

**We didn't expect that:
an experience in cross-cultural interaction
from an Australian perspective**

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Abstract

This paper reports, from the perspective of a group of Australian business management students, on an intercultural interaction involving groups of Australian and Japanese students over a four week period. The study was designed to help us understand how interculturally naive students reason about intercultural interactions. We identified those episodes in the interaction which surprised, or conflicted with the expectations of, the Australian students. We identified six surprises. The Australian students were surprised (1) at the level of intimacy of self disclosure in the written biographies of the Japanese students (2) that they might have to deal with “sensitive issues”, or potentially embarrassing information, in the relationship (3) that stereotypes do not necessarily reflect reality (4) at the difficulty of conducting verbal interactions across language barriers, particularly in the context of the positive expectations created by the written interaction (5) at how power operates in such relationships and (6) the level of interest of Japanese students in Australia. We suggest a concern with equity may underpin the reasoning of the Australian students.

Introduction

In management education there is an increasing emphasis on managers developing intercultural competence (see e.g. Adler 1992; Lane and DiStefano 1992; Lustig and Koester 1993). For the most part intercultural competence means learning to appreciate both the similarities and differences between cultures and being able to develop synergistic cultures (Adler 1980). Intercultural competence is indicated because of the need to develop business and social relationships in a global market context and because of the increasing diversity of cultures within national borders. Australia, for example, is one of the most multicultural nations, if not the most multicultural nation, on Earth. In addition, Australia is a relatively small economy and business will depend on the ability of managers to develop and sustain cross-cultural business partnerships.

Despite this need, the opportunities for intensive cross-cultural experience can be limited. For example, it is possible for people to avoid or not exploit the opportunities for intercultural contact within their own society. In addition, it is often difficult, because of time and cost considerations, for aspiring managers to travel to other cultures to gain the sort of experience which would help them develop an appreciation of similarities and differences between cultures. However, the view taken by many educators is that learning is enhanced if students (and teaching staff) get to experience such interactions directly and have the opportunity to reflect on and conceptualise the experience (e.g. Kolb 1984).

This article provides an account of the learning of a group of undergraduate Australian business students (located in Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia) involved in mediated interaction with a group of undergraduate Japanese students (located in Nihon Fukushi University (NFU), Japan). We were interested in two related issues (a) how do interculturally naive students reason about intercultural relationships and (b) what, to the students involved, constitutes a good intercultural relationship. To gain some insight into how the Australian students were reasoning about the interaction we focused on those episodes which surprised, or conflicted with the expectations of, the Australian students. We reasoned that these episodes would carry in them the greatest opportunities for learning about differences and similarities between Japanese and Australians.

The study was small in scope and of limited duration. Nevertheless, we consider our experience in this activity is worth reporting, if for no other reason than that most intercultural research focuses on the relationship between Japanese and North Americans. It is often assumed that the findings of this research can be extrapolated to the relationship between Japanese and Australians. Many, including the students involved in this study, question this assumption.

Also because of the scope of the study no attempt has been made here to provide a comprehensive link with the extensive literature on intercultural relations. Rather, we will let the experiences of the students involved speak for themselves.

Method

Participants

The Australian participants in this study were members of an undergraduate Faculty of Business unit in Interorganisational Relations at the Queensland University of Technology. All of the Australians who participated were mature age students; ages ranged from 24 years to 43 years. The average age of the group was 33.54 years. There were 8 females and 3 males. One female Australian student had a basic knowledge of a small number of Japanese words. She was taking a course in basic Japanese. The remainder of the Australian students had no knowledge of the Japanese language. None of the students had ever visited Japan or any other Asian country.

Thirteen students, 11 females and 2 males, of the Nihon Fukushi University, Nagoya, Japan participated in the exchange. Eleven students were studying Social Welfare and two students were studying Business. The average age of the Japanese students was 21.

Interaction Task

For purposes of discussion we will consider the interaction task in three phases; an introductions phase, a information exchange phase, and a direct contact phase.

