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# How World Trade Centers, JET and International Education Consider Cultural Dimensions when Facilitating Intercultural Communication with Japanese

John Nelson Bates Jr.  
Business Administration  
April, 2018

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jennifer Heckman

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
University of Washington, Tacoma

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Approved:

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## Introduction

With the prominence of globalization in today's modern world, intercultural communication is a necessity. More recently, the relative freedom of international trade has opened a global business environment where businesses must consider cultural differences when making decisions about how to communicate. Situations where cultural differences must be acknowledged in communications include inherently international operations as well as those that have become global due to the elimination of geopolitical barriers (Silveira & Carlos, 2013). In the words of Palmer-Silveira and Juan Carlos, "Needless to say, the traditional difference between foreign and domestic markets has basically disappeared nowadays...." (2013, p. 9). Silveira and Carlos continue that this trend not only creates a need for foreign language skills, but also the ability to understand the cultural contexts underlying messages. According to Luring (2011), when some parties lack the ability to decode messages transmitted from the context of another culture, culture can act as a kind of disturbance, hindering attempts to convey or interpret vital business messages.

Regarding the need for foreign language proficiency, intercultural communication skills are also necessary for the teaching of foreign language, especially when teachers and students do not share the same cultural background (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005). In some cases, an inability to adapt to cultural variances in language classrooms can even lead to students failing (Dogancay-Aktuna). Therefore, foreign language skill development may be at least partially dependent on another's ability to communicate across cultures.

Finally, Higher Education must prepare students not only for a global work environment, but also for the internationalization of academia itself. Moreover, the diversity present in

student bodies is not enough to teach students the intercultural communication skills necessary, universities must do more (Fall, Kelly, MacDonald, Primm, and Holmes, 2013).

These needs have been addressed by businesses, educational programs and institutions in recent years, but progress is still ongoing. As such, an analysis of what such institutions consider when facilitating intercultural communication will prove useful in deciding where attention should be focused. To do this, I conducted focused research into how members from three select organizational case studies consider cultural differences when communicating with those from one culture, Japan.

One way such institutions might prepare for cross-cultural communications is by considering cultural differences with cultural dimensions theory. Cultural dimensions, first proposed by Geert Hofstede in 1984, are variables of fundamental cultural differences between nations (Hofstede, 1984). There have been critiques, mostly by McSweeney, on the validity and relevance of cultural dimensions. One of these critiques is that it is too nation deterministic, expressing that the nation state is the absolute unit for cultural boundaries (McSweeney). Another critique McSweeney suggests is that surveys, Hofstede's method for his initial proposition of the theory, are not adequate for determining cultural differences (McSweeney, 2002, 93-94). Hofstede's rebuttals to McSweeney's criticisms include his claim that the nation state is largely the only available unit for defining cultural boundaries (Hofstede, 2002). Hofstede also states, in reply to McSweeneys, that the measurement of cultural differences should be done through a variety of methods by various scholars (Hofstede, 2002). Ultimately, Hofstede's cultural dimensions are prominent in the field of intercultural communication and continue to be supported and utilized by many scholars, as I will address later.

Some other critiques by McSweeney are largely void when using cultural dimensions to analyze Japanese culture and communication. McSweeney (2002) critiques Hofstede's sample sizes, stating that "In only six of the included countries... were the number of respondents more than 100....", however, Japan was one of those six countries (p. 94). Therefore, the data Hofstede used to validate his original cultural dimensions is, critiques withstanding, significant regarding Japan even more than most other nations. Moreover, one of Hofstede's arguments for the validity of his sample sizes is the homogeneity of a nation's impact on the sample size required to gain an accurate understanding of that culture, more homogeneity resulting in smaller required sample sizes (McSweeney, 2002). Japan, as will be discussed later in more detail, is a relatively homogenous culture compared to others (Davies, 2002).

### **Approach**

To collect data regarding how professionals consider cultural dimensions, I conducted loosely structured interviews with individuals from World Trade Centers in Tacoma and San Diego, those that have taught in the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, and the International Education Offices of the University of Washington Tacoma and Tacoma Community College. I performed thematic, qualitative analyses of their responses through a global framework utilizing Cultural Dimensions Theory. More specifically, I asked questions with the goal of determining how these individuals considered a set of selected cultural dimensions that will be further detailed later but include how they appealed to the collectivist mentality and comfort with ambiguous speech in Japanese cultural communication styles. My thesis questions are, how do members of these institutions consider, intentionally or otherwise, cultural dimensions when communicating with those from Japan; second, how can professionals in these

institutions practice better intercultural communication skills? Interviewees, while not all were familiar with the theory itself, did consider most dimensions in some capacity or another, especially context orientation. Most made additional comments regarding how they opted to not adhere completely to cultural norms. Based on these results, I argue that there are three ways those in the before mentioned institutions can better their intercultural communication skills. First, they can begin to recognize cultural dimensions theory. Second, they can emphasize the most prominent cultural dimension from interviewees responses, context orientation. Finally, they can remain culturally humble when practicing intercultural communication.

