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THE SOCIAL DESIRABILITY OF TRAIT-DESCRIPTIVE TERMS: SEX AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BASED ON A JAPANESE ARTS COLLEGE SAMPLE

by

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Eighty Japanese arts college students (40 males and 40 females), in an introductory psychology course at the Yamanashi University, rated 148 trait descriptive adjectives on a 7-point scale of social desirability (S-D) under the social set. Sex differences within this Japanese sample were examined and, based on the data of a prior investigation (6), a comparison between the arts college sample and a group of military cadets from the Japan Defense Academy was undertaken. Furthermore, responses obtained from the present Japanese sample were compared to those of 67 American and 67 French college students (2, 5).

In the Japanese sample, an r of .954 was found between mean S-D ratings for male and female college students. Females rated both positive and negative adjectives significantly more extremely than did males, while males were found to be significantly more variable in their ratings.

The male Japanese arts college and cadets' *relative* S-D orderings of trait descriptive adjectives were highly intercorrelated ($r=.961$). However, the cadets gave more extreme ratings and were significantly less variable than the arts college students.

The r for mean S-D ratings between the total American and Japanese arts college samples was .920. Americans, in the absolute sense, however, gave significantly more extreme S-D ratings than did the Japanese but the latter were significantly more variable. A .923 correlation was found between S-D ratings of French and Japanese arts college students. The French rated significantly more extremely than did Japanese, although the Japanese were more variable in their ratings of positive adjectives.

Although there are indeed clear-cut *absolute* and stylistic characteristics which significantly discriminate the S-D ratings of males and females, cadets and arts college students, and different cultural groups, one highly salient attribute of the data still stands out, — the very high degree of constancy in the *relative* ordering of S-D ratings across ostensibly different national and cultural groups. This fact suggests some fundamental and deep-seated transcultural constancies in perception of attributes as good or bad.

A. INTRODUCTION

In several earlier investigations involving both American and French college students (1, 2, 4, 5), it has been repeatedly demonstrated that, notwithstanding a very high degree of comparability in the *relative* ordering of the social desirability (S-D)

ratings of trait descriptive adjectives across sexes, females rated significantly more extremely in the *absolute* sense (1, 2, 4, 5). Along yet another dimension, although *relative* S-D orderings have also been quite consistent across cultural groups, *absolute* differences among such groups in this type of rating task were found, with Japanese male college students, for example, producing significantly less extreme and less variable ratings than their American and French counterparts (5, 6, 7). Thus, previous work in this series has already pointed up certain cross-cultural constancies as well as differences in the S-D ratings of trait-descriptive adjectives.

There are, however, two principal gaps in the earlier studies, particularly those involving Japanese respondents (6, 7), which operate somewhat restrictively on the types of generalizations that may be drawn from them. In the first place, the data have been collected only from *male* Japanese respondents. Secondly, these respondents were cadets at the Japan Defense Academy and, as such, may not have been optimally representative of Japanese college students in general. The point has been made elsewhere [(6) footnote 2, p. 203] that some absolute and content analysis differences between male Japanese and American college students as reported in our initial paper may well be reflecting, incidentally, military vs. arts college differences rather than the presumed cross-cultural differences.

The present investigation extends our earlier S-D work with Japanese cadets to an arts college setting and draws upon the ratings of both male and female Japanese college *Ss*. As such its principal purposes may be summarized as follows: (a) To test for sex differences in mean S-D ratings and variability of S-D ratings within the new Japanese sample; (b) To compare the S-D stereotypes of Japanese cadets with those of male Japanese arts college students; (c) To reexamine the relationship between mean S-D ratings now for American and Japanese arts college students; (d) To retest for absolute differences in mean S-D ratings and variability of S-D ratings using American and Japanese arts college respondents; (e) To re-do comparisons of S-D ratings involving French collegian respondents, now based on comparisons with male and female Japanese arts college respondents.

B. METHOD

The same translation-reduced 148-item word list used in two earlier S-D investigations with Japanese *Ss* (6, 7) was again employed in the present research. Similarly, the procedure for obtaining the S-D ratings was identical to the one used in prior investigations involving the social set (2, 5, 6). That is, *Ss* were asked to assume that each adjective was embedded in the hypothetical frame, "I am a— person" and to rate the resulting propositions on a 7-point scale of S-D ranging from very desirable (point seven) to very undesirable (point one). All ratings were done under the "social" set (i.e., from the frame of reference of people in general).

The present sample consisted of a group of 80 Japanese arts college *Ss*, 40 male and 40 female, enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Yamanashi University (Kofu).

