Concepts and Questions

1. What does Andersen mean when he writes that "the primary level of culture is communicated implicitly, without awareness, and chiefly by nonverbal means"?
2. Do you agree with Andersen that two of the most fundamental nonverbal differences in intercultural communication involve space and time? From your experiences, what two nonverbal areas have you found most troublesome when interacting with people from different cultures?
3. From your personal experiences, can you think of different ways in which people in various cultures greet, show emotion, and beckon?
4. Do you believe that intercultural communication problems are more serious when they involve nonverbal communication or verbal communication?
5. What is kinesic behavior? How does it vary from one culture to another? What types of communication problems can be caused by cultural differences in kinesic behavior?
6. The term haptics refers to patterns of tactile communication. How does tactile communication differ between cultures? Can you think of examples of how tactile communication differs among members of co-cultures? What type of communication problems might arise when people with different touching orientations interact?
7. How does physical appearance affect first impressions during interaction? How are expectations of physical appearance related to the informal-formal dimension of culture?
8. How does immediacy affect interpersonal interaction? What differences in behaviors would you expect from high- and low-contact cultures? In what way would violations of immediacy expectations affect intercultural communication?
9. How is the degree of individualism within cultures manifested in nonverbal behavior?

Japanese Nonverbal Communication: A Reflection of Cultural Themes

EDWIN R. MCDANIEL

Modern technological advances have made the world a much smaller place, promoting increased interactions between peoples of different nations and cultures. Growing international economic interdependencies and expanding multinational security alliances have significantly increased the importance of effective intercultural encounters. Individuals from diverse cultures are interacting with each other more and more frequently—in professional, diplomatic, and social venues.

The most critical aspect of this burgeoning transnational intercourse is, of course, communication. The ability to understand and be understood is central to successful cross-cultural activities. Comprehension, however, must go beyond a topical awareness of another culture's communicative practices and behaviors. An appreciation of the cultural antecedents and motivations shaping an individual's communication conventions is necessary for understanding how and why a particular practice is used.

An established method of explaining the cultural motivations of human behavior is to identify and isolate consistent themes among a social grouping. Anthropological writings have posited that each culture manifests a "limited number of dynamic affirmations" (Opler, 1945, p. 198), referred to as themes. According to Opler, these cultural themes promote and regulate human behavioral activities that are societally encouraged and condoned. To illustrate this approach, Opler used an examination of the social relations of the Lipan Apaches to demonstrate how thematic study could provide insight into cultural beliefs and behaviors.

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In communication studies, the concept of thematic commonality has been used by Burgoon and Hale (1984, 1987) to help explicate relational communications. They conceptualized a series of "interrelated message themes" (Burgoon & Hale, 1987, p. 19), which have been purported to have application to both verbal and nonverbal exchanges. These proposed themes, or topic, have become a supposition cited in studies of interpersonal relations communication (e.g., Buller & Burgoon, 1986; Coker & Burgoon, 1987; Spitzberg, 1989).

Burgoon and Hale's (1984) concept of identifying consistent themes to assist in the explanation of a communication process possesses significant utility for additional, more comprehensive employment. The innovation has clear application to the study of culture-specific communication predispositions.

Using the Japanese as a cultural model, this essay makes practical application of the thematic consistency concept advanced by Opler (1945, 1946) and Burgoon and Hale (1984, 1987). The objective is to illustrate how nonverbal communication practices function as a reflection, or representation, of societal cultural themes. Employing a standard taxonomy of nonverbal communication codes and addressing each individually, the essay discusses cultural themes influencing and manifested by the code in a propositional format. Additionally, the essay strives to demonstrate how cultural influences can subtly shape a society's communication conventions.

**JAPANESE CULTURAL THEMES**

Japan's predominantly homogeneous population embodies a particularly rich array of cultural themes. The more prevalent themes include group affiliation (collectivism), hierarchy, social balance or harmony (wa), empathy, mutual dependency, perseverance and sacrifice (gaman), humility, and formality (ritual, tradition, and protocol) (Caudill, 1973; Lebra, 1976; Reischauer, 1988).