This paper will begin by providing an overview of cultural dimensions, followed by summaries of how analyses of Japanese culture demonstrate the presence of dimensions I selected. Then I will discuss my methodology and rationale before detailing the results of my interviews and my analyses of them. Finally, I will provide recommendations of how these organizations and the professionals in them can better consider cultural dimensions in their practices.

## Literature Review

### *An Overview of Cultural Dimensions*

Hofstede's (1984) original four cultural dimensions included individualism versus collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. However, other cultural dimensions have been proposed and some have had a substantial body of previous literature supporting them; context orientation and tightness were proposed by Hall, and Pelto respectively (Nishimira, Nevgi, and Tella, 2008; Triandis, 1996). Moreover, some cultural dimensions have been supported more

than others. Individualism versus collectivism, for example, has been researched most extensively (Triandis, 1996).

The five cultural dimensions I utilize in my analysis are individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, assertiveness, context orientation, and tightness. Individualism or collectivism is the measure of how interdependent members of a culture are as opposed to individuals being independent and caring primarily for themselves and those close to them (Hofstede, 1984). Uncertainty avoidance is how comfortable a culture is with ambiguity or to what extent the culture relies on institutions or cultural norms to minimize uncertain situations (Hofstede, 1984). Assertiveness is how aggressive members of a culture typically are (Dorfman, Gupta, Hanges, House & Javidan, 2004). Context Orientation is the degree to which communication relies on information outside of what is explicitly said (Nishimura et al., 2008). Meanwhile, tightness, first proposed by Pelto, is the extent a culture tolerates deviation from norms and how unambiguous those norms are (Triandis, 1996).

I chose these cultural dimensions for their relative presence in the Japanese culture as evident in previous analyses by scholars and quantified data from the GLOBE program. Next, I will explain how such analyses and data support my use of these cultural dimensions in the following sections.

### ***Supporting Literature for Collectivism in Japanese Culture***

In their book, *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*, Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno support that Japanese culture is high in collectivism and context orientation when they describe the concepts of *Aimai*, *Shudan Ishiki*, and *Uchi-Soto*. For example, *Shudan Ishiki* is the general term for Japanese collectivism (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). As



Davies himself states (2002), "In Japanese Society, people are primarily group-orientated and give more priority to group harmony than to individuals" (p. 195). Davies provides World War Two and post war economic growth in Japan as examples of when this group-mentality was evident. He states that both unquestioning obedience to the Japanese military during the war, and the consolidated effort to rebuild economically after resulted from the Japanese emphasis on conformity and collective responsibility (2002). More specifically, there is a more rigid sense of *Uchi*, (in-group), and *Soto*, (outgroup) in Japanese culture. Common examples of *Uchi* are husband-wife relationships, the nuclear family and small groups of close intimates (Davies, 2017). Examples of *Soto* include those outside of the nuclear family, often called *Soto no hito*, 'outsiders', and those that belong to minority groups in Japan such as the Ainu people or ethnic Koreans (Davies, 2017).

In his book, *Japanese Culture and Communication*, Donahue also supports that Japan is a collectivist culture in describing the emphasis on interdependencies there. This focus on interdependencies is *Amae* (Donahue, 1998). In Japanese culture, it is expected that one will be strongly dependent upon others, more so than in the US. One area where this is especially prominent is in customer service, where service providers go to extreme lengths to cater to and nurture customers. Common examples of this service include addressing the customer as *okyakusan*, or 'honorable customer', wearing white gloves to symbolize care, and wrapping packages with attention to detail (Donahue, 1998). *Amae* is also evident in Japanese language. Personal pronouns are used relatively infrequently in favor of more descriptive nouns that highlight one's place in society. Also, strangers are often referred to as family, such as calling an older man grandfather or a waitress sister (Donahue, 1998).

However, there are limitations and exceptions to *Amae*. The extent that someone is dependent on another is looked at closely, with imbalances in the dependencies criticized. Overdependence may be criticized as *Amayakashisugi*, emphasizing the nurturer's fault, or *Wagamama*, emphasizing the dependent's responsibility, (Donahue, 1998). Alternatively, lack of dependence may be criticized as *Tsumetai* or *Katte* respectively (Donahue, 1998). Beyond this criticism, *Amae* is also checked by obligated reciprocity and *Uchi-Soto*. For instance, gifts and acts of favor must be recognized and returned in kind, which leads to hesitation in accepting indulgences (Donahue, 1998). Donahue lastly mentions that Japanese generally do not cater to strangers they have no relationship or obligation of service toward. Even assisting those with small difficulties in public is rare in Japanese culture. Donahue attributes this to *Uchi-Soto* specifically, elaborating that Japanese are uncomfortable interacting with strangers or *Soto*, whom they have no specific business with. Holding open doors for strangers, helping the unknown elderly, or other such gestures are therefore not common (Donahue, 1998, 128-129).

