HUMAN AFFAIRS *20*, 356–363, 2010 DOI: 10.2478/v10023-010-0036-6

SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND RESPONSE BIAS REVISITED: THE INFLUENCE OF "OTHERS" ON JAPANESE RESPONDENTS

CHISUZU KONDO, CHIAKI SAITO, AYAKA DEGUCHI,
MIKI HIRAYAMA, ADAM ACAR

Abstract: This study was undertaken to investigate the impact of other respondents' answers on individual responses in survey studies. The study employed four different conditions and manipulated the direction and the level of social pressure. The results have confirmed that social desirability bias hugely impacts individual answers. It was found that respondents are seven times more likely to choose a socially unacceptable option if majority of the preceding respondents also have chosen the same option. Additionally, the existence of an interviewer during data collection was found to be a factor pressuring respondents to give more socially acceptable responses.
Keywords: social conformity, response bias, interviewer effect, immoral choices, Japanese respondents.

Introduction

Did you jaywalk this morning because others also did? How about ordering the most popular item at a fast food restaurant because the customers in front of you and next to you ordered it? Social scientists claim that conformity which is consciously or subconsciously following other people's behaviour exists deeply in our daily life (Asch 1951; Zerbe and Paulhus, 1987). It makes daily life predictable and holds society together, shaping habits, customs, opinions, fads and fashion (Coleman 2007). Most importantly, conformity heavily impacts the behaviour of experiment participants and survey respondents which we will delve into in this paper.

More than 50 years ago, Asch (1951) conducted a milestone study about conformity and social pressure, in which he showed how individuals often follow the dominant idea or opinion of the group they are in rather than sticking with their initial stance. Although such social behaviour might be attributed to various situational factors, individual characteristics also play an important role. It was found that males in general conform more than females (Berndt 1979) and people in urban areas are more likely to be influenced in non-normative situations than those in rural areas (Kuntz, Gunderson 2002). Notably, the culture people grew up with may overall be responsible from this conforming behaviour. Bond and Smith (1996) pointed out that "socialization practices of high food-accumulating societies (pastoral

agricultural peoples) emphasized obedience and responsibility, whereas those of low food-accumulating societies (hunting and fishing peoples) emphasized independence, self-reliance, and individual achievement" (*ibid.*, 111-112).

The culture-conformity relationship was further investigated by several researchers as well. Neto (1995), re-examined Asch's study, suspecting if his findings were still valid in a totally different environment and different culture. He carried out an experiment in Portugal with 18-20-year-old female freshman students at the Faculty of Psychology and obtained similar results. On the other hand, he emphasized the importance of individual differences and stated "why some subjects conform in such situations, while others remain independent, seems essential" (*ibid.*, 222). The same problem was also discussed by Scheff (1988), according to whom the conformity is obviously encouraged by sanctions or rewards. He emphasized that emotions such as shame and pride could make up a system of social sanctions and rewards. Impact of these social sanctions must be different from culture to culture, because shame, pride, or humiliation is based on social or cultural norms.

When it comes to Japan, one can cite Benedict's (1946) assessment that the pattern of Japanese culture is determined by the notion of shame and sin. Scheff (1988) mentioned that the basic shame context is to perceive one's self being negatively evaluated, which means exclusion from the group he/she belongs to. The omnipresent socially conforming behaviour in Japanese society also created concerns for public opinion researchers and social scientists who called attention to the social desirability bias (providing socially desirable answer to a survey question which might not be true) in Japan. It was concluded that the social desirability was related with "honne" and "tatemae" characteristics of Japanese culture where "hone" represents what people really think and "tatemae" stands for private and public responses. Gielen (1992) stated that "In Japan, it is necessary to take into account social desirability in responses and to differentiate between "hone" and "tatemae" more than for those in other countries" (*ibid.*, 59). In addition, Piet and Ruut (1991) reported that Japanese tend to present themselves as average citizens. Therefore, they tend to respond in a socially desirable way to keep the harmony. Similarly, as Iijima (1982) explains, Japanese score more frequently on the middle categories of rating scales because of their modesty and conformity (*ibid.*, 6). Lie (1996) suggested "The character of Japanese culture is emphasizing cultural homogeneity and historical continuity" (*ibid.*, 28). Therefore, the level of social desirability in Japan is different from other countries because of its culture.