Confucian-based collectivism exerts a significant influence on Japanese communication patterns. The nation's racial and cultural homogeneity creates a strong identity bond and facilitates intragroup and interpersonal familiarity. This societal closeness promotes an instinctive, nonverbal understanding among Japanese people. Their cultural similitude abets an intuitive, nonverbal comprehension by diminishing the requirement to orally specify numerous details (Bamlund, 1989; Ishii, 1984; Kinosita, 1988; Kito & Kito, 1985; Morsbach, 1988a; Nakane, 1970; Westwood & Vargo, 1985; Yum, 1988).

The Japanese concept of collectivism is epitomized by their usage of the term nihonjinron to express self-perceived uniqueness as both a nation and a people. This idea of distinctive originality provides the Japanese with a focus for social cohesiveness. Their propensity for group affiliation has created a social context referred to as uchi-soto, or inside-outside. This context can also be viewed as in-group (possessing membership) and out-group (no involvement). Within the security of their respective in-groups (uchi), the Japanese can be quite expressive and display considerable nonverbal affiliation with other members. Much less interaction will occur in an out-group (soto) situation (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984; Gudykunst, Nishida, & Schmidt, 1989; Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987; Lebra, 1976, 1993).

The hierarchical nature of Japanese society and an inexorable compulsion for social balance or harmony (wa) increase the reliance on nonverbal behaviors and concomitantly discourage verbal exchanges. A hierarchy exists in every instance of group or interpersonal interaction. In this superior–subordinate environment, the junior is socially compelled to assume a passive role, awaiting and hopefully anticipating the senior's desires or actions. The senior, desiring to exemplify humility and avoid any social or personal discord, will endeavor to nonverbally ascertain the junior's expectations.

The cultural pressure for social balance dictates the course of all Japanese activities and creates a pervasive acceptance of ambiguity and vagueness during any communication endeavor. Reluctant to arbitrarily advance personal opinions or attitudes, the Japanese will draw on the situational context and attempt to instinctively discern what the other person is thinking (Hall & Hall, 1990; Ishii, 1984; Ishii & Bruneau, 1991; Kito & Kito, 1985; Lebra, 1976; Morsbach, 1988a; Munakata, 1986; Reischauer, 1988).

The cultural trait of empathy (omoyari) also lessens the Japanese reliance on verbal exchanges. In Japan, considerable value is placed on an individual's ability to empathically determine the needs of another person. During interpersonal encounters, the Japanese often use indirect or vague statements and depend on the other person's sensitivity to ascertain the desired meaning of the interaction (Doi, 1988; Ishii, 1984; Lebra, 1976).
PROPOSITIONAL SURVEY

Considered in isolation, a nonverbal code normally provides only partial interpretation of the intended message. This study, however, is not concerned with the code's proposed message, but instead attempts to demonstrate how the code is culturally based and motivated. To this end, in each of the following propositions (denoted as P1, P2, etc., specific nonverbal communication codes are shown to reflect one or more cultural themes common to Japanese society.

P1: Japanese kinesics reflect the cultural themes of (1) group orientation, (2) hierarchy, (3) social balance, (4) formality, and (5) humility.

The Japanese employ a wide array of kinesic activities, especially gestures (Caudill & Weinstein, 1969; March, 1990; Seward, 1983). Usage, however, is situational and often limited to males (Richie, 1987). A Japanese manager, for instance, might rely on gestures to communicate with work subordinates (Sethi, 1974), thereby demonstrating the cohesive familiarity common among in-group (uchi) members.

The Japanese are more relaxed and expressive within their in-group. Away from the in-group, however, the use of body language is usually remarkably restrained (Cohen, 1991; Ishii, 1975). In public, it is common to see both Japanese men and women sitting quietly and unobtrusively; with hands folded (March, 1990). This self-restraint of body movement in out-group (soto) environments is designed to avoid attention and maintain situational harmony or balance.

As another example of concern for social balance, Japanese hand gestures are never used in reference to a person who is present at the time. Instead, they are employed when referring to some absent party (Richie, 1987). This behavior, quite naturally, reduces the opportunity for offending anyone present and helps sustain contextual harmony.

