Cultural Learning and Adaptation: A Closer Look at the Realities

Cecilia Ikeguchi, Tsukuba Gakuin University

This paper investigates the concept of intercultural learning of non-Japanese as they come to grips with new meanings and learn values and social relationship in the host culture. It describes how different individuals confront the dilemmas of face-to-face communication. The study focuses on relationships between cultural learning and three constructs: culture contact, purpose of travel, and culture distance. These concepts are analyzed in terms of the implicit difference model (Shaules, 2004). Data are derived from questionnaire results conducted among 200 foreigners in Japan. It was found that the stages of culture learning follow a non-linear model: acceptance, adaptation, and enforced adaptation. The results prove that it is possible to dislike a particular community and still be interculturally sensitive (Matsumoto, 2003).

Research on culture learning and intercultural adaptation has probably been one of the most explored fields of study as the new millennium began (Hammer, et al., 2003). "To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, must be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for people of other culture" (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992, p. 416). Dramatic advances in travel and communications technology has intensified human interaction, both long distance and face-to-face. This paper builds upon existing literature in describing practical culture learning experiences of foreigners in Japan, based on the view that in developing theory and testing theory through empirical investigation, cross-cultural research should be designed to be both practical and useful (Kim, 1995).This investigation explores culture learning and adaptation of different kinds of culture travelers in relation to different situational variables described by Ward, et al. (2001). The type of culture travelers in focus includes sojourners such as tourists, international students, business travelers, expatriate workers, as well as long-term staying foreigners. The variables used to analyze the experience of these individuals are length of travel, purpose of travel and cultural similarity based on Ward's theoretical model (2001).

Intercultural Contact

The process and outcome of intercultural contact have been described voluminously in previous research in essentially four ways. Only previous studies that are of immediate relevance to this research will be mentioned here. The first group of studies focuses on categorizing the sorts of individuals or groups such as tourists, foreign students, migrants, expatriate workers, and others (Bochner, 1999). Ward, et al. (2001) have classified culture travelers into two groups, the sojourners and migrants, and has made an extensive description of the unique experiences of these individuals. Sojourners are categorized as tourists, students and business travelers, while migrants are distinguished from other groups as either immigrants or refugees. The participants in the present study belong to the first group of culture travelers.

The second group of literature has attempted to analyze the contact experience of these individuals in terms of situational variables such as time of travel, purpose of travel, and type of involvement (Bochner, 1982; Kim, et al., 1997). Variables that are found to relate to the personal psychology of individuals in culture contact include: the place where the interaction takes place, the time-span of the interaction, the purpose of stay, type of involvement and frequency of contact with members of host culture (Kim, 1988). An analysis and summary of dimensions of various cultural contacts are presented in Bochner (1982). The present study focuses on length of travel, purpose of travel and culture similarity between culture travelers and members of the host culture.

The third group of studies, which comprises a large amount of literature, discusses the outcomes of intercultural contact either in terms of their consequences on the travelers as groups or as individuals. The works of Gudykunst and Matsumoto (1996) and Shaules (2004) are some of the most recent ones. For example, in analyzing the culture learning experience of sojourners, Shaules differentiates between highly implicit and explicit elements of cultural differences. Implicit elements are the hidden elements of a new culture which include culture sets of values, world view, communication style and others, as opposed to explicit elements like food, transportation system, architecture, music, arts and the like. Shaules suggests that many intercultural learners resist high implicit elements of cultural difference, while accepting or adapting to more explicit or obvious elements. Shaule's findings indicate that intercultural sensitivity influences culture learning. Sojourners who attained the highest degree of intercultural sensitivity had deep intercultural and language learning experiences in more than one cultural setting. The present study hopes to explore the extent of contact foreigners in Japan have with the implicit and explicit elements of Japanese culture.

Finally a great deal research has been conducted on providing theoretical frameworks for culture learning, such as stress and coping, as well as adaptation process. Some of the works include Aycan (1997), Bennett (1994), and Hammer (1987). Aycan's work, for example, distinguishes between three forms of expatriate adjustment: psychological, socio-cultural and work adjustment, and provides a conceptual model of culture contact. In addition, Kim (1995) considers people's experience in new socio-cultural environments and elaborates on the theoretical structure of cross-cultural adaptation by using personal stories and testimonials. At the heart of the theory is the critical role of the individual's ability to communicate in accordance with the host communication system and his or her psychological and social involvement with the host environment. This paper hopes to add to the existing body of literature on culture interaction and learning by investigating the process of foreigners' interaction with Japanese people, and its effects on culture learning and adjustment in Japan as the host country.

