

TESTING FEAR OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

SE367 Course Project
Aman Pandya (11481)

Mentor:
Prof Amitabha Mukerjee

ABSTRACT

Why do we strive to be socially acceptable? Why is being acceptable to the society so important for us? It has been experimentally proved by Solomon Asch that people do alter their behaviour to fit into the society. Taking direct inspiration from Asch's work, German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann proposed the Spiral of Silence theory which was fundamentally based on fear of social isolation. I replicate here part of an experiment done by Shoemaker, Breen and Stamper to test fear of social isolation via correlating fear of negative evaluation with discrepancy between personal opinion and majority opinion as well as with willingness to express majority opinion. In addition to original experiment, it has also been well documented that women are more likely to succumb to social pressure. So, I also intend to measure gender variations in fear of social isolation, again by using fear of negative evaluation scale developed by Watson and Friend.

LITERATURE

It has been widely acknowledged that as social beings, most people seek social acceptance and as a result try to match their behaviour with the one predominant in the society. This was first experimentally determined by Solomon Asch. As many as 75% of subjects in Asch's experiment gave wrong answers to very easy questions, just to match their answer with the majority.

As a direct response to this theory, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann proposed the Spiral of Silence Theory. This was an important theory as it attempted to explain public opinion as a dynamic process. Noelle-Neumann introduced the concept of fear of social isolation as one of the main reasons we try to model our behaviour in accordance to our surroundings. She states in her book that our social nature causes us to fear separation and isolation from our fellows and to want to be respected and liked by them. And in order to not lose popularity and esteem, people constantly observe their environment very closely. They try to find out

which opinions and behaviours are prevalent or are becoming prevalent and they model their opinions and behaviour accordingly.

Now, as we see, fear of social isolation has played a major part in development of the theory. And although Noelle-Neumann had conducted some field experiments to manipulate the fear of isolation, most of the experts have taken it as an assumption in subsequent works relating to the subject.

It was only in late 1990s that Shoemaker, Breen and Stamper designed an experiment to test the assumption of fear of social isolation. They considered certain possibilities from the psychological literature on social psychology, mainly of Monfries and Kafer. They made a connection between self-consciousness and negative evaluation and that an individual monitors many elements of the self that others can see and evaluate. And to measure fear of isolation, Shoemaker, Breen and Stamper used Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale developed by Watson and Friend way back in 1969. FNE basically measures social anxiety stemming from public consciousness, including apprehensions about what others think.

HYPOTHESES

- The more a person fears negative evaluation, the less discrepancy there will be between the person's opinion and perception of the predominant opinion.
- The more a person fears negative evaluation, the less likely he or she will be to discuss a minority opinion.

METHOD

I used a survey to collect data about certain variables (mentioned in the results section) on a Likert scale. The survey was presented in two parts, each having its own purpose. Purpose of the first part was to determine individual's personal opinion, his or her perception of predominant opinion and willingness to express a minority opinion. They were asked whether CPI should be criteria for holding Positions of Responsibility (PORs) in the institute. This topic was selected after a test run on several topics that included euthanasia, minor laws for juvenile rapists, gun laws and fixing in IPL.

The second part of the survey was to determine the FNE index of the respondents. As mentioned in the literature, variables from Watson and Friend's scale were taken. The original scale contained 30 variables but for the sake of experiment, most relevant 6 were chosen (same as those taken by the original experimenters). FNE was simply taken as net sum of responses on all those 6 variables. The purpose of sending the survey form in two parts was basically to avoid guessing of hypotheses by the participants. Then, I used the Pearson correlational coefficient analysis to determine the validity of the claims.

RESULTS

The survey form was answered by 81 individuals. As constrained by the nature of questions, all of them were from engineering background (mainly from IITs). Gender break-up was 13 girls and 67 boys while a single respondent refrained from revealing gender. Results are tabulated in table 1.