### ***The Globe Project and Rationale for Inclusion of Uncertainty Avoidance and Assertiveness***

The GLOBE Program, (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program), is a three-phase study of culture's effect on leadership (Dorfman et al, 2004). The research was carried out by 172 investigators in 62 countries, some of the most significant including Robert House, Paul Hanges, Harry Triandis, etc. (Dorfman et al, 2004).

Robert House earned his PhD in Management from Ohio State University in June 1960 and received a position as an endowed professor for the University of Pennsylvania in 1988 (Dorfman et al, 2004). At the time of publication, (2004), he had published 130 journal articles and received more than four awards for his work (Dorfman et al). Robert House proposed the

idea for the GLOBE project, wanting to add a large, more rigorous study to the field of intercultural communication, a growing but undeveloped field at the time. House first began considering something like GLOBE in 1991 when there was much literature supporting charismatic leadership. He initially thought about conducting a study with 20 countries to test whether charismatic leadership was universally effective. However, after reading much of the literature regarding organizational culture, House decided that current methodologies did not seem rigorous to him. He then started reading literature regarding general cross-cultural studies and, while doing so, formulated the idea for the GLOBE project (Dorfman et al, 2004). He was the GLOBE projects principal investigator from 1993 to 2003 and visited 38 countries in this capacity (Dorfman et al, 2004).

Paul Hanges earned his PhD in industrial-organizational psychology from the University of Akron and began a professorship at the University of Maryland in 1986 (Dorfman et al, 2004). His interests include cross-cultural leadership and research methodologies. Hanges, who was responsible for working with data in GLOBE, primarily developed the GLOBE scales to quantify the relative orientation of each culture with respect to cultural dimensions (Dorfman et al, 2004). He also developed the GLOBE database and developed new approaches to analyzing the data when traditional methods would not suffice (Dorfman, 2004).

Harry Triandis earned his PhD from Cornell University, New York, in 1958. He has published works such as *Culture and Social Behavior*, *Individualism and Collectivism*, and *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Dorfman et al, 2004). At the time of publication, (2004), Harry Triandis was a retired professor of psychology at the University of Illinois (Dorfman et al).

He is one of the most prominent scholars in intercultural communication and is significant in that he is a recurring author in the literature I draw from the most (Dorfman et al, 2004).

As part of the study, the researchers developed quantitative scales of cultural dimensions for several countries. Also, the studies differentiated between cultural practices, the way things are in a culture, and cultural values, the state members aspire for as a society (Dorfman et al, 2004). The cultural dimensions they looked at included individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and assertiveness, among others (Dorfman et al, 2004). Some qualifications of this study the researchers have mentioned are how terms hold different connotations in different cultures when translated which may affect responses, and that the sample sizes for larger countries might not be enough to represent them accurately (Dorfman et al, 2004).

The GLOBE project in 2004 ranked Japan on a scale of low to high Assertiveness practices as 3.59 relative to 4.55 for the US (Dorfman et al, 2004). Meanwhile, Japan and the US scored similarly regarding uncertainty avoidance practices, 4.15 and 4.07 respectively (Dorfman et al, 2004). However, regarding values, Japan has a much greater preference for uncertainty avoidance, with Japan ranked 4.33 and the US ranked 4.0 (Dorfman et al, 2004). Moreover, Triandis named Japan as an example of a culture with strong uncertainty avoidance when discussing the commonality of cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance also being tight cultures (Triandis, 1996).

### ***Supporting Literature for Japan as a High-Context Culture***

As mentioned previously, Davies supports Japan being a high context culture with his discussion of *Aimai*. *Aimai* is the Japanese way of communicating so that what is said cannot be

accurately interpreted when taken at face value (Davies, 2002). Communicating so that there are multiple meanings to what the speaker is saying allows Japanese to express disagreement or judgments without disrupting the harmonious collective atmosphere (Davies, 2002). As previously mentioned, Japanese are typically unassertive. As such, they avoid being direct when expressing preferences or disagreeing. One way this is achieved is through ambiguous communication based on context. Japanese carefully choose words with unassertive or ambiguous denotations, *tatemae*, leaving deciphering the message dependent on the connotation, or *honne*, of what is said, or just leave the message ambiguous (Davies, 2002). One common example is *maa-maa*, roughly translated to so-so, or somewhat, but often used when asked how one is feeling or how someone performed to avoid being direct about such things (Davies, 2002).