Culture Contact and the Implicit Difference Model (IDM) of Culture Learning

Culture learning comes from contact with a different culture. It has been defined as a sojourner's particular reaction to the systematic and social demands of a new intercultural environment. The sojourner comes to grips with a new set of meanings, whether concrete and explicit, or abstract and implicit, like the values and social meanings attached to it, as he

develops social relationships and becomes involved in the new environment. The implicit difference model (IDM) developed by Shaules (2004) in his analysis of intercultural experience of expatriate workers, suggests that expatriates construct a cognitive reality. This cognitive reality was earlier defined by Bennett (1994) as intercultural sensitivity, a skill that helps intercultural travelers capable of accommodating cultural differences, particularly the deeper implicit differences between their home and host cultures. Shaules indicates that intercultural sensitivity plays a key role that assists intercultural travelers in dealing with the hidden elements of a culture known as the implicit elements of a new intercultural environment.

Bowing in the Japanese Culture Context

Ikeguchi (2003) reported that bowing in Japan serves different functions. This section summarizes the essential points discussed in an earlier work.

1. Bowing signifies the start of a relationship.

When people meet for the first time, more than just a gesture of greeting, the bow signifies the start of a personal, social and business relationship. An initial business meeting starts with a bow, continues with an exchange of name cards, and concludes with a bow. Aside from the initial greeting "nice to meet you," the bow signifies a "request" [yoroshiku onegaishimasu] for a good relationship from hereon. It is also interpreted to mean "please look after me (or a member of my family)."

2. The bow is an affect display.

As an affect display, bowing is a body motion employed to reflect the intensity of the communicator's emotions and feelings in a given situation (Klopf & Ishii, 1987). Most cultures express emotions in linguistic forms like "thank you" or physical contact such as a hug or a kiss to show appreciation. In Japan where outward expressions of emotion are not encouraged, these are signaled non-verbally, usually through the bow.

3. The bow emphasizes an oral statement.

In everyday life, for instance, a verbal apology, like in the following situation: "I'm sorry" [sumimasen] or [gomennasai] is not enough without expressing it non-verbally through the bow.

4. The bow is an aid in verbal utterances.

This context is very closely related to that described above. The difference is that in this situation, the bow is used as either a substitute for words or as a non-linguistic code to augment an oral statement made. The following examples illustrate this point. In funerals, friends express condolences when meeting the bereaved family by starting with a verbal message: [kono tabi…] "in this situation" and finish the message with a deep bow. The rest of the sentence is not expressed; the message is implied and understood. The bereaved family accepts the message by responding with an equivalently deep bow.

5. The bow is a means to resolve conflict.

In a previous study, the bow is described as a way the Japanese deal with an embarrassing situation. For example, politicians and businessmen who commit a serious offense make a public apology with a very deep bow usually uttering [makoto ni moushiwake gozaimasen] which means "I deeply apologize." The implication is that the bow would seal the conflict, and the offender is forgiven.

6. The bow is simply a habit or ritual.

Over and beyond expressions of affect where the bow reveals psychological and emotional information about the interlocutors, it is usually less consciously controlled than other forms of nonverbal behavior. This is very much evident in greetings. The first bow usually conveys the strongest meaning, but repeated gestures are more automatic, less controlled and less meaningful (Ishii, 1975). As a form of communication, however, the bow supplies invaluable cues that aid in the interpretation of verbal messages and expresses various emotions in varying degree as we have seen in the discussions above.

Method

This paper analyzes the relation between three constructs: (a) length of stay, (b) purpose of travel, and (c) cultural similarity and culture learning and adaptation. These variables were examined specifically in relation to foreigners' adjustment to the bow. Bowing is culture specific. It is a vital form of nonverbal communication in a high context culture as Japan.

