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Two Studies Suggesting Changes in Cultural Norms in Japan

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Abstract. During my 2-month stay at Kyoto University from June 10, 2019 through August 7, 2019, I collected data for two related studies with my collaborator, Professor Yukiko Uchida at the Kokoro Research Center and gave two lectures, one about each of the studies. The first study was titled, “Can marginalizing situations cause individuals to become culturally deviant in their values and motives?” The second study was titled, “Explaining Cultural Variance in the Perceived Severity of ASD-Like Symptoms: Theory of Mind, Cultural Tightness, and Opacity of Mind Norms.” The first study included a replication of a previous study to test whether Japanese participants were motivated to maintain consistency with their in-group members more than with their own past behaviors (i.e., motivation to maintain self-consistency), a pattern that would be more typical of a relatively more collectivistic culture. Specifically, after participants were asked to complete a marginalization risk scale, they were randomly assigned to either consider their willingness to comply to the request assuming that they have already complied to a similar request in the past (motivation to be self-consistent condition) or consider their willingness to comply to a request if all of their classmates have complied to a similar request (motivation to conform to in-group condition). The second study tested our expectations that people in a relatively tighter culture, which has previously been characteristic of the Japanese cultural context, would perceive culturally deviant behaviors as more problematic than in a relatively looser culture, such as the North American cultural context. Specifically, participants were asked rate the severity of ASD-like behaviors (i.e., culturally deviant behaviors) under one of three conditions: 1) explicit information is given that there is no underlying cognitive deficit to explain the deviant behaviors; 2) explicit information is given that there is an underlying cognitive deficit to explain the deviant behaviors; 3) no explicit information about an underlying cognitive deficit was given. Both studies revealed that previous patterns of behaviors in Japan can no longer be replicated, thereby suggesting changing cultural norms in Japan, characterized by increasing individualistic norms and cultural looseness.

Keywords: cultural change, motivation, cultural tightness

Study 1: Can marginalizing situations cause individuals to become culturally deviant in their values and motives?

Background and Method

The first study was a replication of a study that was previously conducted in the United States (Norasakkunkit, et al. 2018) with a pretest – posttest design in which culturally deviant behaviors and values were expected to occur after being put in a marginalizing situation. In the United States, this prediction was confirmed. Specifically, it was found that marginalizing situations did increase culturally deviant behaviors and values but only for those who already had a high baseline risk of marginalization.

In Japan, we replicated the above US study by collecting data from 126 Japanese university students. We expected to find that students who were at low risk of becoming marginalized, according to a measure we previously created (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015), would behave in a culturally normative way for Japan. According to our previous studies (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2014, Norasakkunkit et al., 2016), the culturally normative behavior in Japan was to be motivated by conformity to in-group members rather than to be motivated by self-consistency. Then we expected the students who scored high on baseline risk to deviate from this pattern when they were put in a marginalizing situation.

Results and Discussion

Unfortunately, in this study, there was no difference between the reported behaviors of low risk students and high risk students, nor were the students any more motivationally oriented towards the in-group than they were towards self-consistency. Since the study was predicated on replicating previously found culturally normative pattern of behavior for the low risk students before testing the impact of marginalizing situations on the high risk students, we were unable to test our theory about the impact of being put in a marginalizing situation for high risk students. In other words, the behaviors of the low risk students and the high risk students are no longer distinguishable, and furthermore, the students did not behave any more collectivistically than they did individualistically. These results suggest that perhaps cultural norms are changing in Japan, at least compared to those of several years ago. Specifically, at least young university students in Japan today, compared to several years ago, seem to be more motivated by individualistic norms (i.e., self-consistency), at least to the same extent that they are motivated by collectivistic norms (see Figure 1).

Study 2: Explaining Cultural Variance in the Perceived Severity of ASD-Like Symptoms: Theory of Mind, Cultural Tightness, and Opacity of Mind Norms

Background and Method

The second study first required that we develop the stimuli for the experiment (i.e., 18 cases that represent the spectrum of ASD-like behaviors) and also develop a new measure of a cultural dimension called Opacity of Mind. We examined cultural norms with respect to a cultural dimensions of Opacity of Mind and cultural tightness/looseness, which refer to the degree to which people consider seeking information about mental states intrusive, and the degree to which a society has strong norms and a low tolerance of deviant behavior, respectively. Societies that have a relatively low tolerance for culturally deviant behaviors and high opacity of mind norms are considered “tight cultures,” while societies with a relatively high tolerance for culturally deviant behaviors and low opacity of mind norms are considered “loose cultures” (Gelfand et al., 2011). We expected that Japanese norms associated with cultural tightness (and high opacity of mind norms) would suggest that culturally deviant behaviors themselves would be perceived as relatively severe, even if it is made clear that there is no underlying cognitive deficit to explain those deviant behaviors. We collected data from 500 Japanese participants in an online survey via Lancers.

