

# Cross-Cultural Experiences of Americans Staying in Japan

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## Abstract

この論文において、著者は日本に滞在しているアメリカ人13名にインタビューを行い、彼らが日本人にたいしてどのように考えているのか、また日本での異文化体験をどのようにみているのかを分析した。彼らによれば、相手の年齢や社会的地位によって、適切な敬語を使い分けるのは至難の業であることや、また自分たちが外人であることを日本人から思い知らされる機会がよくあることが判明した。また著者はヨーロッパ系アメリカ人が日本の社会で享受する外国人としての特権をも分析した。

## I. Introduction

I have spent about eight years as a graduate student in the United States, and I have had many interesting but sometimes puzzling experiences over there. For example, when I went to a bank near the university where I studied, a banker's attitude was not nice and I felt a bit insulted by her impolite behavior. When she did not hear me, she reacted that I should have spoken better English. At first, I thought that she did not like a foreigner like me, but my guess was wrong. After me another customer had some transactions with her, and her attitude remained the same, which was not polite enough to meet any customers. It was difficult to figure out what factors affected the clerk's attitude, but I was very aware of my Asian identity when I went out in the United States because everyone else but me was usually non-Asian people.

When I returned to Japan from the United States after a long seclusion from Japanese environment, I wonder if people from abroad would have the same experience as I had or not in Japan. In addition, I would like to know how Americans living in Japan see Japanese people and how they experience their lives in Japan. I also think that it might be very interesting to compare my experiences in the United

States with their experiences in Japan. Luckily, I have had chances to meet Americans in Japan, and I interviewed them when they were willing to talk about their cross-cultural experiences.

In this paper I will investigate how Americans staying in Japan experience their lives and how they think about Japanese people with whom they interact. In addition, I would like to compare my experiences in the United States with their experiences and analyze similarities and differences of cross-cultural experiences in the two different circumstances.

## II. Data Collection and Method

I have interviewed thirteen Americans living or staying in Japan. Twelve of them are European Americans and one is an African American. Out of thirteen three people were working in Tokyo at the time of interviews, though one of the three left Japan for the United States permanently right after the interview. Two people are working in Nagoya, and eight people are students who studied in Japan, all of who have already returned to the United States after I interviewed them. The purpose of their coming to Japan is mainly to study Japanese language. Four students stayed in Japan for five months and four students stayed in Japan for ten months.

The initial contact with Japan and Japanese people and language varies. Many interviewees told me that they would like to do something different from what others around them did. For example, they picked up Japanese language because Japanese is the language that others do not study at college. They also mentioned that they decided to go to Japan because they wanted to do something different from what other college students or college graduates do. A few of them had already absorbed themselves in Japanese culture such as animation and martial arts before deciding to study abroad or taking a job in Japan, but most of them were not so interested in Japan before coming to Japan.

Interviewees freely talk about their experiences at ease. It is very important in qualitative research that interviewees feel comfortable revealing what they have in their minds (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Each interview lasted for one hour or more. I had a set of questions to ask them, and many of the questions were concerned with their cross-cultural experiences in Japan. I let interviewees talk about what they want to say freely, so our conversation sometimes went off on a tangent, but the topics that they talked about, most of the time, were somehow related with the questions that I asked them.

To interview is not just elicit bits and pieces of experiences from one's memory. Rather, a researcher interprets and constructs the world that an interviewer and an interviewee can perceive and share (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; McCracken, 1988). In other words, to interview a person leads to meaning-making activities. My interviewees are exposed to Japanese people and society with the background of American culture while I am a native-born Japanese with the background of American higher education. Therefore, to interview for me is to draw out experiences of Americans living in Japan and to constantly analyze them from my points of view. Simultaneously, my interviewees frequently reflected upon their experiences, interpret them and make them explicit while being interviewed.

I have analyzed the interview data by categorizing and coding them. In particular, I constantly compare interviewees' experiences in Japan and my experiences in the United States. It is essential that a researcher is familiar with both Japan and the United States in this study because without the knowledge of the both societies and cultures, it is very difficult to interpret the interview data full of cross-cultural experiences.