Ratings were made under conditions of group administration. Responses of this new group were tabulated and compared, eventually, to those of the 67 American college social set respondents (2) and their 67 French counterparts (5)—39 males and 28 females in each instance. Responses of the 40 male Japanese respondents in the present sample were also compared to those of the 65 male cadets used in our earlier Japanese social set study (6).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the ratings of the current Japanese sample, S-D means and variances were computed individually for each of the 148 adjectives and separately for males, females and the total sample.

(1) *Sex Differences: Japanese Sample*

Based on all 148 trait descriptive adjectives, the Pearson r between mean S-D ratings for Japanese male and female Ss was .954, indicating a very high degree of cross-sex consistency in the *relative* S-D ordering of such items. Such was also the case with earlier American and French samples (1, 2, 4, 5). Absolute sex differences in S-D ratings for the Japanese sample were tested by 148 individual adjective t ratios. Significant differences at $p .05$ or beyond were found in 62 instances. For all 23 positive adjectives with significant sex differences, females had higher ratings, while for all 32 negative adjectives with significant sex differences, females had lower ratings. This very consistent pattern of significant differences prompted a non-parametric analysis of directionality of S-D ratings for male and female Ss . According to a model established in earlier studies, a directional analysis of S-D means was used to fix overall S-D level as positive (Mean s_{-D} 5-7), neutral (Mean s_{-D} 3-5) or negative (Mean s_{-D} 1-3), to determine whether male or female college students had the higher mean S-D ratings. The results of these tabulations are presented in Table 1. Consistent with prior findings for

Table 1 Mean Level of S-D and Direction of Sex Differences for the Japanese Arts College Sample

	Mean Level			
	5-7	3-5	1-3	Total
Males Higher	3	25	56	84
Females Higher	49	12	1	62
Total	52	37	57	146*

*Mean S-D levels were identical for two adjectives.
 $\chi^2=101.23$, $df=2$, $p=.001$

both American and French samples, it can be seen that, notwithstanding the high relative constancy of ordering across the sexes, there is an extremely clear-cut tendency for females to produce more extreme S-D ratings (i.e., rating positive adjectives more positively and negative adjectives more negatively). The stability of this particular

finding, across groups (3), instructional sets (3), and cultures (5, 6, 7) lends credence to the view expressed elsewhere that extremity of response is a feature of the response styles of the female who is a stronger expresser of her culture than is the male.

Differences in variability of S-D ratings between male and female college students were first tested by means of individual adjective *F* ratios. Significant sex differences at *p* .05 or beyond were found for 47 of the 148 adjectives with males having the greater variability in 45 of those instances. Once again a non-parametric test of directionality of mean S-D rating variability across sexes was carried out. Male students were found to be significantly more variable across the boards ($\chi^2=38.72, p. 001$). This same relation held true for both positive and negative adjectives where males were significantly more variable than females (47 of 54 and 47 of 56, respectively). Thus, whereas French males *Ss* had tended, directionally, to rate only negative adjectives more variably than their female counterparts (5), Japanese male college students, as was true for American college students (2), rated positive as well as negative adjectives more variably than did the females.

(2) *School Differences within the Japanese Sample*

Mean S-D ratings of the Japanese male arts college students were intercorrelated with those of the Japan Defense Academy students, with a resultant Pearson *r* of .961. The *relative* ordering of trait descriptive adjectives is thus highly comparable across two different groups of Japanese male respondents. Beyond this correlational analysis, differences in S-D means for males across the two school samples were tested individually for each of the 148 adjectives by means of *t* ratios. Significant school differences in mean S-D ratings at the .05 level were observed for the 25 of the 148 adjectives. For the 11 negative adjectives with significant school differences, cadets had higher ratings on only one, while for the four positive adjectives with significant school differences, cadets had lower ratings on only one.

A directional analysis comparing the S-D means of the two male Japanese groups was also carried out. The results of these tabulations are summarized in Table 2. We observe that the cadets use more significantly extreme ratings than do Japanese male college students (i.e., they rate positive adjectives more positively and negative

Table 2 Mean Level of S-D and Direction of School Differences for Japanese Samples

	Mean Level			
	5-7	3-5	1-3	Total
Japanese Cadets Higher	30	19	12	61
Japanese Collegians Higher	14	27	44	85
Total	44	46	56	146*

* Mean S-D levels were identical for two adjectives. $\chi^2=22.15, df=2, p=.001$

adjectives more negatively).

Cross-school differences in variability of S-D ratings were tested for all 148 adjectives, individually, by means of F ratios. Sixty-five significant differences at $p .05$ were found, with the male college students having the greater variability in all of those instances. A non-parametric directional analysis of rating variability across the two male groups produced very similar findings in that the ratings of the male college students were more variable at all mean levels (39 of 44 positive, 46 of 56 negative, and 41 of 48 neutral adjectives). Although the fact that the cadets gave more extreme ratings operates to reduce their rating variability at the extremes, the male college students also had significantly greater variability in the neutral mean range where no artifactual restriction was present. Overall, the Defense Academy group was far less variable in its S-D ratings than was the Japanese male arts college group ($\chi^2=73.08$, $df=1$ $p .001$).