Nishimura, Nevgi and Tella give another example: *Bubuzuke* is a Japanese dish where tea or broth is poured over rice. Often in Kyoto, when a guest has overstayed their welcome, the host will ask if they would like some as a subtle way to ask them to leave (2008).

Lastly, Nishimura notes that individualist cultures are more likely to be low context cultures, whereas collectivist cultures, such as Japan, tend to be high context cultures as well (Nishimura et al, 2008).

### ***Supporting Literature for Japan as a Tight Culture***

The presence of tightness in Japanese culture was validated by Triandis and others through research conducted with word association (Triandis, 1996). The reason they selected Japan was that Japan fit three determinant criteria they theorized would lead to a higher probability of developing a tight culture: having a dense population, living in relative isolation

from other cultures, and homogeneity between individuals (Triandis, 1996). A culture with a dense population has more interaction between people, and therefore more potential for conflict. Becoming a tight society mitigates this conflict through providing structure and order (Triandis, 1996).

As for homogeneity, when people hold similar values, they must find ways to deal with behaviors that deviate from those values less often and thus have the capacity to be less tolerant, becoming a tighter culture (Triandis, 1996).

However, Triandis qualifies that when members of tight cultures must interact in cross-cultural situations, and are aware of the cultural differences, they might typically become looser to adapt (Triandis, 1996). Isolation is correlated with homogeneity in that a culture that is isolated from others is not as influenced by external cultural influences, and members will more probably develop similar values to those in their in-group (Triandis, 1996). Triandis added that those cultures where members are interdependent on one another for survival, such as those that perform rice cultivation, are more likely to be tight cultures (Triandis, 1996). Finally, Triandis mentioned that cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance are more likely to be tight cultures, because they require stricter social institutions and sanctions to influence behavior and reduce uncertainty (Triandis, 1996). Japan fits each of these criteria. Japan is a relatively isolated archipelago surrounded by dangerous seas, placing the culture in isolation. Furthermore, the landscape is mountainous and thus has little arable land, forcing people to live in dense rice farming communities (Davies, 2002).

Triandis conducted word-association research with adolescent boys from both cultures and concluded that Japan was a tight culture. Japan as a culture generally has unambiguous cultural norms and is less tolerant of deviation from them than other cultures (Triandis, 1996).

### **Methods**

I preselected two interviewees from each organization, knowing that each would have had the opportunity to practice intercultural communication with Japanese. Then I developed a set of questions relating to how they consider the five cultural dimensions I selected, creating an interview guide to provide initial structure for interviews (see appendix A). Once interviews began, I adjusted as necessary for accessibility of each interviewee, the situation of the interview, needs for clarification not planned for and to consider feedback from interviewees.

Interviews were the preferred method as Hofstede's work has been criticized for his use of surveys to conduct analyses (McSweeney, 2002). Surveys have been popular with Hofstede, the GLOBE project, and others. However, Hofstede himself says that cultural analyses should be approached by multiple scholars with a variety of methods (Hofstede, 2002). Conducting research with interviews like this adds more variety to the methods used to conduct such research.

Also, interviews allowed me to have a dialogue with interviewees, as opposed to surveys or other forms of unidirectional data collection styles. I thought that having this dialogue was important because it allowed me to clarify questions interviewees did not understand, as well as inquire further into other relevant topics interviewees discussed or ways they considered cultural dimensions I had not anticipated.

The method utilized to structure my interviews and collect data is influenced by the incremental interview protocol outlined by Hoffman (2009). Hoffman's (2009) protocol, the incremental interview approach, calls for purposeful selection of subjects based on predetermined criteria and potentially multiple methods of analysis considering interviewees' communication preferences. It also involves organized reflection between research stages with potential adaptations to data collection strategies. Since my research question involves seeking common themes based on a theoretical framework from interviews collected through a few different methods, Hoffman's approach fit this particular study well.

The form of interviews varied depending on the information shared, participant availability and how I refined the interview process over time. For example, some interviews were quite structured and followed the interview guide closely while others differed in that some participants proceeded onto relevant tangents that made asking all questions unnecessary. Others were asked questions worded slightly differently than in previous interviews due to feedback from previous interviewees. While only one interviewee allowed me to record our interview, I did take copious notes during and after each interview. Some interviews occurred face-to-face, some had to be conducted over the phone due to time or spatial constraints, and one was conducted via email.