While the impact of social conformity and social desirability in public responses were very well explained in the past studies, there are still many biased practices of data collection in Japan which might distort the public opinion. For example, there are a number of TV programs where the interviewer ask people on the street sensitive or political questions on camera and then counts the number of responses for each option just like a public poll. In these programs, bi-polar or yes-no questions are randomly asked to passersby and the answers (either blue or red stickers) are collected on a board. As can be easily understood, the camera, interviewer and the existence of previous responses would all constitute a bias in a country like Japan that places enormous emphasize on group harmony. However, we already know from the past research that the answers of others and an interviewer influence survey responses. What we don`t know, so far, is how much impact other respondents have

and if the level of influence changes depending on socially acceptable and unacceptable responses.

The major purpose of this study is to close the literature gap regarding the social conformity effects in Japan. With the help of our study, we are not only aiming to extend the existing social conformity research from laboratory settings into real life survey data collection but also learn more about social desirability effects when respondents are offered individually beneficial but socially immoral choices. The results would be of specific interest to social psychologists studying Japan and quantitative researchers who are interested in response bias in various conditions. Thus our research questions are as follows:

H1: In a condition where majority of the previous responses are shown as socially acceptable, the favourability of socially acceptable option will be higher than the condition where majority of the previous answers are socially unacceptable.

H2: In a condition where majority of the previous responses are shown as socially unacceptable, the favourability of socially unacceptable option will be higher than the condition where majority of the previous answers are socially acceptable.

H3: In the anonymous choice condition, the favourability of socially unacceptable option will be higher than the condition where the answers are verbally stated to the interviewer.

Methodology

Procedure

To test the hypotheses mentioned above, we have designed an experiment where the direction of social pressure (reinforcing versus opposing social norms) and the level of social pressure (interviewer exists versus not) were manipulated. Respondents were asked one single question and given two options to choose in four different conditions. The question was; "100 man yen (about $10, 000) is dropped on the street, and nobody's there around you. What would you do now?" The two options were "take it to the police" and "keep it to myself". The first option was socially acceptable answer but not individually beneficial. The other one was socially undesirable but individually beneficial. The question and answers were written on a board and experimenters just asked subjects to read it through, thus eliminating experimenter's voice tone bias.

Conditions I and II were specifically devised to measure the impact of other respondents' answers by manipulating the direction of influence; namely, pro social values and against social values. In the first condition, subjects saw the vast majority (24 out of 28) of preceding answers (responses of the people who answered the same question before them) as "I would take the money to the police." Accordingly, in Condition II, the majority of preceding answers were shown as "I would take the money to myself" (see appendix II). Each subject was asked to put a collared sticker for his/her choice on the board. The ratio of majority to minority was constantly kept at six-to-one ratio by the experimenters to follow the same format of Asch's (1951) famous conformity study.

Condition III and IV, where the same question was asked but the answers of other subjects were not shown, were employed to measure the effect of interviewer existence on survey responses. In Condition III, there was no board or stickers and the answers were verbally stated to the interviewer. Lastly, in Condition IV, the participants were instructed to checkmark their choice on a piece of paper and drop in a box so that nobody would see their answers. Condition IV was also used to control for the first three conditions.

Subjects and Data Collection

The data collection took place at a public university in Southern Japan on four different days in June, 2010. Female students aging between 18 and 22 were randomly approached as they walked through the cafeteria and asked to choose among the options presuming that they found 100 man yen on the street. There were a total of 200 subjects (50 in each condition) and the experimenters made sure that the subjects participated in the study only once. The subject allocation to experimental conditions was non-random; however, there was a different experimenter in each condition and each experimenter collected data in only one day. The subjects were all females to avoid gender bias.

Findings

Figure I illustrates the percentage of favourable responses for personally beneficial but socially immoral "take it to myself" choice. As can be seen, in Condition I, where majority of the previous responses were "take it to the police", only 4% of the respondents have chosen the option of taking the money for themselves. On the other hand, when most of the previous responses were manipulated to be "take it to myself" in Condition II, the percentage of the respondents who favoured this option increased dramatically to 30%. Further analysis has shown that the difference between Condition I and II is statistically significant (See Table I). Thus H1 and H2 are accepted.