Results and Discussion

The results here too suggested that cultural norms in Japan may be changing because the results we found in Japan were exactly what we predicted for a looser culture like the United States. Specifically, Japanese young people today seem to perceive culturally deviant behaviors themselves as less problematic unless information about an underlying cognitive deficit to explain those behaviors was made explicit. In fact, in a pilot study, we found that American participants scored higher on cultural tightness than the Japanese participants! This was quite unexpected! We are considering an alternative theory to explain these results now (i.e., cultural differences in attributional styles), but we will not be able to test that theory (or portions of the original theory) until we also collect data from the United States. We hope to be collecting data in the United States for this study before the end of 2019.

Overall Conclusions

While the data we collected at Kyoto University for the two studies described above resulted in unexpected behavioral patterns, these patterns may suggest changing cultural norms in Japan, which is itself interesting and worth making public through the publication of these findings. Specifically, Both studies revealed that previous patterns of behaviors in Japan can no longer be replicated, thereby suggesting changing cultural norms in Japan, characterized by increasing individualistic norms and cultural looseness.

In addition to collecting data, I also gave two lectures. The first lecture was on the second study discussed above and was given to graduate students at the Graduate School of Education/Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies. The second lecture was given to the graduate students in Professor Yukiko Uchida's and Assistant Professor Masataka Nakayama's Academic Writing Class. This second lecture was on Study 1's data collected from the United States.

Additionally, during my stay at Kyoto University, I consulted with graduate students about their research and future directions, as well as maintained constant communication with Professor Yukiko Uchida, Assistant Professor Masataka Nakayama, the staff at Kokoro Research Center, and many of the graduate students in Professor Uchida's lab.

figure 1: Side by side comparison of current patterns and previous patterns for Study 1

