Awareness of the Non-Verbal Behaviour Unique to Japanese Culture: A Key to Successful Communication

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Abstract

Before Adler's alternative approach (1987) came out, researchers had focused on three issues of sojourn adaptation: culture shock, sojourn effectiveness and adaptive change. Countering this view, Adler placed culture shock in a broader context. Following this line of thought, this paper discusses non-verbal behavior in the Japanese culture and foreigners' adjustment pattern to this specific behavior. The practice of bowing means so many things in many contexts among Japanese. Does the same rule apply to foreigners as well? Are members of the outgroups expected to adapt to the rule? I would like to discuss how this cultural trait works between the ingroup and the outgroup, not only from an intercultural adaptation experience point of view, but more importantly from a cross- cultural learning point of view.

Introduction

This paper describes a specific set of behavior unique to the Japanese, and examines how this set of behavior expresses meaning, accomplish function and achieve outcome in relation to foreigners living in Japan. By exploring the practice of bowing in relation to its meanings, functions and outcomes, this paper identifies a range of behavior and develops an explanation as well as a description of cultural pattern and difference.

In contrast to individualistic and low-context cultures where verbal communication and other explicit codes are more prevalent, Japanese appear to be ‘introvert’ and ‘mysterious’, placing less emphasis on verbal communication. Nonverbal communication provides most of the context to communication, and people are affected by contextual clues. Thus bowing carries with it as much

meaning as smiling, speed of movement and hand gestures do to people from low-context cultures.

This paper aims to find answers to the following questions. What happens to visitors from different-context cultures coming for a short visit, or even for a long-term stay in Japan? What adaptation pattern do they adopt? Do they have to follow the behavior pattern of the in-group? Do members of the in-group expect foreigners to master the art of bowing and convey the same amount of information and meaning as much as members of the host culture are expected to?

A Review

Studies of sojourners and immigrants and their intercultural adaptations were stimulated by the post-World War II boom in educational and cultural exchanges, diplomatic, political and military stationing overseas, as well as increase in tourism and trade. Extensive literature describes the 'problem'- psychological and emotional- encountered in facing a new environment in the initial phase of the sojourn, as well as in the subsequent period of a long-term stay.

The diagram below describes a realistic and comprehensive analysis of the international flow of information or international communication through direct human contact (indicated here as Human Orientation), as well as international communication through the use of technology (indicated as Technological Orientation) (Mowlana, 1997). This paper focuses on the 'human and cultural' activities shown in the lower left hand sections (1-3) of the diagram.

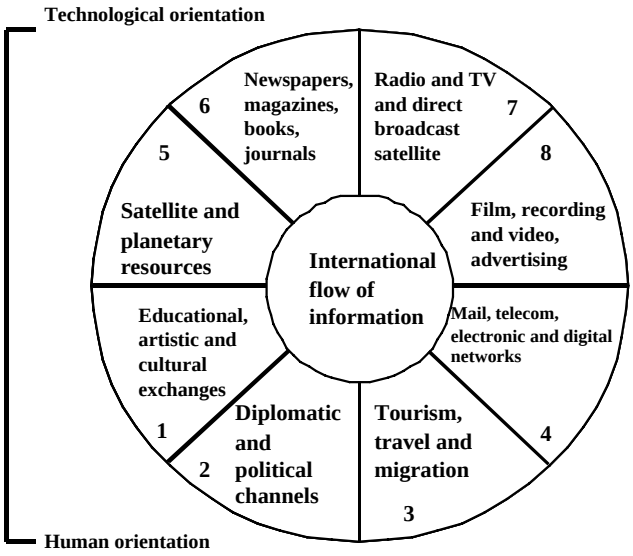

Figure 1. International flow of information

The human activities described in the lower left side of the diagram have drawn attention of researches focusing on intercultural interaction and consequently intercultural adaptation, or psychological adjustment, a term that has often been used for intercultural adaptation. Four research issues tend to have dominated this area of psychological adjustment: (1) culture shock, or psychological responses of sojourners to an unfamiliar culture; (2) factors that contribute to sojourn effectiveness, (3) adaptive changes in sojourners' psychological responses over time, and (4) personal development as a consequence of such changes (Kim, 1989).