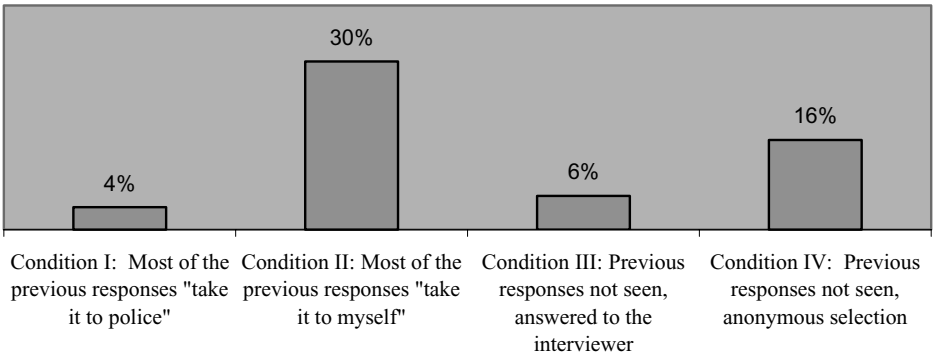


Figure I "What would you do if you found 1,000,000" % of favourable responses for "take it to myself" in Different Conditions

Table I Chi-Square Tests (Conditions I & II)

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.977(a)	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.001	.000
N of Valid Cases	100				

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.50.

Readers can easily note that the frequency of selecting "take it to myself" was also different in Conditions III and IV (6% and 16% respectively). Although this might be counterintuitive as in neither condition have respondents seen others' answers, the difference might be attributed to the discomfort felt admitting an immoral intention to the interviewer in Condition III. In Condition IV, where choices were check-marked on a piece of paper and put in a box, the favourability of "take it to myself" was relatively higher perhaps because the respondents were not influenced by others' responses or an interviewer who might judge them. The statistical comparison of the two groups have shown that the difference is approaching the significance level (ChiSquare=2.55, p<.011, see Table II) which provided support for H3. Surprisingly, the percentage of people in Condition IV who have chosen to take the money (16%), was almost right in the middle of the ratios we obtained in Condition I (4%) and Condition II (30%) suggesting that anonymous choice method is probably the most reliable method revealing realistic results in Japan.

Table II Chi-Square Tests (Condition III & IV)

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.554(a)	1	.110		
Fisher's Exact Test				.200	.100
N of Valid Cases	100				

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.50.

Conclusions & Discussions

Previous studies have explained how social conformity influenced public opinion but did not address the level or magnitude of this effect in survey research. This paper was written with the aim of measuring the change in self-reported responses depending on others' answers in survey type of studies. The most important finding was that the Japanese respondents were seven times more likely to choose a personally beneficial but socially

unacceptable option when most of the previous responses were the same. In other words, seeing other respondents choose a socially undesirable option increased the likelihood of admitting an immoral intention by seven folds. Additionally, the favourability of this socially unacceptable choice was relatively higher in anonymous selection condition where the responses were not influenced by others` answers or the interviewer. Interestingly, the ratio of people who chose socially unacceptable option in anonymous selection condition corresponds to the middle point between Condition I (social pressure that reinforces a norm) and Condition II (social pressure that is against a norm). These findings have important implications for developing research methods; in any research, especially in Japan, the effect of social conformity should not be disregarded since it makes a great difference in the results as it was investigated through this study.

There are a number of possible explanations for our results which revealed a strong social conformity effect in Japan. We suspect that the dramatic impact of social conformity is unique to Japan because of some historical and socio-cultural factors. According to De Vos (1985), Japanese are more susceptible to social conformity because of several hundred years' long "tightly-knit" feudal regimes that ruled Japan. Since being an outcast was perceived to be very costly in Japan's old societies,

> Japanese, traditionally are considered to have been other-directed and what the outsider considers sensitivity to face and attention to protocol suggests that this continual susceptibility to social pressure traced psychoanalytically may presumably be derived from underlying fears of abandonment (De Vos 1985, 172).

Social conformity thus became an inextricable part of Japanese culture where even little children are taught not only to obey their parents and teachers but also respond positively to pressures from classmates (Nishiyama 2006). Similarly, Duiker and Spielvogel (2008) claim that children, who are concerned about social judgment, wear school uniforms during casual school trips which would be considered quite strange in Western societies. The authors conclude that, because of this cultural training, Japanese tend to choose a socially acceptable option if they are forced to choose between a socially desirable and not desirable choice when it comes to making individual decisions (*ibid.*, 19).