Hoffman validates his protocol through empirical research he and his colleagues have conducted with the incremental interview approach and feedback he has received over the course of ten years from students and faculty from multiple countries (2009). For example, the purposeful selection of subjects was included because of his research into *The career potential of migrant scholars in Finnish universities*. Due to a lack of prior research on the topic, he had to



intentionally find individuals who were migrant scholars in Finnish universities (Hoffman, 2009). Here, Hoffman saw the need for the flexibility to pre-select subjects that was missing from other approaches. Meanwhile, the allowance for utilizing methods that fit subject's communications preferences came about because of feedback from Hoffman's students. In advising his students to find the preferred avenues of communication for those they communicate with, Hoffman was inspired to include such flexibility in a methodological strategy (Hoffman, 2009).

### ***Data interpretation***

To interpret the interview data, I conducted a thematic, qualitative analysis influenced by the general inductive approach outlined by David R. Thomas (2006). Thomas' general inductive approach calls for multiple close readings of raw data interpreted by the researcher through predetermined categories to reveal relevant common themes within the data (Thomas, 2006). Thomas' general inductive approach is valid in that there is an extensive body of literature that Thomas points to as having this approach already, although expressed in different terms due to lack of a common name for it previously. All these researcher's methods prior to Thomas' proposal share those commonalities such as multiple close readings of raw data and the intent of finding overall themes. Since my research question aims to find patterns or themes in how professionals in these organizations consider cultural dimensions, (as opposed to deriving theory, describing experience, etc.), this is the most appropriate approach for my analysis.

After conducting interviews and transcribing them or taking notes, I selected text that pertained to how each professional either did or did not consider cultural dimensions, or if they chose not to adapt their communication style regardless of being aware of cultural differences. I performed multiple close readings of this selected text, with each cultural dimension itself and

frequent phrases relating to them that appeared in the text acting as categories to focus my analyses. I looked for themes in the data regarding what dimensions were most emphasized, under what circumstances interviewees considered cultural dimensions, and how interviewees acted because of their cultural competencies or lack thereof. I also looked for any patterns that demonstrated commonality in communication approaches that did not relate to cultural dimensions theory. Themes I recognized include context orientation being emphasized the most, as well as the additional trend of expressing cultural humility as another strategy for facilitating intercultural communication.

### ***Interview subjects and assessment***

In the following section, I highlight the relevant details of the interviewees I selected that relate to their potential to have interacted with those from Japan, as well as other interesting biographical information presented to me.

Paul Carrington taught in Japan as a participant in the JET program from 2005 – 2007, and also for an AEON Amity Corporation English Language School from 2010 – 2011. He says he uses the professional, collaborative and planning skills he developed in the program daily. He also says he employs the cultural competence and cultural humility he developed every day as well. Currently Professor Carrington teaches in the Global Honors program at the University of Washington Tacoma.

I also interviewed Michael Fowler, who is a Senior Trade Consultant at the World Trade Center of Tacoma and owns his own company Asia Access, inc. Asia Access finds parties willing to sell health and beauty products between the US and Japan for JLB, as well as assists other businesses in doing business between the US and Japan. His interest in East Asian culture first

began when he watched the television show, 'Kun Fu'. He later took Chinese language classes and eventually travelled to China. Afterward he attended West Point planning to visit the country again. Instead he went to Japan and lived with the father of a Japanese friend he met at West Point, who later became his mentor.

I also interviewed Director Akane Yamaguchi, the director of International Students and Scholar Services at the University of Washington Tacoma, Namiko Bagirimvano, who runs international programs for Tacoma Community College, Hilda Mwangi, who works at the World Trade Center San Diego, and Rachel Strandquist, who formerly participated in the JET program and is currently a Graduate Admissions and Records Officer for the University of Victoria.

### ***Limitations***

Some qualifications of my methodology could include whether this sample size is representative of each organization and whether having only interviewed those from within a certain geographic distance from myself for accessibility reasons effected the results. Also, how the cultural backgrounds of each interviewee effected their responses. My respondents mostly have US cultural backgrounds, but Professor Carrington also has a cultural background in the UK, and Rachel Strandquist is Canadian. Future research might include a greater number of interviewees from each organization, organizations from a larger geographic area, and interviewees with a wider variety of cultural backgrounds, as opposed to just western backgrounds.

## **Interviewee Response Summary**

### ***Considerations for Collectivism***

One common theme in responses regarding collectivism is the importance of connections.

Mr. Fowler discussed the importance of connections in Japanese business. Even more so than in US business environments, it is difficult to start a dialogue with a person or organization you have not yet been introduced to. It is impolite to introduce yourself in Japanese culture, and the emphasis on interdependencies is especially strong in Japanese business where business connections are based on who one knows and are long-lasting. Mr. Fowler mentioned a situation where to thank his friend's father for all his years of guidance, he found a cheaper producer for his product. However, the man rejected the gift because he had a long-standing relationship with his then-current supplier and was not willing to withdraw from that relationship even if it meant missing an opportunity to gain much larger profit. Currently, Mr. Fowler is attempting to contact someone who has been unresponsive through having a third party they both know contact him on Mr. Fowler's behalf to see if everything is alright. This is a request the contact in question cannot refuse at risk of losing face. It also points out that Mr. Fowler has a stronger connection to said contact than they perhaps realized.