Adaptation studies have attempted to understand the adaptive experience that follows the initial culture shock experience, and have identified different stages of adaptation: (1) a stage characterized by fascination, elation and optimism, (2) a stage of hostility and emotionally stereotyped attitudes toward the host society and increased association with fellow sojourner; (3) a recovery stage characterized by increased language knowledge and ability to get around in the new environment; and (4) a final stage in which adjustment is about as complete as possible, anxiety is largely gone, and new customs are accepted and enjoyed.

These adjustment stages are often described in curves, indicating patterns of change over time. Empirical research has found support for what has been described as U-curve (Trifonovitch, 1977).

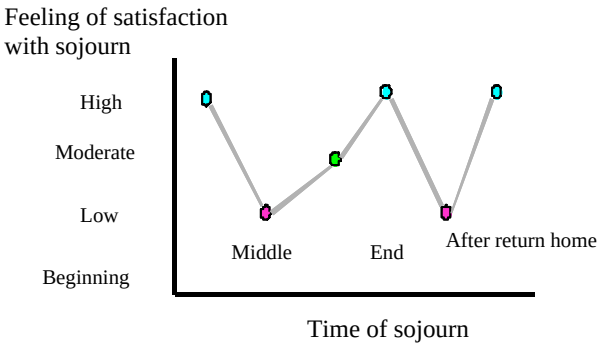

Figure 2. Cultural adaptation process (1)
The U curve pattern

The highest peak in the U curve depicts the initial optimism and safisfaction in the host culture, the subsequent dip in the level of adaptation, and then it is followed by a gradual recovery to higher levels as one gets adjusted (Trifonovitch, 1977). This U-curve pattern of behavior change, however, has not always been consistently observed. For instance, in his review of literature, Church (1982) reported that the U-curve hypothesis is weak, and that not all sojourners begin their cross-cultural adaptation experiences with a period of elation.

It is my intention to show whether this U-curve can be observed in the adaptation process of foreigners in relation to the practice of bowing in Japan.

Review

As we often hear, communication always takes place between individuals, not between cultures. By implication, foreigners coming to Japan have to adapt to the Japanese patterns of behavior, including the patterns of nonverbal communication. Bowing is a traditional Japanese greeting, but it gives diverse meanings depending on different situations and types of personal relationship (Morrison, et. al 1994). How does this cultural pattern affect behavioral patterns and cultural adaptation of out-group members?

In order to find answers to the above question, it is necessary to look closely into and explore the various meanings conveyed in different contexts of bowing. I would like to refer to a previous study on cultural differences on the major emotion-specific verbal, nonverbal and physiological reactions between Japanese, Europeans and Americans (Scherer, et. al, 1988).

Emotions		**Non-verbal reactions:**		
1.	Joy	laugh	moving toward	
2.	Sadness	crying	voice change	withdrawing
3.	Fear	screaming	moving toward	abrupt movement
4.	Anger	screaming	facial expression	voice and gesture change
5.	Disgust	moving against	facial expression	
6.	Shame	laugh	withdrawing	
7.	Guilt	moving against		

Emotions		**Verbal behavior:**	
1.	Joy	speech change	lengthy utterance
2.	Sadness	silence	
3.	Fear	short utterance	speech disturbance
4.	Anger	speech change	lengthy utterance speech disturbance
5.	Disgust	short utterance	
6.	Shame	speech disturbance	
7.	Guilt	speech disturbance	

The summary above suggests cultural differences in emotional experience. The study further reports that in the USA, the common nonverbal reactions to these emotions have been reported as: laughing, crying, voice change, smiling, facial expression, abrupt movements such as moving toward or withdrawing. The findings likewise indicate a consistent cultural difference between the Japanese and the Americans: Americans reported significantly more verbal and non-verbal reactions to each of the seven emotions than did their Japanese counterparts (Scherer, et. al, 1988).

On the other hand, these reactions are not manifested because emotions are not usually externalized in the Japanese culture. Rather, responses are reported non-verbally through the unique practice of bowing. Let's see how this works (Ishii, 1988).

