Communicative Styles of Japanese and Americans

Images and Realities

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O brave new world,
That has such people in't!

SHAKESPEARE, *THE TEMPEST*

Prologue

As we approach the close of the twentieth century John Donne's prophetic observation—"No man is an island, complete unto himself"—returns to haunt us. It is a pronouncement that gathers force with each passing century, a warning more relevant to our time than to his.

In spite of an expanding population, the increased proximity of people, and multiplication of opportunities for human contact, never has loneliness seemed so widespread or so loudly publicized. Despite all efforts to realize a more humane community by reducing barriers of race and class, wealth and education, such changes have only made us painfully aware of the fragile nature of our ties to other people. Rarely have human relationships seemed so tenuous and transitory as they are portrayed in the closing years of the twentieth century.

Yet personal relations, we are told, are indispensable to health and happiness. Our survival, spiritually and physically, demands that we remain in touch with others. "The most holy bond of society," writes Robert Brain, "is friendship."[1] Along with the families we are thrust into, the most important ties that nurture the individual are the voluntary alliances known as friendships.

Science and philosophy combine to stress the need for human companionship and to expose the sources of this need. We are born into and inhabit a world devoid of meaning, a world that is neutral in all its particulars. As Alfred North Whitehead once noted, "Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless, merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly."[2] Objects and events must be construed in some way in order to act upon them. Meanings arise, in short, from the necessity of acting, but they are situated in the mind of every interpreter, not in the world.

Each of us occupies the center of his or her own experiential world. Each is the creator of that world, its sole inhabitant, and the victim of whatever pleasures or pains it provides. As Gregory Stone and Harvey Faberman emphasize, "the universe presents itself as an occasion for man's creative capacities. *It is there.* It awaits his investiture of identity, meaning, value, sentiments, and rules. It is a convertible commodity—a taken, not a given; a concept, not a dictum."[3] And if all meanings are private and personal, they are also incomplete and unreliable; every interpreter is captive of a particular history and particular motive that shape the meanings events are given.

To recognize the neutrality of the world, and the role each of us plays in attributing meaning *to* events, is to grasp a little appreciated, but essential, truth about communication. It helps to explain the diversity of opinions as each person creates a meaning consistent with their past experience and current motives. But it only accounts for part of the process of communication. To be the authors of our meanings, isolated from every other influence, would condemn us to an autistic existence, not merely islands of meaning in Donne's sense, but islands separated by intervening, unnavigable seas. And such is not the case.

Cultures and Communication

The human community arises from construction of a common reality. Some agency must arise that is capable of transforming private meanings into public meanings so they may become known to others. Culture is the agency and symbols the instrument by which each new generation acquires the capacity to bridge the distance that separates one life from another. Cultures promote the sharing of meanings through creating a broad repertoire of symbolic forms. The most obvious of these is language. Certain combinations of sounds or marks on paper acquire the capacity to *re*-present the thoughts and feelings of their users. The words that make up such languages are relatively few in number and imprecise in meaning; one person can remember only a few thousand words, which must accommodate an infinity of human experiences.

In addition, there are the "languages" of mathematics, music, dance, gardens, sculpture. The multiplicity of such codes in all cultures attests to their unique suitability for giving public form to different types of private thoughts and feelings.

The spoken languages of most cultures are endowed with almost sacred power. Yet people seldom sense the full potential of any language simply by cataloging its words or deciphering its grammar. Meanings are articulated not only by the choice of words but also by their manner of utterance, through changes in stress or inflection, through accompanying gestures, facial expression, or glances. Confusion often results, for example, when foreigners phrase their thoughts correctly but fail to employ the appropriate posture or facial cues. And people often share a meaning without using words at all; an

arched eyebrow, a prolonged stare, and a quiet silence may bind them together.