Participants

The study represents a total of 300 individuals who are either temporarily (60%) or permanently (40%) residing in Japan. Over twenty countries are represented. The respondents belong to various acculturating groups according to Ward's definition (2001). The first group consisted of sojourners who are defined as temporary residents for a short span of time, and usually have an assignment or contract to fulfill. They have an intention to go back to their home culture. These included short-term tourists, international students, occupational trainers – and their spouses, businessmen, and professional groups like teachers and university professors on a temporary teaching assignment. So far there are no clear and fixed criteria for defining sojourn in terms of duration, but six months to a period of five years are commonly cited parameters (Ward, 2001). The second group consisted of individuals that are difficult to define; they do not fall neatly in the definitions of culture travelers in the literature so far. Neither do they fall under the definition of refugees or immigrants. They came to Japan for varied purposes such as study or work, not for economic, religious or political reasons. They have lived in Japan for more than 10 years and have become permanent foreign residents through marriage to Japanese nationals. Thus they do not fall neatly into the category of culture travelers. Furthermore, they have no intention of going back permanently to their home cultures.

The samples represent both low and high context cultures, according to Hall's definition

(1976). Examples of low context cultures included: USA, England, Australia, Germany, New Zealand, and Canada. High context cultures represented in the study included China, Korea, Greece, Turkey, Brazil, Columbia, and other Asian and Arab countries (Hofstede, 1983). Inasmuch as culture similarities play an important role in culture learning and adjustment pattern, as indicated above, it is assumed that sojourners from low-context cultures, radically different from Japan, will experience more adjustment problems compared to their counterpart.

Questionnaire

Data were derived largely from survey responses. 300 questionnaire copies were distributed, of which 250 were returned and could be used for the analysis. The questionnaire consisted of preliminary questions on personal information like gender, nationality, occupation, date of arrival in Japan, purpose of travel and length of stay in Japan. The main part of the questionnaire consisted of 16 items in which participants were to record their responses on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Construct validity for the instrument was established through a pilot study that originally included 20 questions. Four items that were found not to address the research questions were discarded, leaving a final set of 16 questions. Additionally, the respondents were asked to describe their feelings in situations (a) when Japanese bow to each other, and (b) when Japanese bow to them, in an open-ended question. The items aim to explore the subjects' emotional reactions to the social demands of the new cultural environment as they learn new meanings.

It is important to note that assessing dimensions of emotion through a questionnaire approach, however, may be a way of circumventing the problem of empirically assessing emotion. Matsumoto (2003) warned that differential recall and self-presentation process may bias the results of a questionnaire, but there was an important advantage. There is no other way of assessing subjective feeling states and evaluations of situations without asking research subjects. Data can be examined for cross-cultural similarities and differences by reporting emotional process.

Video Recording

In addition to questionnaire responses, data were derived from participants' reactions to video recording of various situations of bowing which were taken twice. The first recording was done in school using Japanese students and teachers, and focusing on various situations in school life. The models were unaware of the recording to provide spontaneity, and therefore yield more reliable results. The second recording involved volunteer samples simulating real life contexts that could not otherwise be shown in the first recording. The participants watched the video recordings, and then were asked to record their reactions.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analyzed twice. The first analysis was conducted to differentiate group responses according to amount of culture contact by. The second analysis

was conducted to differentiate responses according to purpose of travel. In both analyses, responses to each item on each scale were summed to provide percentage distributions. Using percentages to assess the real implications of the Likert scale questionnaire responses clearly identifies the differences across response sets and samples (McCall, 2001). The constructs under investigation are discussed below.

Construct # 1: Length of travel and culture learning

How does socio cultural adaptation change over time? The distinction between short and long term time frames is important because it has implications for the culture learning process in the study. Tourists are an example of short term culture travelers; international students and business travelers experience medium length culture contact, while other foreigners may have a life-long experience of culture contact in Japan. This study assumes that length of stay in the host country plays a vital role in the culture learning experiences of the participants.

Construct # 2: Purpose of travel and culture learning

This study also hopes to answer the question "How does cultural reaction to the bowing practice in Japan vary across sojourning groups?" Studies in the past suggest that culture travelers differ in the type and degree of adjustment difficulties overseas. For instance, the type of intercultural contact of students abroad (Crano & Crano, 1993; Kim, 1988) is different from that of international tourists (Ward, et al., 2001), while international business travelers face a different sets of adjustment difficulties (Spiess & Wittmann, 1999; Stening & Hammer, 1992). Moreover, Crano's findings (1993) reveal that emotional adjustment problems of students were basically academic and social. The latter type includes interaction with two groups of students: those belonging to the same culture, and those belonging to a different culture. Business sojourners, on the other hand, experience business-related difficulties like hostile attitude of competitors and business-related expectations, and problems with members of the host country.