However, as Feldman (1995) suggests, it is of great significance to get away from the conventional understanding of another culture based on the knowledge of the both societies and to reach new understanding of the phenomena presented by the interviewees. I interpret their experiences based on my experiences in the United States and the knowledge of Japan and the United States, but I tried to understand their experiences from their points of view. I pay particular attention to their experiences that I had some difficulty understanding so that I can reach some new understanding. I would like to add that in this paper all the interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

### III. Communication Style

Interviewees have some images of Japan before coming to Japan because they studied Japanese language and Japanese culture more or less in the United States. They usually have stereotypes of Japanese people. One of them is that Japanese are reserved and hesitate to express their feelings. Another is that Japanese are polite and kind. Compared with Americans you can say that Japanese have these characteristics, but of course there are so many Japanese who do not fit into these characteristics. And yet, since American interviewees had hardly interacted with Japanese intimately, they tend to have these stereotypes.

There are three aspects of communication that the American interviewees think distinctive to Japanese people. One is the degree to which emotion can be expressed in a private space. Many American interviewees were surprised to witness how expressive Japanese people were at home. They initially thought that Japanese people would be quiet and shy and that Japanese would not show their emotion. In fact, when they use public transportation, they notice that many people did not talk with each other in a train, and most of the passengers were very quiet, either reading a newspaper, a magazine, or keeping quiet without doing anything. Their observations reinforce that Japanese are quiet.

Japanese people, in general, are constrained to express their emotion such as affection and anger in a public space. Younger people are less constrained to express their feelings in a public place, but it is still rare that they complain about bad service at a first food restaurant or a hotel. There are two reasons why Japanese people tend to keep quiet unless it is absolutely necessary to make a complaint. One reason is that most Japanese, I would think, have someone-watching-you-all-the-time feeling. In other words, there is social pressure on what you should do and what you are not supposed to do in a public space, and showing anger and affection publicly is considered a bad manner. The other reason is that good service is usually available at a restaurant, a department store, a convenient store, a hotel, and a bank, wherever people go. Therefore, it is natural that people do not complain about the service, which is usually good.

However, when the Americans spend an extensive period of time with their Japanese host family, they notice that their host mother and father or son or daughter show feelings that they would not expect to see. They were very surprised to see the Japanese around them expressing emotion freely. Madison, a college student studying Japanese, said that he was relieved because he came to understand that Japanese host family with whom he spend a lot of time are the same human beings as he is.

Americans, as far as I have observed, do not hesitate to express their feelings frankly in a public space. This is a very different attitude of Americans from Japanese people. When they do not satisfied with service at a hotel in the United States, they go to the front desk and complain about the bad service

straight away. I witnessed that a guest complained about inconvenience that caused him a trouble to the front desk in Providence, Connecticut. The way he complained was to harshly accuse a hotel staff and it was like quarreling with the staff. I was a bit scared by his attitude. I have experienced the similar situation in a public place such as a hotel, a station, a grocery store, and a bank many times in the United States.

Another distinctive aspect of communication in Japan is a striking difference between what is expressed verbally and what is actually meant. The American interviewees expect to understand what is said at face value in the same way as they do in the United States, but they are at first often puzzled by the fact that what people said is often different from what people intended to say. For example, when Christopher, a college student studying Japanese language, visited his female American friend in a dormitory in Japan, a Japanese friend of this American female student living in the dormitory said that she would not mind if other people entered the shared living room. At first, Christopher wanted to celebrate his female friend's birthday and to have a good time with her. However, after a while the Japanese female student was very upset because she knew that the dormitory's regulations would not allow any guests to enter the shared living room and she expected her American roommate to follow the regulations. Christopher should have met his female friend at a meeting room on the first floor. Christopher and his American friend felt strange about the Japanese student's upset because they got permission from this student at first. In this case, this Japanese student wanted to be nice to her roommate and Christopher and told them the opposite of what she wanted to say. As Nakane (1972) points out, verbal expressions are a means of communication in Japan, but they do not necessarily deliver what they intended to say.

As this incident may suggest, it is a gradual process to shift from what a person says as nice words in order to smooth communication to what he or she intends to say. In other words, Japanese people do not tell others what they want others to understand. Instead, they imply what they want to say and let interlocutors guess it. In this way they avoid direct confrontation when they have to say something that may hurt others' feelings. As Christopher said: "Japanese do not tell you right away." Ruth Benedict (1967) indicated more than fifty years ago that Japanese tried to avoid direct confrontation whenever possible and they have some means to do this. Hinting at what they want to say is one of them.