This embraced interdependence between business associates is a prime example of Japanese collectivism expressed through *Amae*. In situations where a Japanese business person would have to sever a relationship for some gain, severing that connection could be interpreted as *katte*, selfish and self-interested in not wanting to rely on others support (Donahue, 1998). Donahue mentions business situations like these ones specifically, stating that connections in Japanese business are more binding than contracts. Moreover, contracts are rare altogether in Japanese business (Donahue, 1998).

When asked whether he was often able to introduce himself or if it was necessary to have a third party facilitate introductions, Professor Carrington said that it was common to be introduced through a third party when he first arrived. More than likely, he speculated, both because this was when he was meeting people for the first time and because of his relative lack of language skill. However, as time progressed, it became more common for Professor Carrington to introduce himself, possibly due to hesitation on the part of Japanese to introduce themselves to him. He mentioned that this could have been because of either deferential respect for someone visiting from another culture, or hesitation due to perceived lack of language skills on either side.

This too demonstrates *Uchi-Soto*. While there could be many reasons for Japanese to hesitate in beginning interactions with him, part of it is most likely since they simply did not know him. Professor Carrington could be classified in these contexts as *Soto* on many levels: they do not know him personally, he might lack third party connections in some of those later instances, he is neither ethnically nor nationally Japanese, etc.

### ***Considerations for Uncertainty Avoidance***

Two common themes regarding uncertainty avoidance were instances where there are necessary stock phrases for reasons involving etiquette, and expected agreeableness that limited opportunity for conflict or unforeseen circumstances.

Mr. Fowler and Director Akane Yamaguchi mentioned how there are more formalities in Japanese culture, such as when seasonal greetings are necessary at the beginning of written or electronic communications such as letters or emails. This is an example of *Kisetsu*, the Japanese sensitivity to the seasons (Davies, 2002). There is more of an emphasis in Japanese culture

toward seasonal traditions such as celebrations, seasonal foods/clothing, etc. in general, however, its presence in the formulaic introduction of written communication involving mention of the season is an example of required, scripted etiquette used to reduce uncertainty in remedial interactions (Davies, 2002).

Namiko Bagirimvano also mentioned the process of gift giving in Japan as another example. When Japanese exchange gifts, they say certain stock phrases such as, 'I know this is a small gift, but I hope you like it', regardless on the gift itself.

Rachel Strandquist said that there were many times where she was expected to respond agreeably to innocuous questions and comments in an almost scripted format. One example was when her and her colleagues were having lunch and she was asked what her favorite kind of rice was. She replied that she liked Indian rice, which led to what she described as a palpable disappointment from her peers. She says she regrets that response and that small talk had ceased thereafter. Another example she gave like this was when one of her kocho sensei's had begun a conversation with her about how lucky she was to be able to come teach in Japan, emphasizing that Japan was the greatest country in the world. While she had her reservations about his comments, she could tell that she was expected to agree and that not doing so would create unnecessary conflict. These types of expectations to remain agreeable could be examples of high uncertainty avoidance or low assertiveness.

An interesting additional remark Mr. Fowler alone made is that there are no 'cold calls' in Japanese culture, with almost every interaction having a specific intention, (e.g., *Aisatsu*, greetings). However, he also mentioned that certain interactions might be laxer with foreigners since it is assumed that most foreigners are not familiar with such protocols.

The expectation that people will not usually interact unless they have business with each other prevents situations where interdependencies or norms are uncertain, therefore being an example of uncertainty avoidance.

### ***Considerations for Assertiveness and Context Orientation***

Many times, the way interviewees described Japanese as being unassertive in their communication styles was through ambiguous language. However, most respondents said that while they recognize this unassertive communication style as being characteristic of Japanese culture, most still either preferred using an assertive style themselves or said they were unassertive for different reasons. They did, on the other hand, typically attempt to adapt to ambiguous language specifically.

An example Mr. Fowler gave where both cultural traits are prominent is in the way Japanese say 'no.' It is much more common in Japanese culture to express a disagreement indirectly by implying it rather than stating it directly. Common phrases used in these contexts include *Kentoshimasu*, 'will look into it,' or *Wakarimashita*, 'understood.' These phrases are commonly misunderstood because foreigners translate them literally and take them at face value when these phrases might more accurately mean 'no' or 'I hear what you are saying,' respectively.