Far less appreciated and understood are two broader cultural codes that promote commonality of meaning. The first might be called the "interactional grammar" of a culture. It consists of the norms that govern the structure of a conversation: how to initiate conversation, what topics to discuss or avoid, how to shift from one type of message to another, how to terminate a conversation. Human encounters rarely involve a single communicative aim such as complimenting someone or apologizing but proceed through a sequence of exchanges as the aims of the communicants change. The number of such strategies is extensive: It includes how people manage introductions, give compliments, make requests, manage conflicts, offer criticism, make decisions. Each of these strategies has a unique way of opening, a unifying theme and structure, and a conventional way of ending. When people do not agree on these interactional rules, confusion or embarrassment results. While the verbal and nonverbal symbols determine the content of a message, the interactional code determines the sequencing of such messages within extended conversations. Interactional codes are as culture bound as language is, contributing to the sharing of meanings within a culture and to misinterpretation of meanings and motives between cultures.

In addition, there is a "grammar of occasions." Cultures endow certain activities with distinctive meanings, differentiating among parties, funerals, concerts, festivals, and demonstrations. These still broader cultural norms help to define the acts that are appropriate to certain settings and in so doing influence the meanings that evolve in such settings. How people define a social activity—such as shopping, playing, worshipping, fighting—has a profound effect on what people will say and do, and how they will regard and interpret the acts of others. The study of culture in general, and of communication in particular, is concerned with this hierarchy of codes by which people form and share meanings among members of societies.

In short, to make thoughts and feelings intelligible to other people, we must use and respect the same rules for articulating and interpreting meanings. Human societies create a hierarchy of codes for regulating human interaction: Meanings must be cast into words, words arranged into messages, messages positioned in proper sequence, and such sequences situated within appropriate settings. Although such codes require some conformity from their users—whether jazz musicians, ballet dancers, or baseball teams—they greatly expand the collaborative possibilities of human beings. These shared cultural codes give the people of any community a sense of their common identity and a means of relating to one another.

For these reasons we share the view that "culture is communication."[4] In the sounds and syntax of language, the norms of social interaction, and the hierarchy of occasions one confronts a culture in its most tangible form. What the members of a culture share above all else is a way of conducting their affairs, a commitment to similar ways of managing meanings. Mastery of

these communicative norms equips each new generation with a way of forming friendships, validating their experience, and contributing to the life of their times. *It is through communication that we acquire a culture; it is in our manner of communicating that we display our cultural uniqueness.*

Yet these linguistic, interactional, and contextual norms are seldom taught formally: They tend to be absorbed unconsciously as the infant matures surrounded by parents, friends, and teachers who model appropriate behavior. Consequently, the members of any society are rarely able to explain the norms governing their conversations with other people; they simply do "what comes naturally" without much awareness of the sources of their behavior. It is for this reason that members of one culture find communicating with members of an alien culture difficult: What one does spontaneously, without thinking, at home, one must be constantly and consciously aware of away from home. Encounters become fraught with hazard when people do not recognize, or cannot employ, the same communicative norms as their associates.

Although intercultural encounters are, basically, interpersonal encounters, there is a difference. When two people of contrasting cultural backgrounds meet they are likely not only to attach different meanings to the same event (because they have acquired unique ways of interpreting the world in their own culture), but also express such meanings in distinctive ways as well (because they obey unique interactional norms). Thus a substantive difference is compounded because they do not share the same rules for addressing such differences. Until they can adapt to differences in their communicative styles there is no way to comprehend or deal with their substantive differences. If two people who speak different languages cannot share meanings, it is equally true that people who observe different interactional rules also are unlikely to share such meanings. What takes place is less a case of *not* understanding (which might not prevent eventual agreement) than of *mis*understanding (which by alienating the two people may exacerbate their differences).