Construct # 3: Cultural similarity and culture learning

Cultural distance and cultural similarity have been found to determine culture learning in the past. For example, Dunbar (1994) compared 21 German expatriate manages in the US and 21 American executives working in Japan. Results showed that German managers in the US reported significantly greater culture awareness, knowledge and work satisfaction than their US counterparts in Japan. Dunbar refers to the differences in doing business in what might be "culturally easy" environment compared with operating with a "culturally challenging" one (of Americans in Japan). Similarly, the literature showing cultural and ethnic similarities as generally associated with fewer psychological problems is vast. For example, the investigations of Ward and Kennedy (1993) and Kennedy (1999) which compare adjustment of Mainland Chinese and Malaysians in Singapore, suggest that Chinese sojourners in Singapore adopt readily compared to their counterparts. Furthermore, Japanese students in New Zealand were found to report more socio-cultural problems than other South East Asian students.

Table 1.

Responses with Highest Mean, according to Length of Culture Contact

	Less than 2 years	Mean responses
Bowing is beautiful.		58 (*)
Bowing is mysterious.		68
Bowing is disturbing.		64
People seem cold and distant.		26
The people are timid and shy.	62	
	2 ~ 5 years	
Bowing is fascinating.		88 (**)
Bowing is very unique.		68
It expresses a lot of emotions.		55
Unique communication style.	68	
	More than 5 years	
Bowing is formal and rigid.		26 (***)
It's is just a habit / routine.		40
Bowing is meaningless.		29
Bowing is ceremonial and ritualistic.		51
A sincere way of expression.	32	

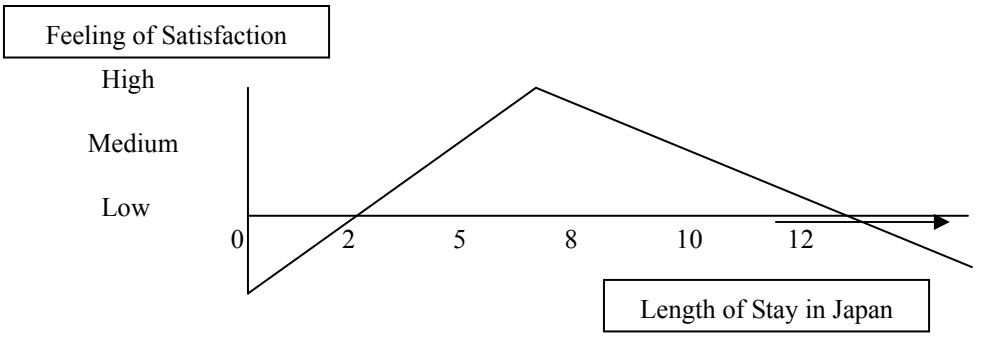

Figure 1. The inverted U-curve indicating stages of adjustment to the bowing experience.

Results

The questionnaire results reveal interesting information on culture learning of non-Japanese in relation to bowing as an important non-verbal code and behavior in Japan.

The participants report a mixture of positive and negative feedback depending on their length of stay in Japan. Newcomers report negative emotions towards the bowing behavior. This is indicated by strong agreement to items No. 1, 2, 4, 6, 10 and 15. After a short period of

stay, the feeling and attitude regain strength. Those who have lived in Japan between two to five and ten years report positive reactions, as seen in their strong agreement with items No. 1, 3, 9, 10, 11 and 16. With increased chances of participation in the communication activities of the host community, they get to learn the meaning of the gesture as well as the skill to practice it. Surprisingly, those who have stayed longer than fifteen years generally
indicate a slightly negative reaction to the bowing behavior. The group response indicates strong agreement to item No. 5, 7, 8, 12, 13 and 14, reporting a feeling of stress and hostility to the practice. This indicates a subsequent dip in attitude following the initial period of adjustment. The responses were plotted in a graph indicating an inverted U-curve as shown in figure 1.

The vertical axis indicates intensity of emotions ranging from low, medium to high, representing the quantitative component of emotion. The horizontal axis indicates the sojourners' length of stay in Japan. The concept of quantitative component of emotion is derived from Elliott's analysis of emotion (1992).

The first point in the inverted U-curve depicts the initial stage characterized by disorientation and curiosity accompanied by confusion. Learning how and when to bow presents a whole set of anxiety for newcomers. Here are some self-reported responses.