The most common activity associated with Japanese kinesics is the bow, which is an integral and repetitive part of daily social interaction. The Japanese bow is used when meeting someone, when asking for something, while apologizing, when offering congratulations, when acknowledging someone else, and when departing, to mention just a few instances. Historically a sign of submission, the bow is a contemporary ritual that continues to convey respect and denote hierarchical status. The junior person bows first, lowest, and longest. An improperly executed bow can be interpreted as a significant insult (Hendry, 1989; Ishii, 1975; Kita & Kitao, 1987, 1989; Morsbach, 1988b; Ramsey, 1979; Richie, 1987; Ruch, 1984).

Traditional Japanese women exhibit a distinct kinesic activity by obscuring facial areas with their hands or some object1 (Ishii, 1975; Ramsey, 1981). Ramsey's investigation of this phenomenon concluded that women utilized these adaptors for impression management. An explicit intent of these actions is to evoke a perception of humility when in the presence of a social superior.

P2: Japanese oculesics reflect the cultural themes of (1) hierarchy, (2) social balance, and (3) humility.

In Japan, prolonged eye contact is considered rude, threatening, and disrespectful. The Japanese are taught, from childhood, to avert their gaze or look at a person's throat. When one is part of an audience, looking away or simply sitting silently with eyes closed indicates attention to, and possibly agreement with, the speaker. Direct, sustained eye contact is normally avoided, unless a superior wants to admonish a subordinate (Hall & Hall, 1990; Ishii, 1975; Kasahara, 1986; Kita & Kitao, 1987, 1989; March, 1990; Morsbach, 1973; Richie, 1987; Ruch, 1984; Watson, 1970).

By avoiding eye contact, the participants in communication simultaneously evince an air of humility and sustain situational wa. The use of direct eye contact by a superior is a clear exercise of hierarchical prerogative (March, 1990).

P3: Japanese facial expressions reflect the cultural themes of (1) social balance and (2) gaman.

As is common to all aspects of their social behavior, the Japanese do not normally evince any significant emotion through public facial displays. The most commonly observed expressions are either a placid, unrevealing countenance or a nondescript smile, whose actual meaning or intent may be totally indecipherable. A smile can indicate happiness or serve as a friendly acknowledgment. Alternatively, it may be worn to mask negative emotions, especially displeasure, anger, or grief (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1993; Kita & Kitao, 1987, 1989; Matsunoto, 1986; Morsbach, 1973).

For the Japanese, the smile is simply a part of social etiquette, designed to help sustain harmony. In a social environment, the Japanese would consider it
unpardonable to burden someone else with an outward show of elation, irritation, or anguish. Eschewing any external display of negative emotion is an example of perseverance or self-sacrifice (ganian) to avoid disrupting the social balance (wa). The smile is also used to avoid conflict; a Japanese person might simply smile in order to avoid answering an awkward question or giving a negative answer (Ishii, 1975; Kitao & Kitao, 1987, 1989; Nakane, 1970; Ruch, 1984; Seward, 1972).

P4: Japanese proxemic behaviors reflect the cultural themes of (1) in-group affinity, (2) hierarchy, and (3) balance.

The Japanese attitude toward personal space is, on the surface, complex and often seemingly contradictory. In uncrowded situations, they assiduously strive to maintain personal space intervals that are even greater than those maintained by Americans. Conversely, when on a train or bus, they offer no resistance to frequent or even prolonged body contact with total strangers. Personal space is also close among friends or family members (Hall, 1990; Richie, 1987).

This apparent dichotomy is the result of their societal group orientation, vertical structure, and constant concern for social balance. In an uncrowded out-group environment, the Japanese maintain their personal space, which also provides a psychological barrier against the unknown, such as the hierarchical status and group affiliation of others (Ishii, 1975; Morsbach, 1973; Watson, 1970). If forced into proximity with an out-group member, the Japanese will assume a façade of imperturbable passivity in an effort to maintain situational harmony. I have often observed the Japanese projecting an air of composed detachment, while being subjected to suffocating conditions in a crowded Tokyo subway car.

Among in-group members, where strong social ties exist, personal space is dramatically reduced. Traditionally, family members commonly slept in the same room, within easy touching distance of each other (Caudill & Plath, 1966). Male white-collar coworkers (sarariman) sitting close together and patting each other on the back during after-work drinking excursions are a common sight in Japanese bars.