By contrast, Japanese people expect Americans to share their personal issues in a cozy setting like a homestay situation. Linda, a college student, told me that her host mother asked her when she had had a period after coming to Japan because her host mother thought that Linda did not seem to be so happy. Linda was shocked to hear the question because her real mother had never asked her this kind of question directly. To ask when she had a period is a very personal question, and Americans respect other's private domains. Therefore, Linda thought that her privacy was invaded and disrespected. On the other hand, when Japanese ask personal questions, this indicates that the Japanese try to narrow the distance between themselves and interlocutors. In other words, to ask personal questions show intimacy with the interlocutors. I have learned the fact that it is offensive to make a comment on one's body shape, particularly on female's plump body in the United States. Body belongs to a personal domain in the United States. Interestingly enough, in Japan when you make a comment on one's body as a part of greeting, you show some intimacy with the person that you meet. Unless you feel close to the person, you do not mention the shape of one's body, but many Japanese refer to the other's body as a part of greeting words such as "Long time no see, but you became fat, didn't you."

The third aspect of communication that many American interviewees think characteristic to Japanese is that various signifiers of a person such as gender, age, and social status affect communication style. Most of them are not so aware of subtleties of Japanese language that people use depending on a situation, but they are conscious of the different ways in which women and men talk. At the end of a sentence men and women use a different word, and it is not so difficult to recognize the difference.

However, it is extremely difficult for Americans studying Japanese to recognize the factors affecting a register of Japanese language. One's self and language are closely related. Japanese self is constructed contextually. For example, "I" in Japanese is embedded in a social context. Depending on a relationship with others, Japanese people use different types of "I." Or Japanese often omit to say "I" in conversation because the subject of a sentence is contextually assumed (Lebra, 1993). Likewise, the identity of interlocutors is constructed multiply, and depending on your relationship with them and their gender, social status, occupation, age, you have to use an appropriate level of honorific or polite words. Age is definitely an important factor in communication. In general, when you talk with someone who is older than you, you should use polite words. And yet, many Americans are not sure of how polite they should be in the choices of words. As Hendry (1999) indicates in her book, to understand *keigo* (honorific words) is extremely difficult for non-native Japanese speakers, mainly because they do not know which signifiers they should consider most or less in using honorific words. In this case, they avoid using honorific words whenever possible or try to use the most honorific words most of the time.

#### IV. Cultural Expectations of Japanese on Americans

Now I move on to another theme that recurrently appears in the interview data. All American interviewees are aware that they are a *gaijin* (a foreigner) in Japan. There are a couple of incidents that they repeatedly experience that make them an outsider of Japanese society. First, Japanese people whom they meet usually talk to them in English. Japanese people make an assumption that Westerners cannot speak Japanese and are obliged to speak to them in English. American students who study Japanese sometimes wonder why people talk to them in English all the time on campus or in the street. The most frustrated person by this Japanese people's attitude is Todd who is a fluent speaker of Japanese. He had stayed in Japan for more than ten years, but he has never been spoken by people in Japanese except one incident in which an old woman falling off a bicycle told him "thank you" in Japanese when he helped her in a dark street. He told me that probably the old woman did not recognize that he was a foreigner because of the darkness. He also told me that he was very frustrated when people make an assumption that he does not understand Japanese at all. With his Japanese friend, people talk to his friend in Japanese but never talk to him in Japanese. Blatantly, he said that many Japanese "make sure that I was a *gaijin*."

In the United States, people make an assumption that others understand English regardless of ethnicity and appearances. When I walked in the street in New York City, an old lady asked me how she could go to a bank. I was not familiar with the geography of the place where I walked, so I told her that I was a traveler and I could not lead her to a place where she wanted to go. At that time I was very surprised that I was asked for the direction because I would never ask a foreigner how to get to a certain place in Japan. It seemed obvious to me that non-Japanese people were not familiar with local geography. Since there are many ethnic groups living in the United States, Americans do not make an assumption that

ethnic identity indicates a specific language that a person use daily.