Introductions phase:

In the introductions phase the students exchanged, by facsimile, biographical information and a photograph of themselves. The object of managed introductions is to increase self disclosure thereby reducing social distance and uncertainty, achieving rapport and facilitating ongoing task interaction (e.g. Johnson 1986).

Information exchange phase:

In this phase students were asked to search the recent popular press to find news stories or articles on the other country. These news articles were copied and students commented on them in terms of what they implied about members of the other nation. Copies of the news articles with the associated comments were faxed to the other campus and discussed at the weekly class. At this class students prepared a response to the comments made by the other group with a view to clarifying, elaborating, critiquing and so on. These reactions were also faxed to the other campus. It was expected that the students would have the opportunity to get feedback on their assumptions about members of the other cultural group.

Direct contact phase:

In the direct contact phase a two-hour videophone link was arranged between the two groups. A videophone consists of a telephone handset and a TV monitor with inbuilt camera. By pressing a button on the monitor a still image of the speaker can be transmitted to the receiver. It is not possible to talk and send images simultaneously. Once an image has been transmitted conversation has to be delayed until the image has been transmitted.

The purpose of this link was to allow direct interpersonal contact between selected members of the two groups. Not all students participated in the videophone link. Typically, the part time Australian students had work commitments and were not available to attend University during the day. Four of the Australian students (two female and two male, all mature age) took part in the videophone link.

The videophone exchange was videotaped and later replayed in class to provide a basis for class discussion.

The Australian students then wrote an essay (for assessment) on their experience of interacting collaboratively with members of the other group. These essays were written by small groups rather than individuals. It was expected that small group work would facilitate exchange of experiences and contribute to learning.

To prepare this essay the Australian students were asked to use data derived from written communications with the Japanese students, from the videophone link, and from their own feelings and perceptions of the interactions during the project.

The data for this paper are drawn from these essays and from the perceptions/ observations of staff members from both Japan and Australia. For the purposes of analysis only evidence which the students experienced directly is used. That is, any conclusions drawn from academic sources has been excluded from the analysis.

Results

The data produced by the Australian students in their essays are discussed in the context of the episodes which the Australian students found surprising in the interaction. It should be pointed out that we were concerned with the perceptions of the Australian students. Whether these perceptions were accurate or not was of less concern than how they reasoned about these issues.

Surprise 1:

The intimacy of self disclosure in the written biographies of the Japanese students.

The Australian students were all very surprised at the extent to which the Japanese students self disclosed to strangers in their written biographies. This level of self disclosure was in sharp contrast to their own much less intimate and revealing biographies. The Japanese biographies created a strong positive impression on the Australian students and had a significant impact on their emotional involvement in the interaction task, an outcome consistent with the importance of positive first impressions in facilitating and maintaining the ongoing relationship (Hamachek 1982).

It should be pointed out that the Australian reaction to the written biographies was in sharp contrast with their reaction to the verbal interaction on the videophone. The videophone interaction, which will be outlined later, was much less satisfying due mostly to the perceived reluctance of the Japanese students to communicate. Indeed, this contrast between written and verbal communications was probably the most potent experience for the Australians. Certainly the written communications led them to expect a much more rewarding verbal interaction than was to be the case.

Some comments from the Australian student reports will illustrate the point, but, unfortunately, these comments do not give much indication of the emotional impact of the Japanese biographies on the Australian students.

One group indicated that the Japanese students provided more personal information than we did...[they] mentioned their dreams, blood type, families, travel interests, study, and sporting activities. [We mentioned] houses, pets, family members, work and study.

Another group noted the reluctance of the NFU students to be talkative during telephone conversations with our students.....In contrast, when the Japanese students wrote to us, their notes were quite personal in tone, much more so than ours were. In this respect they did not treat us as strangers.

Both of the other learning groups also noted the contrast between the tone of the Japanese and Australian biographies.

