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 jajonshim 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 crystallize the socio-cultural specificity of Korean psychological characteristics. However, because translating this indigenous term is difficult, it is 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). 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.
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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**

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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

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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 (Inumia, 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.
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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-
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Contextual Conditions

Causal Conditions:
Damaged jajonshim
1) Denied own ability and value
2) Insults
3) Social comparison or weakness

Contextual Conditions

1) The other’s conditions
2) Self-perception

Phenomena: Negative feeling

1) Uncomfortable/rage
2) Stuffiness/embarrassment

Intervening Conditions

1) Motivation for recovery
2) Considering situations

Action/Interaction: How to express negative feelings

1) Direct Expression:
Rage, try to communicate
2) Indirect Expression:
Avoid the situation
3) No Expression:
Suppress anger, try to forget

Consequences

1) Change of relationship:
Avoiding/understanding
2) Change of emotion: have a grudge/ feel relieved
3) Personal efforts:
Efforts to improve own ability

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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 himself- 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.

References

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.

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References