Japanese proxemic behavior has been the subject of several investigations. In a study involving status manipulation, Japanese subjects exhibited signs of anxiety in reaction to an interviewer’s forward lean (Bond & Shiraishi, 1974). Iwata’s (1979) study of Japanese female students disclosed that individuals with high self-esteem evinced a negative reaction to crowding. This behavior is consistent with the Japanese concept of hierarchy. Self-esteem would be proportional with social status, which would predicate greater interpersonal distance in out-group situations.

P5: Japanese tactile conventions reflect the cultural themes of (1) in-group affinity and (2) social balance.

Studies of Japanese maternal care have disclosed that children experience considerable touch from their mothers (Caudill & Plath, 1966; Caudill & Weinstein, 1969). Even today, parents and their young children often share the same bed. The amount of public tactile interaction drops dramatically, however, after childhood, and the individual is expected to conform to societal nontouch standards (Barnlund, 1975; McDaniel & Andersen, 1998; Montague, 1978). Indeed, adult Japanese actively avoid public displays of interpersonal physical expressiveness (Barnlund, 1989) unless in a close-knit in-group setting.

For adults, in-group (uchi) touching is acceptable (Lebra, 1976). This is especially evident when male coworkers are drinking (Miyamoto, 1994). In an out-group (soto) situation, touch is uncommon unless it results inadvertently from crowding, and then it is simply ignored (Ishii, 1975; Morsbach, 1973; Ramsey, 1985). These conventions again indicate the value placed on group affiliation and harmony.

P6: Japanese personal appearance reflects the cultural themes of (1) collectivism, (2) group affiliation, (3) social balance, and (4) hierarchy.

The central theme of Japanese external appearance is, quite simply, group identity and status. The ubiquitous dark suit dominates the business world, and everyone, men and women alike, normally opts for conservative styles. Small lapel pins or badges identifying the individual’s company are frequently worn. Blue-collar workers normally wear a uniform (such as coveralls or smocks) distinctive to their corporation (Condon & Yousef, 1983; Hall, 1981; Harris & Moran, 1979; March, 1990; Morsbach, 1973; Ruch, 1984).

The general proclivity for conservative dress styles and colors emphasizes the nation’s collectivism and, concomitantly, lessens the potential for social disharmony arising from nonconformist attire. Lapel pins
and uniforms signal a particular group affiliation, which in turn helps determine a person’s social position.

Although not specifically nonverbal, the Japanese business card, or meishi, must be discussed. It exerts considerable influence on Japanese nonverbal behavior and communication in general. The initial impression of an individual is derived from his or her meishi. The card must be of the appropriate size and color and, in addition to the individual’s name, list the person’s company and position. This facilitates rapid determination of the individual’s group affiliation and personal station, which dictates the correct department and appropriate speech levels for participants engaging in interpersonal dialogue (Craft, 1986; Morsbach, 1973; Ruch, 1984).

P7: Japanese use of space reflects the cultural themes of (1) hierarchy and (2) group orientation.

The Japanese hierarchical contextualization of space is best exemplified by the standard spatial array of governmental and corporate offices. Numerous desks, occupied by lower-level employees, are lined, facing each other, hierarchically in rows in a large, common room, absent of walls or partitions. The supervisors and managers are positioned at the head of each row. This organization encourages the exchange of information, facilitates multitask accomplishment, promotes group cooperation and solidarity, and facilitates rapid discernment of the work-center rank structure. Seating arrangements at any formal or semi-formal function are also based on hierarchy (Hamabata, 1990; Ramsey, 1979; Ramsey & Birk, 1983; Ruch, 1984; Takamizawa, 1988). In explaining the Japanese perception of space as a hierarchical concept, Hall (1990) offers an insightful illustration. Neighborhood houses in Japan are numbered in the order they are constructed, regardless of actual location along the street.

P8: Japanese use of time reflects the cultural themes of (1) hierarchy, (2) group orientation, and (3) social balance.

Hall and Hall (1990) have indicated that the Japanese use time polychronically among themselves and monochronically when conducting business with foreigners. The rigid adherence to schedules when dealing with foreigners is in contrast with the temporal flexibility exhibited during interactions with other Japanese. This demonstrates an ability to adjust to dynamic situations. For example, schedules may have to be altered in order to accommodate the desires of a senior, which reflects hierarchical sensitivities.