I. Bowing as Expressions of Joy or Happiness

(1) To greet: On Initial Meetings to say 'Hi' or 'Hello'

Ex. In the business card exchange, cards are presented after a bow or a handshake.

(2) To say 'Welcome'

At the start of a working day in any business establishment, especially in stores, Japanese staff would line up along the store corridors and welcome the first few customers through a very deep bow of welcome. As they bow, they lower their eyes and keep their palms flat against their thighs.

(3) To say 'Thank You'

Japanese show appreciation by bowing several times during a conversation. Most cultures use linguistic form like 'Thank you' to show their appreciation, whereas in a host country like Japan, 'Thank you' is usually expressed non-verbally. A visitor from a linguistic culture may come to regard the Japanese behavior as rude, whereas the host in turn may wait in vain for the visitor to show signs of appreciation.

(4) To say 'Good-bye' even after the other person has left.

II. Bowing as an Expression of Sadness

Comparatively, complex relationships frequently elicit sadness in Japanese society. Bowing conveys emotions in different contexts. It functions

(1) To apologize and/or to say 'Excuse Me',

(2) To appeal= to ask a favor or request, and

(3) To show respect.

III. Bowing as an Expression of Shame and Guilt

Japanese usually attribute the cause of emotion-eliciting events, especially guilt and shame, mostly to themselves. Bowing is used

(1) To admit one's mistake, and

(2) To apologize

IV. Anger and Fear

In general, Japanese become angry less frequently because of inharmonious relationships and situations of injustice. On the other hand, situations involving strangers elicit anger more frequently in the Japanese, but they do not report their emotions intensely and in long periods of time. Even

for strong negative emotions, Japanese generally believe that no action is necessary.

When it comes to fear, fear of either strangers or risky situations is more frequently reported among Europeans and Americans than among the Japanese.

Methodology and Findings

It is now necessary to look into how the unique Japanese nonverbal communication practice of bowing has affected foreigners' adaptation process into the Japanese culture. An interview was conducted with fifty foreigners who have lived in Japan for a period of 2 weeks, at the shortest, and more than 10 years, at the longest. The interviews were conducted among short-term tourists, international students and business/research foreigners in Japan (See appendix). The participants in this study came from countries of both high-context cultures, such as China, Korea, and Saudi Arabia, and low-context cultures, such as USA, Australia and England (Francesco and Gold, 1998).

A common pattern was observed for all the respondents in the study: bowing has been a source of culture shock to people from different cultures. Observing Japanese bowing to each other was found to be a beautiful scene from an out-group member. Some subjects reported a positive reaction to watching Japanese bow during the first few months of their stay. But something starts to puzzle them gradually. Questions like" What is the most appropriate response I ought to give when someone bows so beautifully to me?", "What does he mean in such a particular context?", "When, where, and how do I suppose to bow back to the other person?", "Am I expected to master this art and its meaning and exhibit the same skill as any member of the in-group does?"

It was found out that the U-curve hypothesis described earlier does not apply to sojourners, nor to ‘long-term residents’ in Japan. Rather an inverted U-curve is produced.

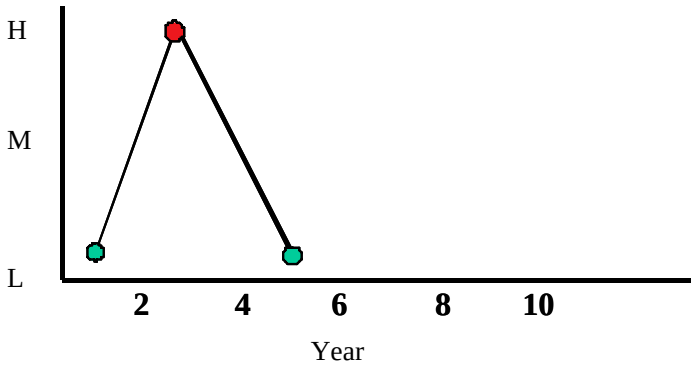

Figure 3. Cultural adaptation process (2).
An inverted U curve.