"I panic when Japanese greet me with a bow because I don't know how to respond."
"I do not understand what they mean when they bow, so how will I respond?: "Thank you." or "That's great." or "I'm sorry." Or should I say "Hey, stop it!" "I'm confused."

With the passage of time, as the foreigners in Japan continue to practice the act of bowing with members of the host country in the neighborhood, in school, at work they develop a feeling of self-confidence. This is marked as the higher point of adjustment.

1. "I feel great bowing especially when they (Japanese) bow to me in return."
2. "I feel like I am a part of their group. They accept me here."

It appears however that the longer the foreigners live in Japan, the more the non-verbal pattern of the country becomes a meaningless routine. Some individuals, who have lived for more than twenty years, report their feelings as follows.

"We are "forced" to engage in an endless round of bowing in daily activities, especially in formal assemblies such as entrance ceremonies and graduation ceremonies."
"I think it's troublesome to sit, stand, bow, and sit, stand, bow, repeatedly."

This feeling is represented by a second low point in the figure. Overall, a pattern of adjustment that resembles the different stages of adaptation in Oberg's original (1960) description of culture shock was found across sojourning groups. Responses of each group, in percentage, were compared. Majority of the participants admit that bowing is a beautiful non-verbal code in Japan that is unique to the culture, and expressing various meanings. Data

show a strong agreement of students, and professional groups like teachers and researcher to Item no 1, 9, 10, 11, and 16. Compared to their counterparts, business travelers report mixed reactions, as shown in their high agreement to items 1, 2, 4, and 10 and 12. While they find bowing to be a beautiful behavior that expresses a lot of emotions, they also find it disturbing and mysterious. For people doing business in Japan, the multiplicity of implied meanings of the bow is a disturbing feeling in so much as it affects work interaction. As predicted, it was found to affect their business relationship.

The second analysis of results was conducted to investigate variations in adaptation. The following is an excerpt form an interview with some business travelers in Japan.

1. [When I met a Japanese manager for the first time, I was amazed. We talked for five minutes. He bowed twenty times. ….]
[After a short meeting with the computer specialist, I said a quick 'good-bye' and ran off to my next appointment. I learned the next day that I appeared impolite (because I did not take some time to gently say good-bye and do the ceremonial bowing.]

2. [I did not know that I have to give my business card with a bow.]
3. [I have learned by now how to meet a Japanese businessman for the first time.]

Data for the third level of analysis was obtained from the participants' self-report of the bowing situations. Individual responses to the open ended questions indicate very interesting information on the relation between culture of origin and one's perception of a new culture habit. Reactions to the bow can be grouped into two types according to cultural differences (Hofstede, 1983). Those who come from low context cultures re-confirm a belief that bowing is a deep element of Japanese culture that is not easy to adjust to. Those who come from high context cultures re-affirm certain familiar emotions in their home country. Here are some examples.

Table 2.
Responses with Highest Mean, According to Type of Culture Traveler

Sojourning group 1 (students, teachers and researchers)	Mean responses
Bowing is beautiful	44
A unique Japanese communication style	67
Unique to the Japanese culture	27
Expresses a lot of emotions	58
Seems to be a sincere way of expressing emotions	71
Bowing is ceremonial and ritualistic	

Sojourning group 2 (businessmen and long-term residents)	Mean responses
Bowing is beautiful	31
Bowing is mysterious	40
Bowing is disturbing	26

After watching the video recordings, many of the comments made by students and business travelers from countries like Canada, USA and Australia, include the following:

SCENE 1 [a woman bows to a relative in a funeral]
(1) "How can she keep herself so distant from her (a bereaved relative). "The gesture is so lacking in emotion."
(2) "I cannot feel a sense of intimacy."

To the same scene, some respondents from the Middle East regions commented:
"I can't feel any emotion." "There seems to be no sign of sympathy."
"If I were that guy, I would approach and embrace my relative."

SCENE 2 [After a confrontation, a friend bows and says goodbye]
A Brazilian lady commented.
"I can not imagine myself not screaming at her for doing that to my sister."

SCENE 3 [Guests are introduced one at a time, in a party scene]
Many students commented.
"It's so repetitive. People seem so cold, formal and distant to each other."
(2) "There's so much restraint. People control their emotion."
Furthermore, professionals from some countries in Europe and Canada report that their cultural identity is being forced to change when they are expected by people in the workplace to respond similarly.