The Japanese decision-making process exhibits the influence of group orientation and social balance on the usage of time. In almost every interpersonal context, it is necessary to build a consensus before announcing a decision. This process, concerned with maintaining social balance among group members, can take days, weeks, or even months (Hall, 1988; Nakane, 1970; Stewart, 1993).

P9: Japanese vocalics reflect the cultural themes of (1) hierarchy, (2) social balance, and (3) empathy.

The Japanese make ample use of paralanguage in their conversations. During interpersonal discussions, the Japanese will constantly use small, culturally unique gestures (aizuchi) and utterances (e.g., hai, soo, un, or ee) to demonstrate their attentiveness (Harris & Moran, 1979; Nishida, 1996). These vocalics possess a cultural motivation. Hierarchy is demonstrated by the adjustment of voice tone and pitch to fit the speaker’s position of junior or senior (Morsbach, 1973). Additionally, the feedback stream indicates that the listener is paying attention to the speaker, which helps maintain positive social relations (wa) between the two individuals.

For the Japanese, laughter can possess a variety of meanings. Laughter can signal joy, of course, but it is also used to disguise embarrassment, sadness, or even anger (Seward, 1972). Use of laughter in the latter nodes is designed to maintain situational harmony and avoid any potential for interpersonal discord.

In a 1989 study, White analyzed tape-recorded English-language conversations of Americans and native Japanese. The Japanese participants used significantly more feedback responses than did the Americans. Unable to ascertain a linguistic reason for this greater use of vocalics, White (1989) concluded it was a cultural influence. The listener was believed to be exhibiting a sensitivity to the speaker’s viewpoint and feelings (in other words, expressing empathy).

P10: Japanese use of silence reflects the cultural themes of (1) hierarchy, (2) social balance, and (3) empathy.

The salient role of silence in the Japanese communication process is attributed to a general mistrust of spoken words and an emphasis on emotionally discerning the other person’s intentions (empathy). Silence is considered a virtue as well as a sign of respectability and

A pronounced feature of Japanese conversations is the many short pauses or breaks, referred to as ma. According to Matsumoto (1988), the Japanese closely attend to these brief conversational breaks. The pauses may convey meaning, demonstrate respect, or be an attempt to assess the other person or the situation (Di Mare, 1990; Doi, 1973, 1988).

Instances of ma in Japanese discourse impart a variety of messages, with the context supplying the actual meaning. Silence is used to tactfully signal disagreement, nonacceptance, or an uncomfortable dilemma. A period of silence can be used to consider an appropriate response or formulate an opinion. Also, a junior may remain silent in deference to a senior (Graham & Herberger, 1983; Morsbach, 1973; Ramsey & Birk, 1983; Ueda, 1974).

P11: The Japanese use of olfactics reflects the cultural theme of social balance.

Little information is available concerning the Japanese attitude toward odors. Kasahara (1986) asserted that the Japanese propensity for cleanliness creates a preference for an environment totally absent of odors. Although there is no supporting evidence, the near-ritualistic tradition of taking frequent baths and the desire to refrain from personal offense lends credence to this supposition.

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding propositions suggest that the use of and reliance on nonverbal communication are actually a part of Japanese behavioral psychology motivated by cultural imperatives. If this concept is accepted, the benefits of employing cultural motivations to investigate a society's nonverbal communication habits, or other communication patterns, become self-evident. Application of cultural themes to communicative dispositions could provide a salient methodology for examining and better understanding both culture-specific and intercultural communication phenomena.

Potential benefits derived from practical application of this approach are especially promising. Greater appreciation of the cultural imperatives behind communicative behaviors would directly enhance inter-cultural communication competence. An individual engaged in an intercultural communication exchange would better understand both what the other person was doing and why he or she was doing it.

The suggested design is not, however, free of limitations. Several perceived impediments exist that require additional investigation and clarification before implementation of wider theoretical application.

A particularly important aspect that demands greater inquiry relates to the identification of cultural themes. As discussed earlier, Japan presents an unusually homogeneous culture when compared with other nations. This societal singularity facilitates discernment of both cultural themes and their motivations. Moreover, the cultural themes can then be reliably applied across almost all dimensions of Japanese society.