We note, with interest, these rather clear-cut absolute differences in S-D rating styles between two groups of young Japanese males of comparable age and intellectual level — an arts college and a military cadet sample. More extreme ratings and less variability characterize the latter group. The theoretical possibility that such differences might be present was raised in our initial paper (6). There, the concern was expressed that some of the differences between the original Japanese (cadet) sample and the American sample might well be attributable to a contaminating military vs. arts college variable rather than the presumed variable under examination (i.e., actual and generalized cross-cultural difference).

In a preliminary way, we may now say that the relative avoidance of extremes, which we thought to characterize our original Japanese sample, was probably an underestimate, since the Japanese arts college sample is even less extreme than the cadet sample. However, the apparently diminished variability of Japanese respondents reported in the original study (6) may, indeed, have been a reflection of specific attributes (toward homogeneity) of the cadet group. Further resolution of the latter issue will follow presentation, in a later section of this paper, of the direct comparisons between the Japanese and American arts college samples.

Since both Japanese females in the present study and the Japanese cadets from the earlier research (6) were found to have given significantly more extreme ratings than did male Japanese colleges Ss , a direct comparison of the mean S-D ratings of the two former groups was considered appropriate. Mean S-D ratings for the college females and cadets were correlated with a resulting Pearson r of .901. Significant group differences in mean S-D level at $p .05$ or beyond were found for 67 of the 148 adjectives rated. Among these adjectives, females had significantly higher means on all 23 positive ones and significantly lower means for 31 of the 33 negative ones. Beyond this, a non-parametric analysis comparing Japanese female students with cadets was carried out, the female students producing significantly more extreme ratings ($\chi^2=66.33$, $p .001$). With respect to S-D rating variability, direct comparison of Japanese females vs. cadets produced

a total of 38 of 148 significant F ratios: in 24 of these 38 instances females had the greater variability ($\chi^2=2.63$, $p=n.s.$). A non-parametric analysis of directional differences in variability indicated that females were more variable than cadets on 29 of 34 adjectives in the neutral range ($\chi^2=16.94$, $p=.005$), but this was not so at the extremes.

In sum then, for our several Japanese samples, females appear genuinely to rate more extremely than males, even significantly more so than cadets, who themselves are extreme raters in comparison to arts college males. In terms of rating variability, both cadets and arts college females are less variable than arts college males, with the cadets in turn being less variable than the females in the neutral range. In this sense the cadets represent a highly homogeneous group with respect to their perceptions of what is socially desirable and undesirable.

(3) *Comparisons of Japanese and American Arts College Ss*

The Pearson r between mean S-D ratings of the total Japanese and American arts college samples for 148 trait descriptive adjectives was .920. This datum is fully consistent with a structurally comparable one from our earlier study using male Japanese cadets and American arts college students as the criterion groups. It reflects, once again, a high degree of cross-cultural agreement in the *relative* ordering of trait descriptive adjectives.

Beyond this correlational analysis, differences in mean S-D ratings between the Japanese ($N=80$) and the American ($N=67$) college samples were tested individually for all 148 adjectives by means of t ratios. Significant cultural differences in mean S-D level exceeding the .05 level were observed for 101 of the 148 adjectives. For the 34 positive adjectives with significant cultural differences Americans had higher ratings on 27, while for the 35 negative adjectives Americans had lower ratings on 25.

A non-parametric analysis was carried out to determine whether, apart from these significant differences, there was a consistent pattern of directional differences in mean S-D ratings across cultural groups. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 3. The general attribute of more extreme mean S-D ratings by American males when compared to the Japan Defense Academy samples (6, 7) appears to hold true for Japanese arts college students as well.

Table 3 Mean Level of S-D and Direction of Differences between Total American and Japanese Samples

	Mean Level			
	5-7	3-5	1-3	Total
Japanese Higher	13	12	35	60
Americans Higher	44	25	18	87
Total	57	37	53	147*

* Mean S-D level was identical for one adjective.
 $\chi^2=22.69$, $df=2$, $p=.001$

As had been done in our earlier study (6), attention was again focussed on significant individual adjective differences which ran counter to the general trend of higher positive and lower negative ratings by American Ss. The observed pattern of such differences, while not identical in every detail, was, by and large, quite similar to the one already described in our previous report (6).