On the other hand, foreigners from culturally similar countries report the following observations.
[Foreign students from Shri Lanka]
1. "Bowing is so beautiful that everybody in my country should learn it too."
2. "Some people do it; some people don`t."
[Teachers from Thailand]
1. "Bowing reminds me of home."
2. "I feel homesick when I see people bowing."
[Researchers from Asian countries]
1. "There's so much restraint. I like it."
2. "It's so beautiful."

The way the culture groups in this study perceive the nonverbal code of bowing is mixed according to the goals they pursue in Japan. Overseas students engage in culture learning as well as intellectual endeavors to achieve academic success. The same is true with teachers and researcher groups whose patterns of interaction demand intercultural sensitivity. The individuals on work-related assignments have clear work-related tasks that they have to accomplish. They have to successfully interact with their local counterparts to achieve this goal. Clearly, for business travelers, adjustment to bowing is closely related to work performance and

pressure.

The bow gives a message several meanings unavailable from explicit verbal utterance. In daily face-to-face encounters the Japanese value catching on quickly to another's meaning (Ramsey, 1984) before it has been completely expressed. Obviously, the conversational sensitivity, guessing the inner thoughts of others is a challenge to culture learning in Japan.

As previously pointed out, the bow is used to supplement verbal messages, or as a substitute for words in discourse. Individuals who come from low context cultures, where the spoken message is a must, react to the bow negatively especially in the initial stage of adjustment. It is hard to understand the system of meaning at work. Individuals, like the Brazilian woman mentioned above, expect to find animation and expressiveness as primary indicators of conversational involvement, but fail. After a few years of interacting with members of the host country, foreigners generally come to adjust to the bow as an essential condition to life in Japan. Knowing how to bow is not just a new skill learned, it comes with learning a new set of meanings. Thus, change in oneself gets into the deeper level on intercultural experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Stages of cultural learning with regard to the bowing experience can be described in a non-linear model of curiosity, acceptance, adaptation and enforced adaptation. Intercultural adaptation to the bowing practice follows a learning curve and comes only with intercultural depth. In the first stage of cultural adjustment, as part of culture learning the bow is seen as an explicit element (Shaules, 2004) of cultural difference like food, language, or transportation. Individuals especially from culturally different – low context cultures ─ societies reject bowing as troublesome and superficial at times. After the initial stage, the demand of the environment, the need to bow in different situations, requires change in behavior, and begins to mark an implicit level of cultural learning. After a few years of residence, bowing becomes an actual part of intercultural reality that should be accepted whether similar to or different from one's own. Flexibility and change are necessary to function as a member of society: to bow at the right time and the right way, as revealed by the comments of businessmen, researchers and teachers. After longer years of residence, foreigners learn the values and communication style of the Japanese. Bowing becomes a natural part of everyday life as they learn the deeper cultural assumptions in the host country. Bowing at this stage is understood to be a part of social identity, and the experiences are found to be meaningful. It becomes part of the deeper elements of intercultural learning. For some longer staying individuals, however, ability to behave according to the demands of the environment does not mean complete acceptance of the new culture. Thus they report that bowing becomes repetitive and a meaningless routine.

Cross cultural adaptation is an interactive and dynamic process and changes over time. The findings on the inverted U-curve seem consistent with a culture learning model of cross-cultural adaptation (Kealey, 1989) which suggests that socio-cultural adaptation follows a learning curve with a steep increase for a few years, then tapering off thereafter (Ward, et al., 2001). The "restraint," "guessing and expanding" aspect of Japanese culture is what distinguishes the Japanese and keeps them unique from the rest of the world (Ramsey & Birk,

1985). It seemed for some time that non-Japanese can never comprehend or participate in this style of silent communication. The data from this investigation suggest that this is not so. Adjustment to the practice of bowing is a cognitive and behavioral change resulting from interactions with host nationals. Like the other skills that facilitate culture learning, effective interaction with members of the host country positively influences adjustment process. Those coming from extremely different culture from Japan take longer time to adapt.

There are a number of factors related to intercultural sensitivity that are not within the scope of this study. Foremost is the personality factor. It is important to effectively determine different levels of sensitivity, for instance by using the intercultural potential adjustment scale (Matsumoto, et al., 2003). This study is exploratory and needs refinement of instrument in the future.

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