There were attempts by the Australian students to explain the contrast between their own and the Japanese biographies. The consensus seemed to be that age differences explained the differences, rather than cultural differences per se. One group referred to "age and life experience"

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another to the “youthfulness of the students and the relative informality of their university life”. It is possible, however, that Australians and Japanese differ, culturally, in their preference of medium for communicating personal information to strangers.

As indicated above the written biographies of the Japanese students had a strong positive impact on the Australian students and highlighted the sharp contrast between the personal nature of the Japanese biographies and their own impersonal ones. Indeed, the Australian students subsequently sent additional, and more personal information about themselves to their Japanese colleagues.

Surprise 2:

How do we deal with “sensitive” information?

The Australian students did not anticipate that they might have to deal with “negative” information about the other society. The issue the Australians had to address was what to do with such information. Three issues of this sort were identified in the search of the Australian popular press; racism, sexism, and Australians’ experience of Japan during World War II (which is still mentioned regularly in Australian newspapers). It seems unlikely that potentially “hot” issues can be ignored in developing and maintaining collaborative intercultural relationships.

One group suggested that self censorship is necessary:

..the greatest challenge is controlling emotional responses, and consequently behavioural responses to issues such as racism and sexism in a different culture, when, in your own culture it would be acceptable (even if not particularly welcome) to express your thoughts and feelings about discrimination and prejudice.

A second group chose to comment directly on a newspaper report about allegations of corruption in Japanese business:

While the Japanese students agree that corruption exists in the Japanese business world, the concept that the ethics of their business people are lower or questionable was not agreeable to them.

They further commented:

From a western context some of these relationships begin to seem unethical, but to judge one culture from the context of another is not the way to determine good from bad, merely to highlight differences.

In both cases the discussion remained superficial, due, we suspect to some anxiety about addressing such issues. However, this might have been an important opportunity to get a better cross-cultural understanding of this issue, particularly given the cases of corruption in Australian government and business circles in recent years.

Dealing with potentially embarrassing issues in the context of intercultural relations seems a particularly important area for future research. Firstly, there is a need to determine when it is appropriate and when it is inappropriate to address such issues. Secondly, there is a need to identify strategies for dealing with such issues and for determining what impact this has on the relationship. It would seem important to manage these communications in such a way that those involved get a deeper appreciation of the issues without reinforcing private and untested attributions about the other group.

Surprise 3:

Stereotypes do not necessarily reflect reality

Prior to the beginning of the interaction with Japanese students the Australians generated a list of characteristics which they assumed reflected Japanese society. This list contained such items as "hierarchical", "strong tradition", "group-oriented rather than individual oriented". The process of exchanging impressions of Japanese society, based on newspaper articles, provided the Australian students with an opportunity to question some of these prior assumptions about Japanese.

For example, the Australian students assumed that Japanese have stronger cultural beliefs and values which they were less willing to change than would Australians. They came to question this view because the Japanese students indicated a "willingness of their people to accept new technology and change, easily displacing past practices."

In addition, the Australian students initially assumed, quite naively, that "the Japanese students would identify themselves as part of a group rather than as individuals". "Certainly the amount of information conveyed by the students concerning themselves outlined earlier suggests that this concept of their society may not operate in the simple way we had initially inferred".

It should be pointed out that the Japanese students learned much less about Australia during the exchange of faxes. Australia was not well featured in the Japanese popular press, other than as a leisure destination. This view of Australia as a leisure destination is reinforced by the Report of Japanese Travel Bureau, 1994 where it was indicated that Australia was the most preferred destination for Japanese tourists during 1992 and 1993.

Surprise 4:

Written exchange is great, verbal exchange is difficult

The Australian students found the written exchanges with the Japanese students rewarding and they were looking forward, tinged with a little anxiety, to the prospect of speaking directly to them on the videophone. They were surprised to find the verbal exchange awkward, slow, and frustrating, particularly during the time the Australian male students were involved.

During the videophone interaction there were long and frequent silences from the Japanese students after the Australian, particularly male, students spoke and sometimes the female Japanese students were "reduced to giggles". Furthermore, the Japanese students tended to use the time on the videophone to ask questions of the Australian students. This tended to result in a one-way, question - answer, interaction.

