

RESPONSE STYLES OF JAPANESE AND AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Frances Horler and Junichi Yamazaki

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of Japanese and American college students on a Likert-type rating scale to ascertain whether cultural differences might be reflected in the frequency of extreme responses (*Strongly Agree* and *Strongly Disagree*) and *Undecided* responses. If cultural differences are reflected, researchers must be sensitive to these differences in constructing instruments and interpreting results in cross cultural studies.

Although the total percentage of extreme scores of Japanese was slightly less than for American students, Japanese men recorded slightly more extreme scores than did American men. A marked difference, however, is observed in the *direction* of response; Japanese males *Strongly Agree* twice as frequently as American males, and conversely American males *Strongly Disagree* more frequently. Japanese females *Strongly Agree* more frequently than American females; American females *Strongly Disagree* twice as frequently as Japanese females. Japanese men and women recorded

Frances Horler, Ph.D., University of Chicago, Professor Emeritus, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The University of Rochester (N.Y.), is Director of English Studies at the Kobe YMCA College.

Junichi Yamazaki, a graduate of Kwansai Gakuin University, holds the M.A. in TESL from The State University of New York, Albany. He is on the Faculty of the English Department at Himeji Gakuin Women's College.

approximately twice as many *Undecided* responses as did their American counterparts.

Cross cultural studies have indicated that culture may have a differential effect upon style of response to rating scales. Zax and Takahashi (1967), examining the ratings of Rorschach inkblots on Semantic Differential scales made by Japanese and American college students, found that Japanese students made significantly more neutral responses and fewer extreme responses than did American students. The results were attributed to differences in child-rearing practices in the two cultures, particularly to the greater emphasis placed on restraint in the Japanese culture.

Using *The School Environment Preference Schedule* (SEPS), Gordon and Kikuchi (1970) analyzed the response set of twelfth grade American and Japanese students. They found that Japanese students made approximately twice as many *Undecided* responses as did American students. In contrast to the findings of Zax and Takahashi, they found no statistically significant differences in the frequency of extreme scores — *Strongly Agree* and *Strongly Disagree*.

Characteristics of the two cultures suggest that differences might be reflected in response to questions of opinion. Japanese, in contrast to Americans, are reluctant to express personal opinions. Their views are softened and often communicated implicitly rather than explicitly. This reluctance is attributed to a sensitivity to the feelings of others and a strong desire for harmony and group consensus. Reactions to questions of personal opinions which involve *yes/no* answers differ in the two cultures. Japanese tend to find such questions embarrassing and difficult to answer.

They feel cornered by being forced into making sharp distinctions between “yes” and “no” when their customary and preferred method of answering questions and communicating opinions is to blur the edges of their possibly differing opinion so that it can be harmonized with the opinions of others. (Nao-tsuka 1980, p. 131)

Response Styles

The ability to express thoughts clearly, directly, and logically, so much admired in the western world, conflicts with the Japanese understanding of courtesy. Characteristic ambiguities of the Japanese language foster the hazy, indefinite expression. From time immemorial generations of Japanese have developed to a fine art the practice of “beating around the bush” in order to avoid open conflict and hurting the feelings of others. And what is left unsaid — the silence — is as important as what is said. “Mere tabulations of responses to a public opinion poll in Japan, therefore, do not reflect what people are really thinking” (Kato 1959, p. 32).

Purpose

The questions of the present study are: Do Japanese and American college students differ in response set on Likert-type scales in respect to the frequency of extreme scores, *Strongly Agree* — *Strongly Disagree*, and of *Undecided* scores? And if differences exist, do these reflect cultural patterns?

Method

The data analyzed were collected for a comparative study of work attitudes. The *Work Opinion Schedule*, consisting of 43 items to be rated on a five-point scale, was administered to two-year college students in Rochester, New York (M 26, F 28) and in Kobe, Japan (M 25, F 25). The parallel Japanese version of the instrument was checked by back translation and examined for comparable constructs by bilingual Japanese and Americans. The *Schedule* was made up of such items as the following:

- Administrative and supervisory positions are best held by men.
- In a good job, prestige is more important than salary.
- It is better to work for a large corporation than for a small one.

The percentage of responses in each of the scoring categories is presented in the following table.

