior an individual takes to respond or adjust to a phenomenon. The action/interaction strategy in *jajonshim* means a strategy to control a feeling of wounded *jajonshim* and can be summarized into three types: expression of emotion, controlling or repressing one's emotion, and polite expression. When their *jajonshim* is hurt, people express their feelings to the other party to motivate him or her to solve the situation or salvage their *jajonshim*. However, if people cannot directly express their feelings because of special relational characteristics with the other party or situational reasons, they try to repress or forget their feelings or attempt to adopt a polite action strategy to survive the situation. For example, expressing negative emotion to a superior is difficult in Korean society, even if the superior criticizes a person's job performance and hurts his or her *jajonshim*. Consequently, junior workers tend to behave politely to show recognition of what their superiors are saying and to quietly deal with the situation.

*Intervening conditions.* Intervening conditions control various strategies to deal with wounded *jajonshim*; "motives for restoring self-worth" and "consideration of the relation between the [two parties]" emerged. Inner motives to salvage the wounded self-worth are connected with strategies to express one's wounded *jajonshim*; this is not always possible though. Considering the other's face and maintaining good relations are two factors particularly important in the Korean culture, which highly regards relationism. Although their *jajonshim* is hurt, people tend to consider whether there are more important things than restoring their damaged self-worth, and they tend to think about the appropriate actions they could take against the other party and the level of expression.

*Consequences.* Consequences are the results that derive from a strategy adopted to respond to a phenomenon; three consequences of *jajonshim* emerged. First, "change in the relation" was expressed as two aspects: cutting off all relations with the other or maintaining relations. Cutting off all relations was possible when individuals decided to avoid or put an end to a relationship. On the other hand, maintaining relations was possible by fully understanding the other or by superficially keeping the relationship to a minimum. Second, "change of emotions" means that the emotions turn into a grudge state because feelings were not resolved and thus linger. Consequently, whenever people think of the incident, the emotions felt at that time are aroused again, leading to feelings of good riddance. Last, "the individual effort" emerged as an aspect that motivates people to try to solve the problem or change the situation by getting even with the other party. This aspect also leads people to reflect on their own deficiency and develop themselves.

As a whole, important factors in the process of experiencing *jajonshim* are awareness of the other party's characteristics and the extent and selection of a strategy that deals with negative emotions resulting from *jajonshim*. The core mechanism that affects these two factors may be awareness of the relation with the other party, which implies that

cultural characteristics of Korean relationism can have an influence on the processes of experiencing *jajonshim*.

## General Discussion

Study 1 showed that *jajonshim* is a symbol that expresses Koreans' unique awareness of self-worth, while Study 2 showed that the important factor in the process of experiencing *jajonshim* is awareness of the relation with the other party. On the basis of these main findings, this discussion examines the differences between self-esteem and *jajonshim*.

The results show that a clear difference exists between these two terms. The major difference is that *jajonshim* reflects the value given to people by others whereas self-esteem is the value people give to themselves. In other words, self-esteem is a stable trait based on people's own self-concept, while *jajonshim* is an unstable trait and relies on others with whom people interact. Moreover, *jajonshim* is centered on how others evaluate a person in terms of being good enough rather than how positively that person sees him- or herself. Consequently, *jajonshim* is not something that individuals can improve by themselves because it is given by others. Thus, negative *jajonshim* is easily felt when others undervalue a person or their evaluations do not match that person's own expectations.

*Jajonshim* helps people maintain a positive self-image by protecting the self from threats that might diminish an individual's sense of worthiness. This role of *jajonshim* in maintaining a positive self-image is associated with a prevention orientation, with a focus on loss, damage, or potential weaknesses (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). In other words, *jajonshim* reflects the perception of the self as deserving of respect, being valued, and being accepted by others. In contrast, self-esteem is stable and controllable. It reflects how individuals can achieve a more positive view of themselves and is also related to a promotion orientation, or a focus on advancing oneself and achieving gains (Brockner & Higgins, 2001).

In conclusion, both *jajonshim* and self-esteem are related to an individual's sense of value. However, *jajonshim* depends on others' evaluations, whereas self-esteem depends on one's own evaluation of the self. *Jajonshim* influences not only one's perceptions, emotions, and behavior but also one's social relationships through a prevention focus, whereas self-esteem is associated with a promotion focus. *Jajonshim* is likely not limited to the Korean culture; other cultures might experience phenomena similar to *jajonshim*, but the causes and factors may differ from culture to culture.

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