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Erlandsson, Arvid; Kuroishi, Norihiro; Sano, Yoriko

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Swedish feelings of normality at an extreme funeral

○ Arvid ERLANDSSON¹⁾ · Norihiro KUROISHI²⁾ · Yoriko SANO¹⁾

1) International Christian University 2) Japan Professional School of Education

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【Introduction】

The Japanese concept of “futsu” can roughly be translated into the English word “normal” albeit some authors interpret some conceptual differences between the two words. Sense of being “futsu” and affective reactions towards normality has previously been researched on Japanese university students (e.g. Sano & Kuroishi, 2009). In brief, Japanese people feel the most calm and the least negative affects when their behavior and results does not differ significantly from the rest of the group. However, it can be argued that this is a cultural phenomenon. Japan is a good example of where an interdependent construal of self is dominant while most Western cultures emphasize an independent construal of self (Markus & Kitayama, 2009). For that reason, the current study investigated if the patterns of Westerners affective reactions and sense of normality in extreme situations differed from the Japanese. Also, in this study the power of injunctive norms are compared to the power of descriptive norms in line with Cialdini’s works (e.g. Cialdini, Reno & Kallgren, 1990). Injunctive norms can be understood as the content of the customs and tradition while descriptive norms are conceptualized as how the majority of people behave.

【Method】

In order to illustrate a situation where the custom gives a clear indication of preferred behavior we asked the participants to imagine themselves attending a funeral for a relative. The story was a translation of the story used for a Japanese sample (Kuroishi, Sano & Erlandsson,

2010). In Sweden as well as most cultures, the “traditional” clothes to wear at a funeral are black. Hence to wear black at a funeral was considered the custom, or in other words the injunctive norm (hereafter IN). In order to manipulate the descriptive norm (hereafter DN) we used a 3 × 3 between-person factorial design, (i.e. while others wear black, gray, or vivid clothes, you wear black, gray or vivid clothes) resulting in 9 different combinations (labeled A-I). After reading the stories, the participants rated to what degree they think they would experience 24 different affects if they found themselves in the described situation (General affect scale by Ogawa et al. 2000). The included affects either illustrated positive (8 items $\alpha = .845$), negative (8 items $\alpha = .855$), or calmness (8 items $\alpha = .914$). Next the participants answered 9 questions meant to measure to what extent they would perceive themselves as normal if in the described situation ($\alpha = .933$). The answering on all dependent variables was done on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). Finally, a control question was included in order to confirm the IN (“Should people generally wear black at funerals?”).

【Results】

A total of 179 Swedish university students participated. The mean age was 21.77 ($SD = 3.35$). 55 were male and 124 were female.

The IN control question clearly showed that the majority of participants believed that people generally should wear black clothes at funerals ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.08$). Subsequently, one way ANOVAs were used to compare the 9 combinations on the different variables.

Sense of normality: The combinations differed significantly in sense of normality ($F [8,169] = 22.22, p < .001$). Bonferroni post-hoc tests revealed that in situations where the DN and the subjects' behavior harmonized (combinations A and I), behaving like the IN did not significantly increase participants' sense of normality ($MD = -0.29, SE = 0.25, ns$), but when DN and the subjects' behavior opposed (combinations C and G), behaving like the IN increased sense of normality ($MD = -1.55, SE = 0.24, p < .001$)

Positive affects: The positive emotions were low overall and the differences were weak and inconsistent.

Negative affects: The combinations differed significantly in negative affects ($F [8,168] = 11.28, p < .001$). However, acting in correspondence with the IN did not predict negative affects neither when DN and the subjects' behavior harmonized (combinations A and I; $MD < 0.01, SE = 0.24, ns$) nor when they opposed (combinations C and G; $MD = 0.53, SE = 0.23, ns$).

Calmness: The combinations differed significantly in calmness ($F [8,168] = 8.25, p < .001$). However, acting in correspondence with the IN did not significantly increase calmness neither when DN and the subjects' behavior harmonized (combinations A and I; $MD = 0.41, SE = 0.27, ns$) nor when they opposed (combinations C and G; $MD = -0.69, SE = 0.26, ns$).

【Discussion】

The results indicate that Swedish students base their sense of "being normal" first and foremost on what other people do (the DN). In contrast, the IN (the customs) only seems to have a secondary effect on sense of normality in the "extreme" situations where the DN and subject's behavior oppose each other.

The IN had no impact on participants' affective reactions. Our affective reactions are based primarily on the DN while the IN does not make us feel significantly less negative affect nor significantly more relaxed even in the "extreme" situations. By looking at the figure below it is reasonable to assume that it is the "descriptive normality" that predict peoples' affective reactions.

Further, replicating the findings from previous research (e.g. Sano & Kuroishi 2009) this study showed that sense of normality is a good predictor of how much people feel negative emotions and relaxed emotions, but not as good in predicting positive emotions.

Interestingly, the results from Sweden resemble the results from Japan very strongly (Kuroishi, Sano, Erlandsson 2010), indicating that Japanese "futsu" and Western "normality" seems to render similar responses.

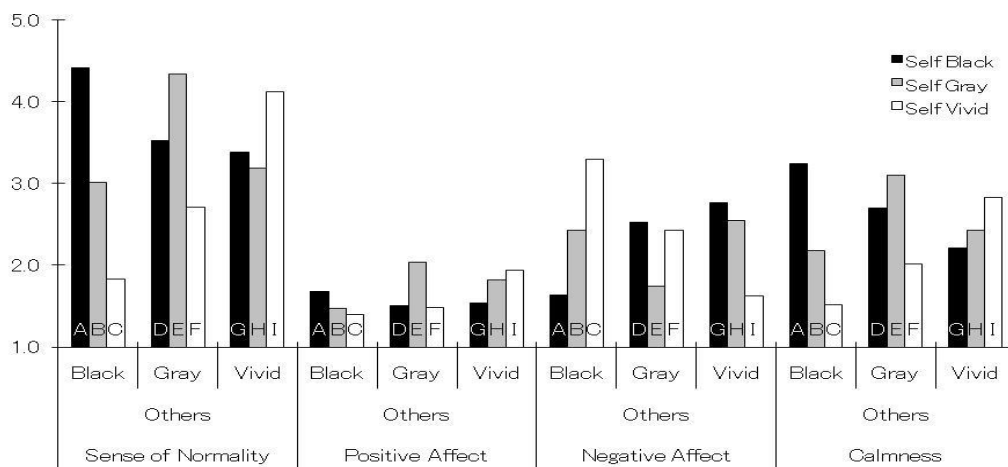


Figure 1 Mean sense of normality and affects for the different combinations