	Sex	SA	A	U	D	SD	SA+SD
Japan	M	12.8	25.0	32.6	20.8	8.7	21.5
	F	8.7	26.6	31.3	25.1	8.4	17.1
	M+F	10.7	25.8	31.9	23.0	8.6	19.3
USA	M	6.4	29.3	15.9	36.0	12.3	18.7
	F	7.0	25.8	17.4	32.9	16.9	23.9
	M+F	6.7	27.5	16.7	34.4	14.7	21.4

Table 1

Percent of Responses in Each Scoring Category
For Japanese and American Students

Results

The total percentage of extreme responses (SA + SD) of the Japanese subjects (19.3%) is slightly smaller than that of the American subjects (21.4%). Contrary to expectations, Japanese males made a greater percentage of extreme responses (21.5%) than did American males (18.7%). A difference in direction, however, is to be noted; Japanese males *Strongly Agree* (12.8%) twice as frequently as American males (6.4%), but American males *Strongly Disagree* (12.3%) more frequently than Japanese males (8.7%).

The percentage of extreme responses of Japanese females (17.1%) is smaller than that of American females (23.9%). Although the difference in *Strongly Agree* responses is not large (J 8.7%; USA 7.0%), American women recorded twice as many *Strongly Disagree* responses as did the Japanese women (J 8.4%; USA 16.9%). For each of the sexes the Japanese subjects chose approximately twice as many *Undecided* responses as did the American subjects.

Response Styles

Discussion

Results indicate that Japanese and American students do not differ markedly in the *total* percentage of extreme responses (19.3% and 21.4% respectively). This finding is consonant with that of Gordon and Kikuchi (1970:146), who, using a similar Likert-type scale as the stimulus, concluded that "the extremeness response set is clearly identifiable in the Japanese culture." In the present study American women recorded extreme responses more frequently than did Japanese women (23.9% and 17.1% respectively). This is contrary to the findings of Gordon and Kikuchi, who state, "The tendency to use extreme alternatives 'SA' or 'SD' . . . is found to be equally strong in both cultures" (1970, p. 146).

Zax and Takahashi, on the other hand, using Rorschach ink-blots as the stimulus, found that Japanese made fewer extreme responses than did American subjects, the difference between Japanese and American females being statistically significant ($p < .05$).

For each sex Japanese students recorded approximately twice as many *Undecided* responses as did American students. These findings are in agreement with those of Gordon and Kikuchi and of Zax and Takahashi.

Studies have shown that American subjects score higher than Japanese on measures of *Decisiveness* defined as the value placed on taking definite positions on issues (Gordon and Kikuchi, 1970:146). It would therefore be expected that on Likert-type scales Japanese would register more *Undecided* responses, a conjecture supported by research.

Although Japanese are reluctant to express personal opinions directly and forcefully and prefer the muted response, they are not so hesitant about responding to questions of fact. It may be possible that some items on the *Work Opinion Schedule* reflect viewpoints so fundamentally a part of the Japanese culture and so almost universally accepted that they were considered to be questions of fact rather than of opinion.

For example, "The rules and regulations of your institution should be followed exactly" was recorded as *Strongly Agree* by 60% of the Japanese males and by 11.5% of American males. Further studies using various types of stimuli and items are needed to clarify further cultural differences in response set.

How stable are the response styles of Japanese subjects? It has been suggested that the increasing contact with the western world will modify the Japanese response set so as to resemble more closely that of American subjects. Enormous cultural changes have taken place in both nations over the past several decades. But the Japanese preference for the vague and indefinite statement, certain ambiguities of the Japanese language, and the avoidance of adversarial positions have been for centuries such an integral part of the culture as to be highly resistant to change. Only periodic follow-up studies will provide an answer.

The evidence that cross cultural differences exist in response set to rating scales has implications for researchers in designing instruments and in interpreting results. Thus, inferences on cultural differences and similarities ought to reflect differences in the *content* of the item being measured and not the response set.

The present study is meant to be heuristic in nature -- to raise questions rather than to provide definitive answers -- and thus to suggest areas for further research.

References

- Gordon, L. V., and Kikuchi, A. 1970. Response sets of Japanese and American students. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 82, 143-148.
- Kato, H. (Ed.). 1959. *Japanese Popular Culture*. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co.
- Naotsuka, R. 1980. Mutual Understanding of Different Cultures. Osaka: Educational Science Institute of Osaka Prefecture.
- Zax, M., and Takahashi, S. 1967. Cultural influences on response style: Comparisons of Japanese and American college students. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 71, 3-10.