

## Three Lessons Learnt in My AsiaBarometer Survey Experience, 2002-2022 from Three Sub-disciplines: Cultural Psychology, Statistics, and Experimental Psychology<sup>29</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper presents how I attempted to escape from, and try to overcome, some pitfalls of public opinion research that were born in the West and have diffused to the entire globe. This paper focuses on how we can mitigate some Western biases in questionnaire formulation, data analysis, and publications. I have learnt from three sub-disciplines: cultural psychology, statistics, and experimental psychology about cultural biases, misuse of statistics, and experiment misapplication in public opinion research. Here, I provide my concrete experiences in formulating the questionnaire for the AsiaBarometer Survey 2000s, in executing a trial and error of statistical data analysis for writing five monographs from 2010 and onward, and in reflecting on the whole process, especially focusing on questionnaire formulation, execution of field work, book publications with three methodological issues kept in mind (Inoguchi, forthcoming in 2022; Inoguchi, 2017; Inoguchi and Tokuda, 2017; Inoguchi and Fujii, 2013; Shin and Inoguchi, eds., 2010).

This Abstract points out how we can avoid and try to overcome some pitfalls learning from three other subdisciplines: cultural psychology, statistics, and experimental psychology. (1) Cultural psychology: a: DATA CREATION: Survey methodology was born in the West and diffused to the whole globe but questionnaires are mostly created in the western mode, if not in toto. Nisbett (2003) argues that Westerners and Asians think differently about the same questions. Westerners think analytically while Asians think holistically; Westerners focus on leading actors and their universalist logics while Asians concentrate on contexts and backgrounds and they look toward large masses (cf. Henrich, 2020). b: ANALYSIS MODE:

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questionnaire in the United States, Canada and Australia, which employ the western mode, dominantly use psychology undergraduate students as respondents accounting for 70% of their manuscripts published in major leading journals. c: PUBLICATION SPACE: These responses from the undergraduates are used in psychological data analysis that led to publications in leading academic psychology journals in the United States and Western Europe. At each of the three processes of survey targeting, respondents selection, and choice of publication outlets, Asians have been misrepresented. (2) Statistics: a: Contributions to our knowledge depend on good questionnaire formulation: questionnaire should not be packed with narrowly focused questions with exceedingly abstract and/or ambiguous words (like happiness or trust) which coincide with prevalent western universalist (modernist) thinking. One example is to ask respondents: Do you agree with the sentence: On the whole, do you think that people can be trusted? One of the think tanks based in the UK reports that 80 percent of Westerners reply in the positive, probably because the Bible says so. b: Contributions to our knowledge derive from inappropriate statistical data analysis: When we ask questions on values and norms without some domain clues or adjectives attached to such abstract concepts, such as quality of life and then attempt to reveal key dimensions, say by factor analysis, the first dimension to emerge is bound to be the super-factor (Fog 2020), meaning that many questions are closely related to each other so that factor-analyzing them is bound to yield the one key dimension that explains almost everything. Such data analysis does not reveal new knowledge and thus contributes little. (3) Experimental psychology: Those questions experimental psychologists formulate are bound to be complicated because they set up control variables and to identify the differences in outcomes between control groups and non-control groups. Undergraduate students majoring in psychology may be happy to undergo this process. But those respondents on the street or those respondents chosen randomly may not understand much of such questions. The results are either they do not accept answering questions at all (e.g., DK) or they give their answer to hide their thoughts by choosing middle-point answers like 'neither agree nor disagree.' Those academics who use experimental methods must explain in their questionnaire in non-academic language. My paper summarizes the three lessons drawn from the Asia Barometer Survey experiences in parallel to the aforementioned three pitfalls.

**Key Words:** survey methodology, cultural biases, statistics misuse, experiment misapplication, Asia Barometer

## 1. Introduction

In the dawn of the Third Millennium, I designed and executed a large public opinion survey, called the *AsiaBarometer Survey on the Quality of Life*. Conducted in 32 Asian societies, including the three adjacent societies of the United States, Australia, and Russia, and based on an English master questionnaire and its translation in 35 local languages, 60,000 respondents, using national random samples, participated in face-to-face interviews. This resulted in the analysis of 6,000,000,000 observations (the first and largest ever on Asia, east of the Middle East). Unprecedented in itself, this project has produced several books on quality-of-life research since 2010, revealing many interesting findings that not only challenge folklore narratives but also Western-dominated public opinion data analysis and publications.