The interaction was not altogether problematic however. An interesting contrast emerged between the interaction effectiveness of the two Australian males involved in the videophone

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interaction and that of one of the female Australians. The female student, who was able to use some basic Japanese words, was seen to be far more effective than the males.

The problematic nature of this interaction led to a great deal of theorising by the Australian students. The problems experienced were linked to the intergroup differentials of age, gender, culture and language, as well as the limited nonverbal information available, the lack of time available to establish the relationship, the limitations inherent in the videophone technology as well as their unfamiliarity with it.

Two mature-aged males and two mature-aged females were involved in the videophone interaction. The two males were the first and last speakers. Neither was seen to be particularly effective. The first male (male 1) speaker "received a very disjointed communication with the students". The second male (male 2) also experienced difficulty in his conversation with the Japanese students. There were long silences and occasional "giggles". Both of these speakers appeared to find the long silences frustrating and sought to fill the silence by frequently checking to see whether they had been heard or whether they should repeat their message.

Both of the female students appeared to handle the interaction more effectively. One of the female students (female 1) is very outgoing. She was studying basic Japanese language and was able to use some basic Japanese (e.g. saying hello - moshi moshi). The Japanese reaction to her efforts was strong and positive. The tension which appeared to characterise the interaction to that point was reduced significantly and the Japanese students became far more talkative.

The difficulties experienced by the two males were seen to be a product of their use of language, their age, and their gender. In terms of language the first male was seen to have used "colloquialisms that caused confusion in the translation of his statements". He was also seen to have used "phrases within his statements and questions that caused the statements/questions to become unclear in meaning. This was principally because the audience lacked the knowledge of the cultural norms of [the speaker's] society".

The problems the males experienced were also attributed to their gender, "male/female differences, which again indicated a cultural context difference":

The response of the young females in the group of Japanese reflected embarrassment and self-consciousness. This would be consistent with the young females lacking a norm for communication with this young male stranger of another culture, as opposed to the older male/authority figure depicted by [males 1's] age and deeper voice.

This student group (all of whom were involved in the videophone interaction) concluded that "...younger Japanese students were quite shy with the older Australian students" and that "it was also evident that the female Japanese students were quite self conscious and shy when speaking with older male Australian students". Both of these points (i.e. the impacts of age and gender differences) were linked to cultural differences; "obviously there were vast differences in the cultures of the Japanese students and the Australian group":

In contrast, female 1 received a warm reception for her attempts to communicate in Japanese. The students were keen to hear more of her attempts at speaking their language and this formed the basis of a free flowing interaction.

A second group also suggested that the problems experienced by the male Australians occurred because the Japanese female students "apparently found it difficult to communicate with our male students" and that they were "intimidated by" "significant age differences", "the informality of the interaction" and "language barriers (i.e. jargon, colloquialism, speed)" and that "it conflicted with their conversational norms".

They further suggested that the female-female interaction was "more comfortable" yet gave what could be a gender neutral explanation; that female 1 understood "the need to speak slowly, to use simplistic language". Underlying these attributions was a belief that in Japanese society there is a "strong hierarchical structure which extends from their family life into their work life" and that women have a "subservient role to men in Japan". The Australian students assumed, therefore, that intragender communication is likely to be more effective than is intergender communication.

A third group saw the problem in terms of language:

It seemed that the Japanese students were quite reserved when they spoke to us, not least because they were coping with a foreign language. This may have exacerbated the tendency of our speakers to display our more outgoing national persona, by talking quickly, quite loudly, and enthusiastically. Possibly this situation typifies relationships (in their initial stages) between Japanese and Australian people... Had we the opportunity to extend the relationship with the NFU students further, this may have led to dissatisfaction on their part with the amount of effort that they put into the exchanges, especially compared to the benefits they were gaining.

It seems this latter view of the cause of the difficulties is more consistent with the Japanese view of the interaction. Gender, age, and hierarchical structure were not seen by the Japanese students to be the main reason for the difficulties they experienced. Instead, the problem for these students was language, exacerbated by a lack of familiarity with Australian English. In Japan, American English is taught. The Australian accent proved problematic.