These are examples of Japanese choosing words with tactful literal translations, or *Tatemaie*, and intended actual meanings, *honne*.

Bagirimvano mentioned a time where a Japanese person from their respective office needed information for a meeting that would happen a few hours after the call. However, he was hesitant to express how soon he needed the information and, as such, Bagirimvano kept

expressing that she would have it for him at times that would be too long. She said that she believes the man felt uncomfortable saying that he needed the information immediately as that would seem to direct and therefore impolite in Japanese culture. In this context, the man had a difficult time expressing how soon he needed the information in a way Bagirimvano could understand. Bagirimvano gave another example of a time where a colleague wanted to send invitations to an invite-only event to Japanese and had asked in the draft of the email for the recipients not to forward it to others. Bagirimvano realized that this might be too direct and that asking Japanese not to forward it might seem rude, so suggested that they simply say that it is an invite-only event, with the recipients inferring that they should not forward the email to others on their own.

These examples demonstrate that, even when speaking English, context orientation is still something professionals must consider and that can cause significant miscommunications. They are also further examples of how some opportunities for said miscommunications begin with a discomfort with being assertive, or the consideration of how being assertive might be deemed rude.

Another example, given by Mwangi, was that often when Mwangi is attempting to create drafts in documents for to organize ideas, many Japanese confuse it for a contract.

Given the previously mentioned cultural preference for accountability through social reciprocity over contractual agreements, this is not surprising. Perhaps those Mwangi has interacted with were attempting to account for what they perceived as a US cultural phenomenon, (reliance on contracts), by attempting to be very clear whether each document was contractual or not. They could have been afraid that it was being implied that something



was contractual without it being explicitly said by Mwangi due to both their own high context cultural backgrounds and cultural competencies they had regarding US culture.

Regarding those who expressed reservations in adapting to an unassertive communication style, Mwangi said that while she recognizes Japanese culture to be less assertive, or as she put it, 'less of a competition', she is still more direct and assertive when interacting with Japanese for the sake of mitigating cultural misunderstandings. Yamaguchi also said that she is more direct, simply because that is her typical style of communication and she would rather mitigate misunderstandings through being direct regardless.

One instance where assertiveness is more tolerable in Japan, where one can be 'softly assertive' in a Japanese cultural context, according to Professor Carrington, is when one is at a restaurant. Unlike in some cultures such as the US or the UK, customers at a restaurant may call upon waiters/waitresses directly without having to imply that they would like assistance with something. Based on this example, it might be that in situations where uncertainty avoidance is especially high regarding people's roles that people can be assertive in these situations. However, this would especially require further evidence to support.

### ***Considerations for Tightness***

All interviewees said that they found it worthwhile to communicate in a culturally sensitive way, however, most provided examples of situations where they either were not able to or opted out of adhering to cultural norms while communicating for various reasons.

Mr. Fowler said he thought it was "very worthwhile". He elaborated saying that although interactions may be laxer regarding protocol when Japanese are interacting with members of a foreign culture, problems still arise because those from the US do not typically communicate in a

culturally mindful way. Usually, he said, Japanese, (and other cultures), tend to see those from the US as brash, direct and lacking tact. With Japan being a tight culture, it is especially important for those interacting with them to try to communicate in a culturally sensitive way.

Mwangi said she felt it was extremely worthwhile, especially in written communication because a lack of perceived tact or cultural competence, she said, can lead to not ever having the opportunity to meet face to face. However, she also said that one difficulty in intercultural communication is adapting to what extent everyone has adapted to other cultures.

Professor Carrington said he found it very worthwhile, stating that it is not only a matter of respect but also a matter of productivity and efficiency, often being the only way to find the path of least resistance. However, he also mentioned that cultural humility is often required in equal or greater measure than cultural competence as there will always be exceptions to the norm. Moreover, he elaborated that there are different expectations for foreigners and minority groups than there are for Japanese, and even different expectations amongst foreigners themselves.

Bagirimvano said that while she saw it as worthwhile, it is still important to express one's own culture and to be able to laugh at oneself in the face of cultural blunders rather than being discouraged by them.

Rachel Strandquist gave a similar sentiment, saying that although she finds it worthwhile, she also sees a responsibility for herself to introduce new ways of doing things to those she encounters from other cultures. Furthermore, she said that she learned to not take it to personally when she embarrassed herself as she saw it as inevitable when interacting with people from another culture. She also said that she enjoyed eliciting shocked responses and

challenging cultural conventions to an extent. Finally, she said that while she tried to adhere to cultural norms, she also made compromises and deliberately rebelled at times. One of her Kocho Sensei's was much shorter than she was, and thus it was harder for her to bow lower than him. To remedy this, she compromised by often bowing to him from a chair. She also frequently mentioned that her and her boyfriend shared in household tasks when confronted with the presence of women doing remedial tasks for men. However, when she discovered that it was deemed unacceptable to show her lower back in public, she conformed to those norms.