Other societies, such as the United States, do not have the degree of cultural congruency extant in Japan. For these cases, identification and application of consistent cultural themes to the composite ethnicities is fraught with considerable difficulty and potential peril. Any motivation to stereotype themes across an entire heterogeneous populace must be tempered by a resolve to treat ethnic divisions both as separate entities and as integral parts of the greater societal whole.

Another dilemma requiring meditation concerns units of measurement. The nonverbal communication patterns of a culture are largely observable and measurable. Culture, as an entity itself and as a motivator of communication behaviors, is not, however, readily quantifiable. Most studies dealing with cultural influences have relied on recounting of personal experiences and observations (anecdotal documentation).

Many studies incorporate "culture" as a somewhat ethereal, abstract manifestation of humankind's imagination. Others have approached "culture" empirically and attempted to employ scientific measurements. Hofstede, for instance, used survey questionnaires and statistical analysis in an effort to determine the role of culture in the formation of value systems that affect "human thinking, organizations, and institutions in predictable ways" (1980, p. 11). Similarly, Osgood, May, and Miron have made noteworthy progress in statistically quantifying intangible attributes, what they term "subjective culture" (1975, p. 4).

The progress of Hofstede (1980) and Osgood, May, and Miron (1975) suggests that culture is not entirely beyond the scope of objective quantification. Their achievements provide benchmarks for empirical
Thematic universality is also an area of potential peril for theoretical application of cultural themes to communicative practices. Specifically, the investigator must not axiomatically assume that similar themes beget similar behaviors when moving among cultures. A theme prompting a specific behavioral action in one culture may generate an entirely different pattern in another cultural environment. To obviate this possible pitfall, each culture must be examined as a unique entity. The identification of common cultural themes and communication practices across a substantial number of societies is needed before theoretical application can be made on unexamined cultures.

Further investigation is also needed to determine if any of the cultural themes are codependent. For example, if hierarchy is manifested by a culture, will formality or another theme also be present?

The preceding constraints should not be interpreted as a repudiation of the proposed approach to explaining communicative practices. Rather, they are simply areas of concern that must be investigated and clarified before cultural themes can be reliably employed to help discern and understand societal communication predispositions. Resolution of these concerns will instill the concept with increased application, additional rigor, and greater parsimony.

Notes

1. Although sometimes moving at a seemingly glacial pace, culture is actually a dynamic process, as individuals avail themselves of modern technologies they are exposed to and often adopt different social practices. This diffusion of cultural behaviors can and does exert change. With this in mind, we must recognize that the nonverbal communicative behaviors of the Japanese, as discussed in this article, are undergoing change. For example, except in rural areas, one seldom sees young Japanese women place their hand over their mouth. Direct eye contact is becoming increasingly common, especially in interactions with Westerners. Public touch is becoming more acceptable, and young Japanese couples can be seen cuddling in Tokyo's parks.

2. Even this established tradition is undergoing change. A recent article in a Japanese business newspaper bemoaned the fact that many of the younger employees were eschewing the company's lapel pins.

3. This is not to suggest that the Japanese are a wholly homogenous group uninfluenced by other cultures. For example, Japan has three large minority groups—Koreans, Ainu, and Burakumin—that possess distinct cultural characteristics. In recent years, the urban areas of Japan have also experienced a growing influx of foreign workers, coming from all parts of the globe. These immigrants bring their own values, beliefs, and behaviors, some of which are diffused, in varying degrees, into the Japanese culture.

References


**Concepts and Questions**

1. What are "cultural themes," and how might we benefit from their study?
2. What are the major Japanese cultural themes that influence intercultural communication?
3. Can you think of any American cultural themes that might influence how Americans use nonverbal communication?
4. How does Confucian-based collectivism help control Japanese nonverbal communication?
5. What cultural themes are seen as the basis for Japanese kinesic behavior? Are the same or different themes active in U.S. American nonverbal behavior?
6. What are the most obvious activities associated with Japanese kinesic behavior? What would be a U.S. American counterpart?
8. What are the cultural underpinnings of silence in Japan? How does the Japanese manipulation of silence affect intercultural communication?
9. Describe differences in the use of vocals, or paralanguage, in Japan and the United States. How might these differences lead to misunderstandings during intercultural communication?
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