The problems in the verbal interaction were also attributed to a lack of nonverbal information. The specific problems caused by the lack of nonverbal information were not specified but it is assumed that they relate to the long silences which often seemed to follow statements made by the Australian students. These students were not able to determine whether the silences were linked to technical difficulties, to a lack of comprehension, or that the Japanese students simply did not hear what the Australian students said. One group stated that the lack of nonverbal information...

places greater emphasis on the language component of the communication. As such the translation of language is never complete, as language is based upon the norms of the society of that culture there are differences in the perception of the message in the decoding.

The problems in the verbal interaction were also attributed to the videophone technology. The technology did not allow simultaneous speech communication and image transmission. As

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there was some attraction to sending images the result was "poor, disjointed transmission" and "frustration with the technology". "The technology at once created a physical problem to be overcome and provided a side-issue to distract the communication from the goal of the communication."

One group concluded...

that the single most important feature of communications technology must be dependability and ease of use...An example of this was that written communication seemed to achieve much more, much more efficiently than the verbal sessions. However, the empathy gained through the verbal sessions did show that they were valuable despite the little task progress made.

The lack of time "to really get to know the Japanese class" was also offered as an explanation of the problems encountered in the verbal interaction. One suggestion was that videotapes might help here:

Perhaps an introduction on video, and a series of video exchanges to really identify with individual class members and bring a more personal, and perhaps humorous 'feel' to the exchange.

Surprise 5:

How Power works in relationships

The Australian students were surprised at how power works in such relationships. The Australian students became aware of the implications of ownership of the medium of exchange on power relations between the two groups:

Their joy with [female 1's] attempts to speak Japanese was so genuine that it tended to highlight the difficulty that exists for them and the efforts they made to speak English. It was rather a humbling experience [for the Australian students]. It also highlighted the disempowerment that occurs (and even the sense of helplessness) when one party has greater power of language than the other, who is struggling; yet, there has been no attempt [by the Australian students] to meet even part way with language skills.

All of the groups recognised that Australians learning to speak Japanese with proficiency was not a viable, short-term solution to this problem. They did, however, see the value of making an effort to learn some second language skills, not so much, it seems, to facilitate information exchange but as a symbolic gesture to indicate sensitivity to and empathy with the difficulties experienced by the other group.

Another group provided a different perspective on the power relationship which emerged between the two groups. They viewed the interaction as a competition in which there were winners and losers. They noted that the Japanese students...

Intercultural Communication Studies VI:2 1996-7 R. Thompson E. Yasufuku, & P. Crowe sought more information and asked far more questions about our culture, and our perceptions of Japan and Japanese than we did about their culture. They adopted a 'student' role. And it is my impression that, as a generalisation, we tended to adopt the 'teacher' role. We provided them with far more information than we obtained.

Another group commented:

if you look at the time we had to work together, and it is considered in terms of competing for a resource (information) within a limited timeframe, it can be seen to be a collaboration as a new form of competition - which (in my view) they undoubtedly won.

The Australian students offered a range of possible explanations for this dynamic:

Was it because the two groups were seeking different ends?

Was it age differences?

Was it the humility of their approach?

Was it that we believe they have nothing to teach us?

Was it arrogance on our part, that we so easily slipped into the teacher role?

Was it because we did not recognise the opportunity? Or did not know how to exploit it?

Or because they gained an advantage because of their second language problems?

Or because they were so enthusiastic we wanted to please them?

This discussion highlights the operation of two views on power in the relationship. In one view the power differential favoured the Australian students in that the interaction was conducted in English. This control of the language of interaction was seen to disempower the Japanese students. In the second view the power differential favoured the Japanese students in that they controlled the agenda of the interaction, thus disempowering the Australian students. In both cases this seemed to be linked to the amount of effort put into the interaction by both groups. On balance the Australian view seemed to be that the Japanese students put more effort into the exchange than they did.