Next, variability comparisons of S-D ratings by American and Japanese arts college Ss were undertaken via individual F ratios for each of the 148 adjectives. A total of 68 significant differences at p .05 or beyond was found, with the Japanese showing greater variability in 54 of these instances. Tested non-parametrically, this greater variability for the Japanese sample was found to be present for the full adjective sample ($\chi^2=23.53$, $p=.001$), as well as for positive adjectives taken alone ($\chi^2=25.79$, $p=.001$) and negative adjectives taken alone ($\chi^2=6.81$, $p=.02$). This particular set of findings represents a direct reversal of the structurally comparable ones from our study with Japanese cadets (6). The latter were found to be significantly less variable than a male American arts college sample. The highly restricted variability of our original Japanese sample seems, in the light of present data, to reflect the specific and very homogeneous evaluative frame of military cadets rather than a more generalized cultural style as we had earlier speculated (6).

(4) *Comparisons of Japanese and French College Ss*

Comparisons of the S-D ratings of French and Japanese collegians were reported in an earlier paper (5). The French were found to rate more extremely and more variably than the Japanese. These data were limited, however, to male Ss and, once again, the Japanese sample consisted of the military cadets. The present data make possible a comparison of French and Japanese collegians, both males and females, based on the 118 adjectives common to the ratings of French and Japanese arts college groups. Based on these 118 adjectives, the Pearson r for mean French and Japanese ratings was .923, slightly higher than the r of .882 reported earlier (5) for male French collegians vs. Japanese cadets, as well as the r of .900 between the American vs. Japanese arts college samples using the same 118 adjectives. Individually, for each of the 118 adjectives, t ratios were computed testing the significance of the differences in the mean S-D ratings of French and Japanese Ss. There were 75 such significant differences. For the 25 positive adjectives with significant cultural differences, the French had higher ratings on 20, while for the 27 negative adjectives with significant cultural differences, the French rated lower on 20. A non-parametric analysis comparing the mean S-D ratings of French Ss with those of Japanese Ss was carried out. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4.

Although somewhat less intensely so, in comparison with the differences in S-D ratings between American and Japanese college students, the French use more extreme ratings than do Japanese, consistent with the findings of our prior investigation (5). With respect to rating variability, significant cultural differences at p .05 or beyond were found for 57 of the 118 adjectives. Among these significant differences,

Table 4 Mean Level of S-D and Direction of Differences between Total French and Japanese Samples

	Mean Level			
	5-7	3-5	1-3	Total
Japanese Higher	14	11	27	52
French Higher	30	20	14	64
Total	44	31	41	116*

*Mean S-D levels were identical for two adjectives.
 $\chi^2=11.39$, $df=2$, $p=.005$

however, neither cultural group was consistently more variable than the other. A non-parametric tallying of directional differences in variability between the two groups for all 118 adjectives shows that there is a slight tendency for more variable ratings by the Japanese, but only for positive adjectives where they are more variable in 30 of 45 instances ($\chi^2=5.00$, $p=.05$). It is conceivable that the greater variability of the Japanese *Ss* on the positive adjectives may reflect the more extreme ratings of the French *Ss* at this level, especially so since no group differences are observed in the middle S-D range where there is no artifactual constraint on variability.

Indeed, the general spirit of the data involving French-Japanese comparisons on S-D rating variability is one of a very high degree of overlap and group comparability. Prior conclusions, about the restricted variability of Japanese respondents in comparison to French and Americans (5, 6, 7), were doubtless biased by the military cadet composition of the earlier Japanese samples. The present Japanese arts college sample makes it clear that Japanese arts college students *qua* sub-culture are not at all significantly less variable than their French and American counterparts.

Finally, several over-viewing comments may be in order. It seems clear that when the *relative* ordering of trait descriptive adjectives is our criterion, there is extremely high consistency in S-D ratings by sex, by arts college vs. military cadet status, and across three national groups. This fact accords well with a network of earlier ones summarized elsewhere (3) and suggests a very high degree of basic congruence in what is judged good and bad in ostensibly different modern societies representing Occident and Orient. However, in spite of this constancy in *relative* ordering across sexes, it is now abundantly clear that extremity of S-D rating is a basic response style which differentiates the female from the male, consistently and transculturally. It would be of considerable interest to determine empirically the extent to which the characteristic style of response may have generality to other rating and behavioral situations and to inquire further into some of its possible determinants.

A second, particularly interesting aspect of the present findings, concerns the specific absolute S-D rating differences found between Japanese military cadets and arts college males. Of the two, the latter group rated significantly less extremely and significantly more variably. These differences point up the probable lack of

representativeness of the cadet sample as a basis for broad cross-cultural comparisons. Doubtless, in the last analysis, the best protection against selection of non-representative samples would be achieved by drawing multiple college samples from both cultures. For the moment, however, it is probable that the Japanese arts college group represents a more appropriate comparison group for the American and French collegians than did the Japanese cadets. When we focus on the former as our Japanese criterion group, it is demonstrated that significant avoidance of extreme S-D ratings continues to be a stylistic attribute which differentiates Japanese collegians from French and American, but significant reduction in S-D variability does not.

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