## 2. Formulation of Questionnaire

Quality of life (Inoguchi/Fujii, 2013) is a complicated concept. My starting point is that unless the question relates to life domains, aspects, and styles like family, job, public safety, social welfare, leisure, marriage, health, housing, standard of income, education, household income, conditions of the environment, democratic system, spiritual life, neighbors, food, friendships, it is not easy for public opinion research to handle, especially in a cross-cultural context. An example of a poor question is asking respondents to rate her or his level of quality of life from 1 to 10. Why? Because the aim of the AsiaBarometer Survey is to differentiate quality-of-life values and standards important to of Asians. Thus, the aforementioned list of life domains, aspects, and styles is essential. Also when Japanese respondents are asked opinions on divisive issues, they tend to give their answer by choosing 4, 5 or 6 in their quasi-Downsian endeavor to portray themselves in cognitive consonance with the majority. Chinese respondents tend to give their individualistic answer by choosing high or low numbers, like 2 and 3, or 8 and 9, relatively clear unless under tight authoritarian situations. On responses to organizational deterioration, i.e., exit, voice, and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970), the question is based on the situation that: You want to get a permit from an agency. The bureaucrat's answer is to "wait patiently." What is your response? 1) Use connection to obtain permit; 2) Nothing can be done; 3) Wait and hope things will work out; 4) Write a letter; 5) Act without a permit; 6) Bribe an official; 7) Don't know. How does one choose between using a connection or bribing an official. Options 1) use connections and 6) bribe an official are sometimes not easily distinguishable. Options 5) act without a permit and 6) bribe an official are considered extreme responses. Thus, Americans seem to choose the first option

with some cognitive dissonance, and appear to frequently select option 7 as a response to this question, which is higher than the Japanese, who tend to hide behind option 7. Australian respondents prefer option 3 wait and hope things will work out as their second choice and option 4 write a letter as their first choice. In keeping with *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (Callahan, 2012), Chinese respondents similarly selected both option 3 wait and hope things will work out and option 1 use connections to obtain permit. For the Indian respondents, as believers in the dictum that everything keeps changing as well as the one that nothing changes, option 1 use connections to obtain permit and option 3 wait and hope things will work out, ranked as the largest and the second largest choices.

### 3. Use of Statistics

Fog (2021) points out that many cross-cultural research results yield a super-factor, meaning that because of high correlations among a set of cultural variables the first dimension is more likely to produce the dominant dimension with the large eigenvalue. Even with the help of varimax rotation, the presence of the super-factor does not change much, only the dimensional name changes. To mitigate this problem, my strategy is to relate the quality-of-life concept to concrete life domains, aspects, and styles when the survey asks about the degree of satisfaction. To accomplish this task, first, I introduce an identifiable concrete concept, only a word or two is required here, like marriage, health, housing, public safety, and neighbors. Second, the number of life domains, aspects, and styles should be neither too many nor too few. For this section, I chose to have sixteen elements. Third, recalling the famous two dimensions of human desire identified by Maslow (1943), i.e., survival (like housing and household income) and social relations (like marriages and neighbors), I wonder what would be a third dimension in human life and quality of life. I think it is policy, permeating daily life and affecting quality of life. Quality of life cannot be determined without considering the policy impact on human life in the twenty-first century. Thus, a set of life domains, aspects, and styles that reveal a quality of life are added, while keeping the number of life domains, aspects, and styles within the chosen 16-element range. Factor-analyzing quality-of-life-related daily satisfaction responses in each of the 32 Asian societies yield results on survival, social relations, and policy dominance. Why does the AsiaBarometer Survey factor-analyze each of the 29 societies instead of aggregating the entire responses of all the 29 societies? Because the distinction of survival, social relations, and policy dominance can differ in the order of dimensional eigenvalues and this is important. But, more visibly, those words used as