Another instance that many interviewees experience is that Japanese people avoid taking a seat next to them although there is an empty seat next to them. This kind of incident happens in a bus, a train, and a subway. Even when a bus or a train is crowded, they witnessed that an empty seat next to them was not taken. Most of them do not mind if other Japanese do not sit next to them, but they are very aware that Japanese people consider them outsiders.

Japanese people make a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders (Nakane, 1967). When you are a member of a community or a group, you feel comfortable and have access to resources. For people from abroad, to be an insider is a good way of making things go smoothly. Bruce, an African American who spent fifteen years in Japan observed that once he “became a member, things became a lot easier.” He invested a lot of energy and a lot of time to be a member of the community where he lived, and now he knows people in the neighborhood. He paid dues for local festivals and felt comfortable with local people.

Many American interviewees also indicated that Japanese often stared at them in a public place. Some Japanese children called them a *gaijin*, and they often feel that they were ridiculed or made fun of by the young people. Other Japanese silently stared at them for a longer period of time out of curiosity. Linda told me that Japanese often stared at her in a subway because she was taller than average Japanese women and her hair is blond. Since she understands Japanese fairly well, she knows what other Japanese people talk about while staring at her. She said that most of the time Japanese people talked about her long leg, her blond hair, and her height. What they talk about is nothing offensive, but she felt as if she were a target of their curiosity.

Being a foreigner sometime causes American interviewees to feel uncomfortable, but there are some advantages of being a native speaker of English and of being an American in Japan. Todd called the advantages “*gaijin* privileges.” One of the *gaijin* privileges is that Americans can have special treatments because they are European Americans whose native language is English. For example, it is easy for American students staying in Japan to get a part-time job of teaching English privately. Japanese people are willing to pay money for a native speaker of English. On the other hand, for Asian Americans it is harder to get a part-time teaching job because their English is not considered authentic. This is a funny notion of authenticity of English language that most Japanese still hold. I have not had a chance of interviewing Asian Americans, but some interviewees reported that their friends who were Asian Americans had some difficulty finding an English-teaching job even though their friends were native speakers of English.

As I indicated before, Japanese people make an assumption that European-looking people do not understand Japanese at all. When people from abroad have some troubles, Japanese people show very generous and kind attitude. For instance, when Polina, who is a college student, got lost and asked a Japanese to show how to get to the station, the Japanese accompanied her to the station. She was very impressed by the person’s kindness because in the United States people just indicate how to get to the place and they never walk together to the destination. Polina thinks that this is a special treatment in Japan and some other Americans had a similar experience.

There are *gaisen* (a short form for *gaijin senmon*) who only like to associate with Western-looking people whose native language is English. They just want to speak English and do not want to talk about Japan and Japanese people at all. Many interviewees told me that their male American friends had a

romantic relationship with Japanese women. According to Todd, there had been many occasions in which American male students easily get a Japanese girl friend. Daniel, a college student, also thought some of Westerners take advantage of their ethnic identity, having a relationship with a Japanese woman. He even mentioned that some male international students from Western countries come to Japan to get a Japanese girlfriend.

By sharp contrast, American women had hardly had a romantic relationship with a Japanese man. They either have an American boyfriend or are not interested in Asian men. In addition, most of Japanese men have inferior complex to American women and they are not willing to socialize themselves with American women.

## V. Conclusion

Through this research I found that Japanese people make a lot of assumptions about Americans staying in Japan. The most conspicuous one is that foreign-looking people do not speak and understand Japanese. When I learned this fact, I thought that Japan was not an open society. Japanese society has a tendency to homogenize people with different backgrounds (Nakane, 1978). And yet when a person does not share the same or similar ethnic background as Japanese, he or she is positioned as an outsider and is excluded from a community unless he or she invests a lot of energy and time to be a member of a community. We Japanese should not make an assumption that foreign-looking people do not understand Japanese at all. Todd, who is a fluent speaker of Japanese, told me that he often pretended not to understand Japanese because Japanese people treat Western-looking guys with no ability to speak Japanese better than those who speak Japanese. From his perspective, Japanese people have unhealthy and skewed perception of Europeans or European Americans. I hope that many Japanese will treat Westerners less admirably and more openly in the near future.

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