### **Conclusion**

Japanese culture often maintains collective harmony through using tight social norms and institutions to reduce uncertain situations. This is achieved through creating the expectation that its members will communicate in an unassertive way through agreeable, indirect communication. All interviewees recognized at least some of these dimensions even if they did not mention the underlying theory. However, most expressed that they did not appeal to collective interests, change their own mode of communication to an unassertive one, or adhere to cultural norms without reservations. Interviewees did however demonstrate that most of them recognized patterns in Japanese manners and speech that allowed them to better detect intended meanings when communication was ambiguous. Most interviewees also expressed a moderate adaption to uncertainty avoidance through recognition of expected phrases and manners. Based on these results, to practice better intercultural communication with Japanese, I recommend that professionals recognize cultural dimensions theory, emphasizing context orientation, and employ cultural humility.

Beginning with recognizing the theory allows professionals to not only start to be more aware of their current competencies, but also to be able to better recognize patterns they witness with specific dimensions to bear in mind to help build new competencies. Since context orientation was the most prominent dimension recognized and considered by professionals, emphasizing it may better prepare these professionals or others for perhaps one of the most common cultural mishaps occurring in similar situations.

Finally, although the purpose of this research was to highlight the considerations of cultural competencies by professionals in certain institutions, their responses brought to the forefront an additional way of practicing better intercultural communication: cultural humility. While cultural dimensions can be valuable tools in building cultural competency, they are limited by the extent to which each individual and circumstance adheres to the perceived cultural differences they highlight. Often there will be exceptions to these generalizations, even in largely homogeneous cultures like Japan. Moreover, always acting in a way that accommodates to another's perceived cultural traits stifles opportunities for expressing one's own culture, which may be received positively otherwise. In the end, one who is interacting with those from other cultures must sometimes allow those from those cultures to teach them what they thought they knew.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Guide

- I. Opening
  - a. Establish Rapport
    - i. Shake Hands
    - ii. It is a pleasure to finally meet you \_\_\_\_, I appreciate you giving me your time.
  - b. Purpose
    - i. I would like to ask some questions about how you communicate effectively with people from Japan.
  - c. Motivation
    - i. I hope to use this information to summarize what professionals consider when practicing intercultural communication in a number of organizations.
  - d. Time-Line
    - i. This interview should take about thirty minutes, is that alright with you?

**Transition: Shall we begin?**

- II. Body
  - a. Icebreakers
    - i. How long have you been working with this organization?
    - ii. How long have you worked with people from Japan?

**Transition: Now, I'd like to ask specifically about when you interact with organizations.**

- a. Collectivism
  - iii. When addressing an organization from Japan, do you more often address individuals or the group as a whole?
    - 1. Clarification: Do you speak as if the organization is the audience, (e.g. your organization/your department, etc.), or as if the individual recipient is the sole audience?

○

**Transition: Moving on, I'd like to talk about how a typical interaction is structured.**

- b. Uncertainty Avoidance
  - iv. When communicating, how scripted are your interactions?
    - 1. Clarification: When you are communicating with someone, how often do you feel there are prescribed responses or gestures that would be most appropriate, as opposed to it being appropriate to decide how to respond?

**Transition: Now that we've gone over scripted interactions, I'd like to ask a few questions about more open ones.**

- c. Context Orientation

- a. Outside of potential language barriers, is there ever any difficulty understanding what the other party is attempting to say?
- d. Assertiveness
  - v. How assertive are you in your communications?
    - 1. Clarification: Do you typically speak frankly and openly, as well as provide input whenever you think it would be beneficial, or do you rather withhold from being direct during your interactions?
      - a. Follow up: How often are you this assertive in these communications?
      - b. Follow up: Could you provide an example of a time where you were this assertive and the result in that instance?

**Transition: Just to wrap things up, I'd like to ask about your methods for interacting on a broader level now.**

- e. Tightness
  - a. To what extent do you think it worthwhile to communicate in a culturally sensitive way?

**Transition: That's all the questions I wanted to ask.**

### III. Closing

- a. Summarize
  - i. From what I gather, the key principles you consider when communicating with those from Japan are: \_\_\_\_\_
  - ii. Am I correct in that?
- b. Maintain Rapport
  - i. Thank you again for allowing me to interview you!
  - ii. Is there anything that has come to mind you think would be applicable to our conversation?
- c. Action to be Taken
  - i. Thanks again.
  - ii. [exchange business cards]
  - iii. Would it be alright if I Email you with any additional questions?