The first point in the inverted U-curve depicts the initial adaptation stage as a period of disorientation and curiosity accompanied by confusion. Learning when and how to bow presents a whole lot of uncertainty to foreigners living in Japan. A similar experience is reported by sojourners, students, researchers, foreign teachers, and businessmen assigned to Japan.

Once the art has been mastered, the initial shock is replaced by the period of fascination. Immigrants become increasingly better adapted as they continue to interact in the host environment. As they continue to participate in communication activities of Japanese society, long-term foreigners get to learn the meaning of these gestures and develop the skill, and consequently, feelings and attitudes regain strength.

But a third stage of irritation and sometimes hostility to the practice in the host country developed especially among those who stay for a long period of time (10 years or more). The feeling of elation resulting from one's mastery of the arts of the host culture is followed by a subsequent dip in the adaptation process. A very good example is: the endless cycle of bowing in formal assemblies such as entrance ceremonies, graduation ceremonies in schools and universities. The cultural pattern of the host country becomes a meaningless routine. Foreigners feel they are compelled to follow the rule, making interaction a source of anxiety.

Summary

This paper reflects on the practice of bowing, a unique characteristic of the Japanese culture. Communication in Japan is marked by great subtlety: information is left unspoken yet is perfectly understood. Silence is gold, and subtlety is the rule. In a high-context culture, subtle extra-linguistic expressions are socially accepted, while unusual facial expressions, dramatic gestures, expansive hand and arm movements are frowned upon. Bowing links to the subtlety of verbal and non-verbal communication in the Japanese culture, and is expressive of motional reactions and messages.

What are its implications on sojourners and long-term residents? A common pattern of individual adaptation to the unique practice of bowing is observed for (1) short-term and long-term situations in Japan, as well as for (2) foreigners coming from either low-context cultures and high-context cultures. Sojourners who participated in this study fall into the category of tourists who have an interest in the culture of the host country. The practice of bowing adds more stress in addition to the usual problems that international students

regularly face (McCargar, 1993). The cross-cultural business travelers in Japan report a similar psychological adjustment in greater intensity to the non-verbal custom of bowing. They are expected to interact successfully with fellow businessmen or researchers of the host country. For those who depend on the host culture for livelihood, they go through a more extensive adaptation process. However, immigrants' adaptation is affected by a number of factors, such as their knowledge of the host society, their participation in interpersonal social networks, and the use of the country's mass media. An analysis of the first culture effects on the respondents' coping potential indicated consistently a similar finding across cultures.

Directions for future research

At any given time, the state of sojourners' and immigrants' adaptation is influenced by the forces of the culture he brings with him to the new one. Studies of cultural adaptation have primarily approached intercultural interaction from the social psychological and communication perspectives. There is still a lack of close examination of the way each stranger's premigration characteristics influence the way he adapts to the new environment. This implies a need to expand the scope of research to incorporate studies of the adaptation process with those on the institutional and social structure of the ethnic community where the migrant came from. By exploring the cultural ethnic background of the subjects and how this affects adaptation in the Japanese culture, this study has taken a step to view intercultural adaptation as interactive and multidimensional while the individual culture heritage and the host environment are viewed as a factor to co-influence the adaptation process. More investigations are needed to explore the influences of environmental conditions and premigration attributes on adaptations (Kim, 1988).

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Appendix

Questionnaire (a simplified version)
What is your status/occupation in Japan?
How long have you lived in Japan?
Have you observed the Japanese bowing? If yes, where did you first observe it?
What WAS your first impression of Japanese bowing (during the first few months)?
What IS your first impression of Japanese bowing (after some time)?
When Japanese bow to you, what do you do?
When Japanese bow to you, how do you feel?
Are you a member of any Japanese organization? (If yes, please briefly state your role and position in it.)
How often do you meet with Japanese people?
Are you a member of an organization from your home country OR a foreigners' organization?
If yes, please briefly state your role and position in it.
How often do you meet with Japanese people?
How would you rate your ability to speak Japanese?
How would you rate your ability to listen to Japanese on the radio, on TV, etc.?
How would you rate your ability to read/ write Japanese?