Deciphering Cultural Codes

One of the complications of a shrinking world lies precisely at this point: While we have extensive information about many languages of the world, we are largely ignorant of the interactional norms that might help in communicating across cultural borders. We know almost nothing about how people of various cultures become acquainted. We do not know what behaviors attract or alienate people in forming friendships. Through what stages, in what ways, at what rate do people move from being strangers to being friends? What experiences intensify or terminate such relationships? How, if at all, are people changed by their involvement with one another? These are only a few of the questions to consider regarding personal relationships within cultures.

Even the words used to discuss such matters pose a semantic challange. "Liking" and "disliking," "loving" and "hating," are far from clear. We have only the vaguest notion of what it is to call someone an "acquaintance," "friend," or "intimate." Claims that we "know" what we mean have a hollow ring when we find we cannot specify what we know. And if friendships puzzle the social scientist, they are no less puzzling, and no less significant, for the layperson. It is through our ties with other people that we achieve our humanity and fulfill it; the depth, nature, and quality of our personal relationships are of importance not only to specialists but also to every member of the human race.

Just how might one explore the norms that regulate communication in a given culture? Perhaps the most obvious approach is to let the culture speak for itself. Why not simply ask people to explain their rules of behavior? This is not as easy or as satisfactory as it sounds. Unless people have experienced other cultures they have no basis for comparative judgment. Americans who have never been abroad sometimes describe the United States as a "formal," "cooperative," and "status-conscious" society. After being exposed to other cultures they completely reject the same descriptions. Sometimes one needs to be outside a system to see it clearly.

In addition, natives of a culture are rarely able to account for their own acts. The cultural unconscious—like the personal unconscious—is just that: unconscious. It is enough to know how to act properly within one's own culture; why such acts are necessary or desirable is not at all obvious, perhaps least to the actors themselves.

But the greatest difficulty lies in distinguishing collective myths from collective truths. Popular explanations of Japanese and American behavior are often unreliable: Some are clichés, repeated so often they are finally believed; some constitute the abstract ideals of a given society but are claimed more than they are realized in daily life; still others may offer penetrating glimpses of the cultural ethos. But, in the absence of accurate data, it is difficult to know whether one is dealing with a cultural myth, idealization, or valid insight.

A second way of understanding a culture is through exposure to the comments of sophisticated and careful observers. The cultural profiles of Alexis de Tocqueville (on the United States), Octavio Paz (on Mexico), or Doi Takeo (on Japan) have been immensely provocative. Through specialized training such critics have acquired a unique sensibility to facets of social behavior. Their background equips them with an informed intelligence for interpreting what they observe. But their intuitions, like all intuitions, are born of a singular subjective experience and subject to that limitation. Still, the attention they receive is fully deserved, and their insights offer provocative hypotheses concerning the dynamics of the cultures they have observed.

A third way to approach culture, and the one to be followed here, is to undertake a careful *description* of how people relate to one another in search

of the norms that regulate social acts in Japan and the United States. Three features distinguish this approach: It is focused, it is empirical, it is systematic. The aim is to create an agenda for inquiry, design instruments for reporting how people behave with their associates, and identify similarities and differences in behavior in the two cultures.

The pages that follow explore the interpersonal worlds of Japanese and Americans. What is sought, beyond the facts, is the pattern that connects, that links one behavior with another. The approach is unique: It employs neither the psychic focus of the psychologist nor the institutional focus of the sociologist, but looks instead at the social norms that operate when Japanese and Americans communicate with strangers, acquaintances, friends, and intimates.

There is a paucity of just such data. Even in the West, where there is great interest in the factors that govern the choice of friends and spouses, the emphasis has been on experimental manipulation of one or two variables—proximity of residence, physical attractiveness, personal traits, beliefs and values—rather than on describing how companions communicate in real life.