As Benedict (1946) mentioned, Japanese culture is determined by the notion of shame and sin. By the same token, exposure to "others" or others' choices is likely to distort individual answers since people cautiously avoid shame by following "others". In the same vein, Naito (1999) proposes that, in Japan, the conformity awakes public self-consciousness because of the sense of group criterion. Even though taking someone else's money is shameful, for some people it might be more shame to not to follow the other group members and we believe this was exactly what happened in Condition II: 30% of the respondents yielded to the majority by responding differently. It also makes perfect sense that, if the opinion is visible to "others", Japanese are more likely to follow the majority in order to act in harmony.

There are countless media practices in Japan where people are publicly asked to state their opinions about sensitive matters and it is doubtful whether the responses are accurate. Whether it is a street interview or an academic study, the effect of social conformity should not be overlooked since it dramatically changes the outcome as it was investigated through

this study. However, the sample in this study was limited with female college students and we are not sure if the same results can be replicated in other populations. Further studies on the current topic are therefore recommended.

References

Asch, S. E. Opinions and Social Pressure. *Scientific American* 193, 31-35, 1951.

Benedict, R. *The Chrysantemum and the Sword Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Kodansha Bunko, 1946.

Berndt, T. J. Developmental Changes in Conformity to Peers and Parents. *Developmental Psychology 15*, 608-616, 1979.

Bond, R., Smith, P. B. Culture and Conformity: A Meta-Analysis of Studies Using Asch's (1952b, 1956) Line Judgment Task. *Psychological Bulletin 119* (1) 111-137, 1996.

Coleman, S.E. Testing Theories with Qualitative and Quantitative Predictions. *European Political Science 6* (2), 124-133, 2007.

De Vos, A. *Dimension of the Self in Japanese Culture*. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985.

Duiker, W.J., Spielvogel, J.J. *World History.* Volume II: Since 1500. Sixth Edition. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2008.

Gielen, U.P. *Psychology in International Perspective: 50 years of the International Council of Psychologists.* Netherlands: Swets & Zeilinger, 1992.

Kuntz, K.M., Gunderson, S.K. Non-normative and Pro-social Conformity: A Study of Rural and Urban Differences. *Journal of Undergraduate Research: University of Wisconsin-La Crosse 5*, 233-239, 2002.

Lebra, T. S. *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*. Hawaii, USA: University of Hawaii Press, 1976.

Naito, T. Self-consciousness and Imitation. *Journal of School of Allied Medical Science Shinshu University 16* (1), 47-59, 1999.

Neto, P. Conformity and Independence Revisited. *Social Behavior and Personality 23* (3), 217-222, 1995.

Nishiyama, K. *Doing Business with Japan: Successful Strategies for Intercultural Communication*. Hawaii, USA: University of Hawaii Press, 2000.

Ouweneel, P., Veenhoven, R. *Cross-national Differences in Happiness*. Netherlands: Swets & Zeilinger, 1990.

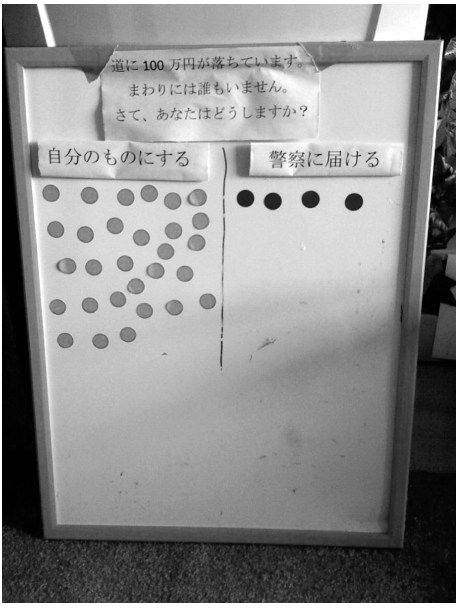
Scheff, T. J. Shame and Conformity: The Deference-Emotion System. *American Sociological Review 53* (3) 395-406, 1988.

Zerbe, W.J., Paulhus, D. L. Socially Desirable Responding in Organizational Behavior: A Preconception. *Academy of Management Review 12* (2), 250-264, 1987.

Hyogo-Ken,
Kobe-Shi Nishi-Ku
Gakuen Hagashi Machi 9-1
Japan
E-mail: acar@inst.kobe-cufs.ac.jp

APPENDIX I

Condition I
Most of the preceding answers are socially acceptable (6 to 1 ratio was kept throughout the procedure)



Condition II
Most of the preceding answers are socially unacceptable (6 to 1 ratio was kept hroughout the procedure)