concrete clues to life domains, aspects, and styles attached to respondents' satisfaction can be captured by one of the three dimensions, i.e., survival, social relations or policy dimensions. Survival is not necessarily always fixed and first. For example, take Hong Kong. Hong Kong's order of dimensions is social relations, survival, and policy dominance. With the social relations dimension such clues are highly correlated: friendships, marriage, health, education, family life, leisure, spiritual life. Along with health, education, and family life, essential for survival, such clues as spiritual life, leisure, friendships, which are essential for social relations, are both statistically saliently correlated with social relations dimension. In other words, social relations dimension are enlarged. No less significant are the high correlations of neighbors with policy dominance dimension. Hong Kong, being an old and new settler society, good social relations among similar groups or communities like Cantonese, Fukienese, Hakka, and those from other major provinces like Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Hunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, post-1949, post-1989, post-1997, post-2020 migrants make enormous differences.

#### **4. Bringing in Experimental Methods in Public Opinion Research**

The application of experimental methods can offer enormously eye-opening or surprising results. The AsiaBarometer Survey intentionally avoided such methods. Unexpected results occur largely because experiments in public opinion research require far more pre-experimental training of respondents, especially in the case of non-Westerners. Western-formulated questions, which tend to focus on principal actors and their analytic mode of reflection, are not in sync with Asians' focus on contexts, backgrounds, and their overall holistic mode toward life. Securing a reasonable number of citizens willing to participate in the survey has become increasingly difficult in terms of time, money, personnel, and because of these challenges I think my decision to exclude experimental-like questions was sound. Experimental psychologists and experimental biologists provide extensive training to their subjects through rigorous observations and long conversations during one-month stays in their community. With relaxed time constraints, respondents may find barriers easier to overcome. Public opinion researchers who seek significantly large numbers of respondents or subjects to respond to questions quickly and clearly, due so, because they are ultimately interested in principal actors and their response outcomes. Take for example the iterated prisoner's dilemma games, as applied to American and Japanese subjects by Yamagishi (1998). The setting of the prisoner game is as follows: Two prisoners, A and B, are in prison and cannot communicate with one another. They want to plan an escape from prison by cooperating with

each other. If A communicates his/her intention to cooperate with B, B can do one of two things: cooperate or not cooperate. If B cooperates, the game ends with both getting the highest rewards. If B does not cooperate, the game ends with prisoner A getting the worst punishment. Regardless of who initiates the first step, the game's structure remains the same. The accumulation of rewards and punishments determine differentiated outcomes. Americans start the game by showing a willingness to cooperate, but Japanese are hesitant to respond to Americans' first gesture of cooperation. A Japanese saying goes as follows: Do not step on a bridge without hitting it twice. This is particularly true when A has not been to B for some time, B is unlikely to respond with cooperative action. Yamagishi (1998) concludes that Americans tend to show a generalized trust whereby they are quick to take a friendly posture with some risks, but after a while they learn whether to trust or not. Yamagishi (1998) concludes that Japanese tend to be more selective in their trust, that is, Japanese trust those they have known for some time and do not trust those with which they have no history.

To avoid this kind of experimental method, I have attempted to identify some weights attached to the key dimensions of trust or social capital across ten Asian societies (Inoguchi, 2004). Eight questions are selected and all the respondents of eight societies pooled data were factor-analyzed. The key dimensions have been identified as: 1) human nature (virtuous vs evil), 2) utilitarianism (high vs low benefits), 3) societal harmony (communism vs capitalism). Since many versions of trust-related questions attempt to capture certain aspects of trust, the sum of those questions' biases, once factor-analyzed, is likely to be alleviated. The list of eight social capital questions is as follows:

Q1: Generally, do you think people can be trusted or do you think that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people (that it pays to be wary of people)?

1. Most people can be trusted.
2. Can't be too careful in dealing with people.
3. Don't know.

Q2: Do you think that people generally try to be helpful or do you think that they mostly look out for themselves?

1. People generally try to be helpful.
2. People mostly look out for themselves.
3. Don't know.

Q3: If you saw somebody on the street looking lost, would you stop to help?