Surprise 6:

Japanese interest in Australia

The Australian students were all surprised at the level of interest shown by the Japanese students in Australia, compared to their own interest in Japan.

For example, one group felt the Japanese students "were more interested in us than we were in them and Japan" and this seemed strange given that Australia "has little significance to most Japanese in their day to day lives, far less than Japan has for Australians". They also believed the Japanese students...

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put more effort into the exercise than we did, perhaps because they had more to gain,
especially in terms of their interest in social welfare and practicing their English....They
were very interested in our opinions on things, posing many more questions than we did.

Furthermore, they suggested...

that We may be seen to be more self-centred than the NFU students.....we are all both
working and studying, and therefore arguably less able to share our attention than they
are.

Another group noted how curious NFU students were about Australia...on the other hand
QUT students showed no interest in traveling to Japan. Was this because our priorities as mature
age students were different, or was this a reflection of an 'Australian' attitude to intercultural
awareness?

Discussion

In this section an attempt will be made to speculate about what might account for the
reactions and behaviour of the Australian students to the interaction with the Japanese students.

It is noteworthy that the most significant of these surprising episodes were linked to a
consideration of the relative effort put into the exchange by both parties. Firstly, the Australian
students noted the contrast between the intimacy of the Japanese biographies compared to their
own. They subsequently sent additional personal information to compensate. Secondly, though
they felt they got little out of the verbal exchange they recognised that the Japanese had to put in a
great deal more effort, given that the medium of exchange was English, and that they should make
some effort to learn at least some Japanese language.

Indeed, the Australian students seemed to be trying to reconcile this difference in input by
explicitly considering the relative motivation of the two groups in the interaction.

It did seem that the Australian students were calculating or assessing how much effort or
intimacy each group was putting into the exchange compared to what each group was getting out
of it. On balance it seemed that the Australian students believed that the Japanese students put in
more effort, more intimacy, and more interest than did the Australian students and further that if
the interaction had continued the Japanese students would have become more dissatisfied. Again,
on balance it seemed that the Australians believed that they, as a group, should put in more effort
to make it more likely the interaction would be successful. We argue that the Australian students'
reactions and behaviour might be explained by a concern with equity in the relationship. This
argument is consistent with Equity theory (Adams 1965).

Three basic assumptions underlie Equity theory. Firstly, there is an assumption that
individuals think of their interactions with others as economic exchanges. Something is invested
or input (for example, effort, experience and so on) for some return or output (for example, salary,
satisfaction). Secondly, it is assumed that individuals compare the ratio of their investments or
inputs and returns or outputs with that of some relevant comparison other as a basis for
establishing equity or lack of equity. Thirdly, people, in some cultural contexts at least, prefer

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equity in their relationships with others (as opposed to equality or need). Perception of lack of equity is aversive and motivates behaviour (or reasoning) to reduce the inequity.

If inequity is perceived then a range of strategies may be adopted to reduce or eliminate it (Adams 1965). In this discussion we will identify only those strategies which are illustrated by the reactions and behaviour of the Australians.

One way in which the individual might reduce the perception of inequity is to increase or decrease his or her inputs, for example, by increasing or decreasing the amount of effort that the person invests. In this interaction the reaction of the Australian students (sending additional and more personal biographical information) to the sharp contrast between their own and the Japanese biographies can be explained in terms of this inequity reducing strategy.

There was also some evidence of this strategy in the reasoning offered by the Australians for the unexpectedly problematic verbal interaction with the Japanese students. After the event there was little that they could do to increase their investment in this interaction. However, they did argue for the desirability of increasing Japanese language skills at least for symbolic purposes. Note that they did not argue for Japanese language proficiency, which would have constituted a belief in equality. Instead they appeared to argue for greater equity, that is, that the **ratio** of inputs to outcomes for each group are equal.

One Australian student sums up the relative input of the two interactants:

Had we the opportunity to extend the relationship with the NFU students further, this may have led to dissatisfaction on their part with the amount of effort that they put into the exchanges, especially compared to the benefits they were gaining.