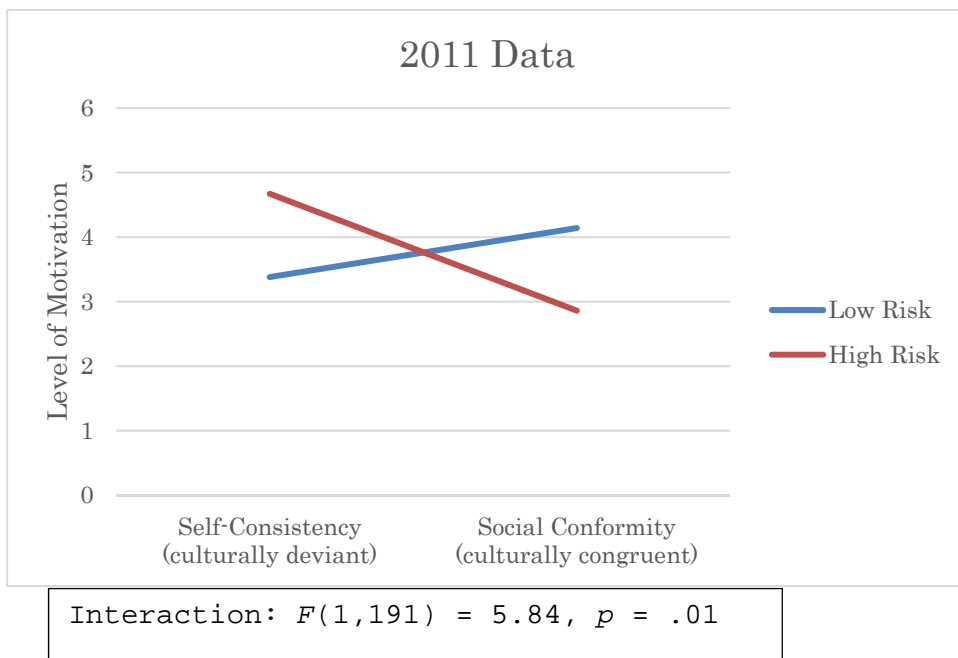
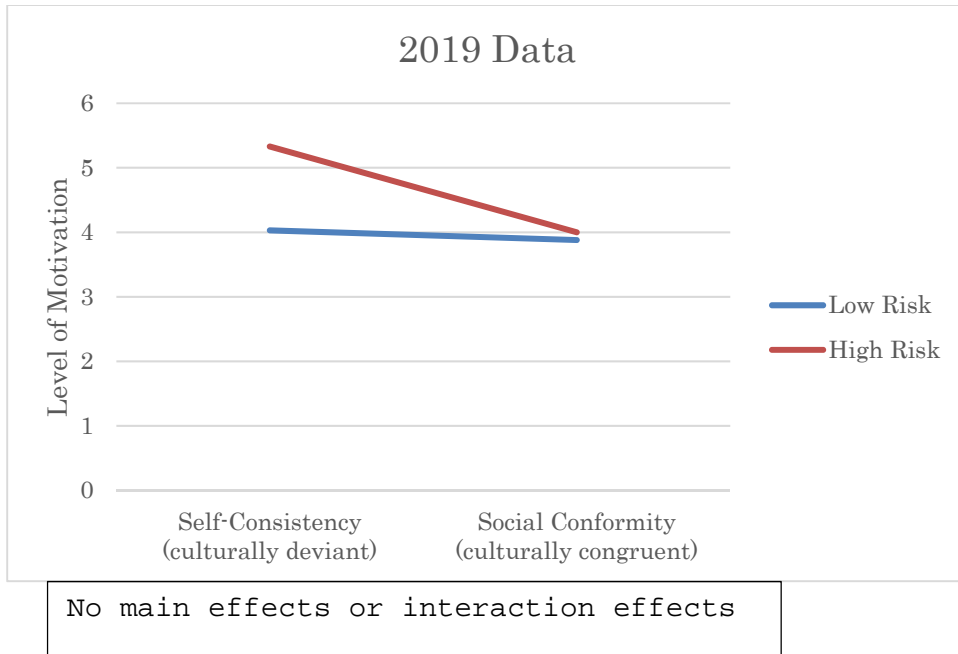
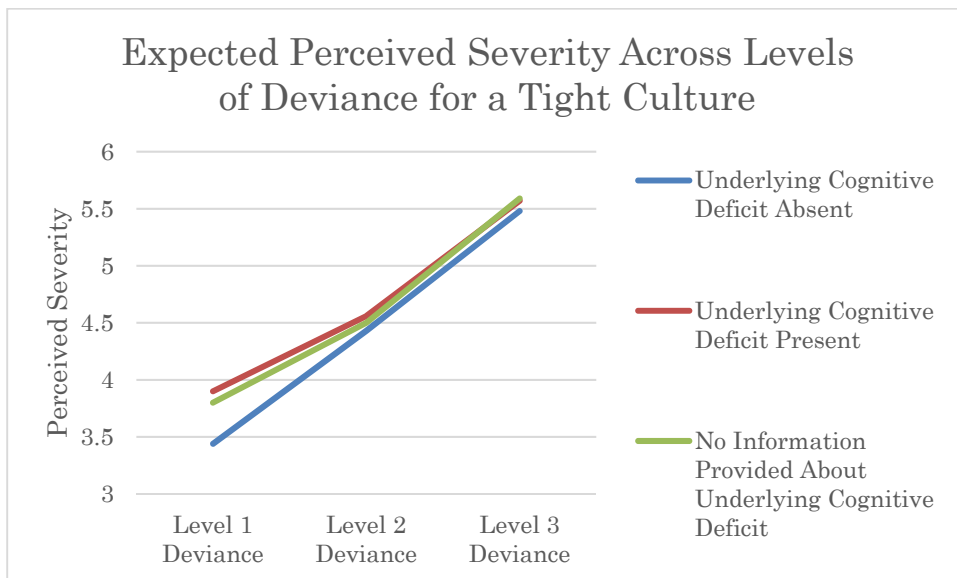
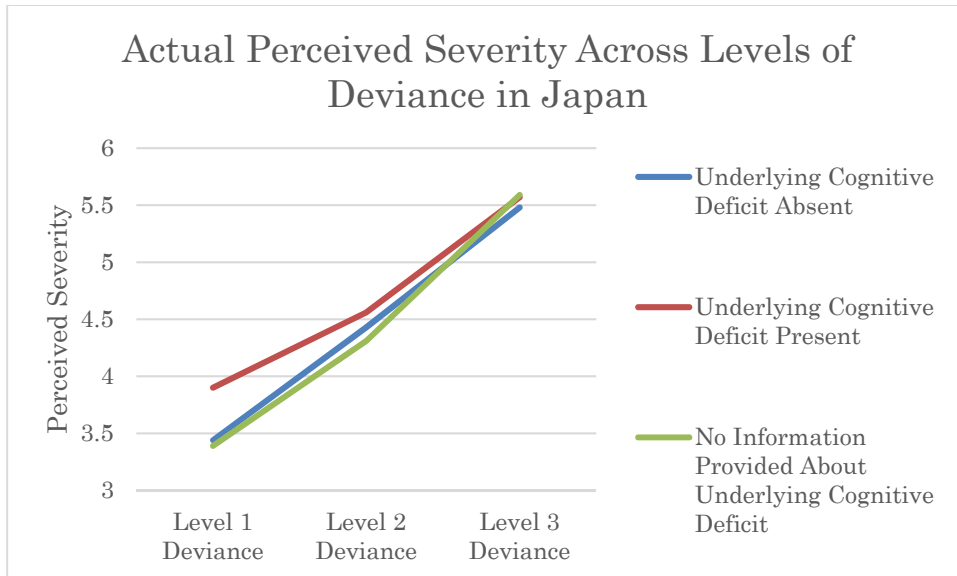


figure 2: Side by side comparison of current patterns and expected patterns for Study 2



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