1. I would always stop to help.
2. I would help if nobody else did.
3. It is highly likely that I wouldn't stop to help.
4. Don't know.

Q4: If you had no descendants, would you think it desirable to adopt somebody in order to continue the family line, even if there were no blood relationship? Or do you think this would be unnecessary?

1. Would adopt in order to continue the family line.
2. Would not adopt in order to continue the family line. I think it would be pointless.
3. It would depend on the circumstances.
4. Don't know.

Q5: Suppose that you are the president of a company. In the company's employment examination, a relative of yours got the second highest grade, scoring only marginally less than the candidate with the highest grade. In such a case, which person would you employ?

1. The person with the highest grade.
2. Your relative.
3. Don't know.

Q6: If the main breadwinner of your household should die or become unable to work due to illness, how would your household maintain the household budget? Select up to two of the following measures

1. Another adult member of the family would become the main breadwinner.
2. Would send one or more of the children out to work.
3. Would get support from relatives.
4. Would get support from neighbors and the community.
5. Would get social welfare payments.
6. Retirement allowance.
7. Have an insurance policy to cover such a situation.
8. Other.

9. Don't know.

Q7: Do you think that on the whole men and women are treated equally in your country? Please indicate which of the followings is closest to your opinion.

1. Men are treated much more favorably than women.
2. Men are treated somewhat more favorably than women.
3. Men and women are treated equally.
4. Women are treated somewhat more favorably than men.
5. Women are treated much more favorably than men.
6. Don't know.

Q8: What should a person who needs a government permit do if the response of the official handling the application is: just be patient and wait?

1. Use connections to obtain the permit.
2. Nothing can be done.
3. Wait and hope that things will work out.
4. Write a letter.
5. Act without a permit.
6. Bribe an official.
7. Don't know.

The eight questions ask social capital-related questions with a variety of contexts. They also ask social capital-related questions mostly not in the form of ordinary scale but in the form of choosing the most favorable answer. Even when a context-specific question is asked, it is very important that such a context has clues or adjectives related to social capital and is concrete and familiar. This pooled data was analyzed, using factor analysis, hierarchical cluster analysis and discriminant analysis (Inoguchi, 2004) to find the basic convergence of country locations on the three dimensions of general trust (Japan, South Korea), merit-based utility (India, Sri Lanka), and trust in social system (Vietnam, China). This example shows that without using experimental methods one can analyze major dimensions of social capital in Asia reasonably well.

## 5. Conclusion

New methods and new technologies are on the steady increase in many disciplines, and public opinion research has been metamorphosing itself through the adoption and adaptation of these methods and technologies. I have presented some examples of

questionnaire formulation and statistical data analysis and an alternate method to experimental method in public opinion research. The AsiaBarometer Survey focused on quality of life questions in 32 Asian (and adjacent American, Australian, Russian) societies with 60,000 respondents and 6,000,000,000 observations with random samples and face-to-face interviews. Unprecedented in itself, the project has published four scientific books since 2010 and in 2022 a fifth volume will come out. The subjects of the project has given deep and sharp analyses on quality of life, happiness, life satisfaction, trust both interpersonal and institutional, exit/voice/loyalty and typology of Asian societies. Underlying this project is the appalling fact of Western dominance, not only in questionnaire formulation and data analysis, but also in publications of articles in leading journals in the United States and Europe. Some 70 percent of articles published in such journals in psychology depend on undergraduate students in the United States, Canada, and Australia (Nisbett, 2003). No less appalling is that only 5 percent of East Asia-based authors publish in leading U.S. economic journals. Academics and researchers based in Africa, Latin America, and other Asia-based authors publish in such journals with even less frequency (Rodrik, 2021). When Richard Nisbett (2003) in his findings concludes that Westerners and Asians think differently, Western bias must be mitigated in questionnaire formulation at least. My endeavor has been very small toward mitigating such Western cultural bias. But the future is bright with associations such as the World Association of Public Opinion Research (Wapor) and its Asian chapter Wapor Asia, helping to diffuse good practice in public opinion research worldwide.

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