There was one episode in which the ratio of inputs to outcomes was seen to favour the Japanese. Because the Japanese students were seen to control the agenda of the interaction, by asking questions, the Australians felt they got little information about Japan. They said they lost a "competition for information". There was not much they could do about this other than philosophise on the dilemmas of "trying to maintain equality while developing cooperative intercultural relationships".

Another strategy for reducing inequity is cognitively distort own or others' inputs and/or outcomes. This may explain the Australians' view that the Japanese were putting more into the activity because they had more to gain; "perhaps they had more to gain especially in terms of their interest in social welfare and practicing their English". Implicitly, the Australian students seemed to be arguing that the Japanese students are putting in more effort so they **must** be getting more out of this project than we are.

However, there is no real evidence that the Japanese students would get more benefit. Indeed, the reverse might be argued. Unbeknown to the Australians, this interaction was an extracurricular activity for the Japanese students while for the Australians it constituted a reasonable proportion of their assessment.

Conclusion

One of the purposes of this activity was to allow us to gain some insight into how interculturally naive Australian students reasoned about an intercultural interaction with Japanese students. The vehicle for exploring these reasoning processes was those episodes in the interaction which were "not in accord with their expectations", that is, those aspects which were surprising.

Six such surprises were identified. We have speculated that the reasoning which seemed to underlie the Australians' reactions to the important surprises can be understood in terms of a concern for equity in the relationship. It is noteworthy that "fairness" or "fair play" is perceived to be an Australian cultural characteristic.

It would have been interesting to compare the Australian reactions with those of the Japanese students. However, as indicated this activity was extracurricula for the Japanese and it was not possible to collect the necessary data.

Another issue became apparent during the interaction. In trying to account for the surprises they experienced the Australian students had to come to terms with the concept of culture and cultural difference. This proved to be problematic. There are diverse and often ambiguous definitions of culture (Segall *et al.* 1990:26). Furthermore, there may be as much diversity within a culture as between them (Hofstede 1980; Kanter 1993). In the context of this interaction there are other intergroup differentials which may explain differences between the two groups.

For example, it is possible to attribute observed differences to individual differences rather than intercultural differences. Female 1 had good interpersonal skills and this may explain her success in the interaction. Secondly, intergender relations may provide an explanation. Gender relations can be problematic even *within* a culture (Hatcher 1995:16). Indeed, one group suggested that, in future, individuals should be matched on gender lines.

Generational differences were also involved. Those who teach mixed classes of school leavers and mature-aged students will recognise this dynamic. Younger students often complain about communication difficulties with mature aged students.

A language intergroup is also involved. Observed differences may simply reflect the fact that the interaction was conducted in a language which was the first language for one group and the second language of the other. The effects of increased information processing demands on this latter group could explain observed differences.

In addition to the impact of these intergroup differentials there are also related problems associated with level of analysis. Hofstede (1980) has made the point that cultural value differences discovered in cross-cultural research do not necessarily mean that all members of the culture hold those values. For example, it has been suggested that Japanese tend to have a long term time orientation while Australians are short term oriented. This does not mean that all Japanese are long term oriented or that all Australians are short term oriented (e.g. Miura 1994). The two groups of students involved here may not be "typical" representatives of their national culture.

There is some difficulty, then, in determining what level of analysis is most appropriate in a particular case.

There are several ideas for further research suggested by this paper. Firstly, do cultural groups differ in their preference for mediums for communicating different types of content? Secondly, how can sensitive issues be addressed in intercultural encounters to create deeper intercultural understanding rather than to reinforce pre-existing stereotypes? Finally, do cultural groups differ in the exchange values which underlie intercultural relationships?

It is worth a final note on the educational value of such exchanges. This exchange was limited in scope and relatively short. Yet it provided those involved with much to reflect on. One participant made this comment:

Our expectations of this exercise were that it would be somewhat easier to accomplish and would reveal far less than it actually did of the features and problems [of intercultural contact].

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