TABLE 1

Sr. No.	Variables	Mean
1	Individual's opinion*	2.92
2	Individual's perception of predominant opinion*	2.68
3	Discrepancy between opinion and perception of predominant opinion**	1.04
4	Willingness to express individual opinion***	3.41
5	I worry about seeming foolish to others*	3.09
6	I worry about what people think of me even when I know it doesn't make any difference*	3.09
7	I become tense and jittery when I know somebody is keenly assessing me*	3.42
8	Other people's opinion do not bother me (Reverse Coded)****	2.91
9	When I am talking to someone, I worry what they may be thinking about me*	3.27
10	I often worry that people who are important to me won't think very much of me*	3.12
11	Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) Index	19.07

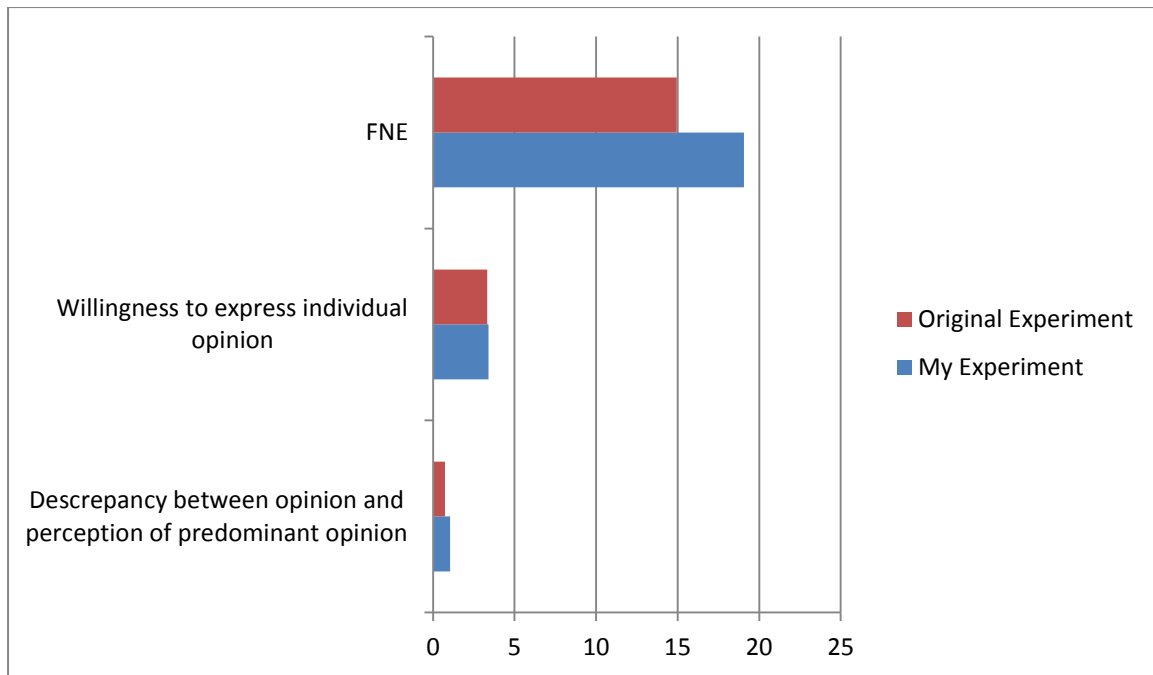
*5=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree

**Absolute difference between two Likert scales

***5=very likely, 1= highly unlikely

****1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree

FNE is taken as sum of the six individual items above



GENDER VARIATIONS:

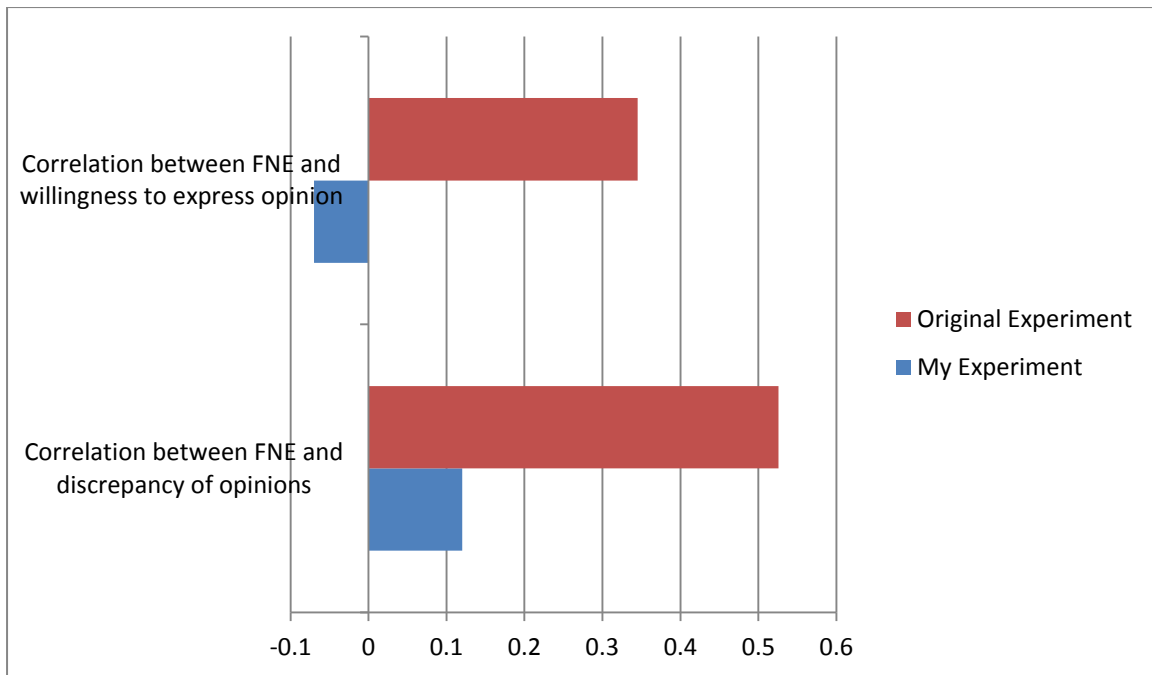
I found no real difference between the FNE of males and females. In fact, contrary to expected results, FNE of males was slightly more than that of females. This may be attributed to lopsided demographics of the sample set and it is completely possible that we may obtain expected result from a more unbiased sample set.

Gender	FNE
Male	19.04
Female	19

CORRELATIONAL COEFFICIENTS:

In a major blow to my hypothesis, absolutely no correlation was found between either FNE and discrepancy of opinions or FNE and willingness to express individual opinions in public. Original experimenters had obtained a moderately high correlation between the same variables and they expected better results in subsequent experiments with different subject (the manner in which I have done). I have used the same Pearson correlational coefficient formula as used by the authors.

Variables	Correlational Coefficient
FNE and discrepancy of opinions	0.12
FNE and willingness to express opinion	-0.07



CONCLUSIONS

As we can see from table 1, clearly there is a similarity between individual's opinion and individual's perception of predominant opinion. Thus, there was a minimum discrepancy between the two opinion variables, yielding an opinion discrepancy score of 1.04 which is expected to be even less for a larger sample set. Respondents were also, in general, likely to express their opinions in public irrespective of the dominant opinion in a discussion, which can be supported by the willingness to express individual opinion score of 3.41.

I was not able to compute any significant correlation between FNE and tendency to express minority opinion as well as FNE and discrepancy between opinions. Yes, there was minimum discrepancy between the opinions, but that was not in any way related to FNE. **Irrespective of their FNE scores, people placed their opinions very close to each other.**

By similar arguments, we can say **people tend to voice their opinions irrespective of their FNE score.**

I also cannot determine **any considerable gender bias in FNE ratings**. Perhaps, this was due to very less number of female respondents.

FUTURE SCOPE

A considerable difference in FNE indexes obtained in the original experiment and my experiment may be possibly attributed to constrains of demographics. Almost all correspondents were from an engineering background that too mainly from IITs. A significant decline in the correlational coefficients may also be loosely due to the nature of

sample set or even errors in experimental technique. Even the original experiment was just moderately successful and the authors had suggested to retest the hypothesis with newer measures and designs. So, we can do the same by taking help of Prof N K Sharma of IME department (as suggested by Prof Amitabha Mukerjee) who has a great expertise in designing survey forms and has also developed a lot of interesting theories on so called weird behaviour of IITians, the main subjects in our experiment.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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