But what behavioral data should be sought? The possibilities are staggering. One might study people at work or play, neighbors or colleagues, in public or private settings, intimate or distant relationships. Some narrowing of the field is essential. Too wide a scope of inquiry sacrifices depth; too narrow an inquiry may fail to see the pattern that gives meaning to the details. Here we decided to sample Japanese and American behavior across a spectrum of social encounters involving strangers, acquaintances, friends, and intimates. To this end we asked a large number of Japanese and Americans to describe in detail their actual behavior with the people who made up their circle of companions: who they knew, where they met, what activities they shared, what they talked about, what commitments they made, what impact these relationships had upon them.

Before you examine our findings, two caveats are in order. Remember that culture has no objective existence. It is no more than a metaphor, a fiction inferred from consistency in the daily acts of individuals. It is too easy to reify this concept. Cultures are not artifacts but explanatory generalizations based on the way people make their living, compete or collaborate with one another. Consistency in behavior leads to postulating the existence of a culture to account for the similarity in Japanese or French or American behavior.

Similarly, personalities do not have an objective existence. The human personality also is a fiction, an explanatory metaphor inferred from acts over time. What differentiates one person from another—motives, needs, interests—is never directly observable but is derived from consistencies in their actions from one setting to another. Although it is convenient to talk about people as if they *had* a personality or *had* a culture, neither is tangible; they are constructs rather than concretes. Their value lies in the number and importance of the behaviors they explain or predict.

The broad contours of this comparative study are suggested here; the details will unfold in the pages ahead. We look first at the existing images of communication in the twentieth century. Since human relationships do not mature in a vacuum but are shaped powerfully by the environment in which they arise, we next examine the vast changes in the material conditions of life in the twentieth century. Critics maintain that industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization have undermined or invalidated traditional forms of companionship, forcing people into dehumanizing ways of relating. Yet these conditions seem to have been assimilated in different ways in Japan and the United States; each culture may throw light on the alternate style of the other. The character of these emerging patterns of human relations is examined through over one million responses to the Barnlund-Campbell Dimensions of Interpersonal Relations inventory in both countries.

These questionnaires, administered to nearly a thousand Japanese and Americans, included eight scales covering a wide span of communicative behavior with the people who make up the circles of acquaintances of these respondents. They reflect on the frequency of social encounters, the content of conversation, the character of physical contact, how space and time are managed, the nature and depth of commitment, ways of accommodating differences, and the impact of involvement on the personalities involved. The relative influence of cultural and sexual identifications is probed. Thus the study attempts both an extensive and intensive look at the communicative styles of members of these two cultures; it affords an opportunity to compare cultural myths and cultural realities in Japan and the United States, and to speculate on their consequences for the individual and society.

Why these two cultures? There are several reasons. Each is a prominent and powerful member of the world community and will continue to be so for decades to come; any improved understanding of their cultural dynamics may provide some glimpse of the future. A more compelling reason is that Japan and the United States each seem to have adapted to the challenges of the modern age in contrasting ways; both have much to offer and much to learn from the other. Further, their cultural distinctiveness is most apparent in their communicative styles. Finally, our respect for both cultures, along with the presence of talented colleagues in both countries, made such a study feasible and appealing.

For anyone contemplating cross-cultural research there should be a flashing light that reads "Dangerous Intersection Ahead!" Cultures are elusive and complex objects of inquiry; they must be handled with care. The manifestations of culture are everywhere, yet this multiplicity of evidence may overwhelm the observer. One must identify certain particulars to study them, yet isolating them may divorce them from the contexts that give them meaning. And even the most prominent features of a society may change as they are being interpreted.

If cultures are awkward phenomena to study, the methodological challenges of cross-cultural study are even more complicated. Which features are

to be compared? What may be significant in one country may be trivial in another. There is a major problem in constructing instruments that are sufficiently comprehensive and sufficiently sensitive to cover behavior in both societies. Not only must instruments possess linguistic equivalence—through forward and backward translation—but they must be experientially equivalent as well.

The phrase "forward and backward translation" describes a procedure for making instruments used in two or more cultures linguistically equivalent. After the instrument has been constructed in one language, a copy is given to a bilingual specialist(s) to translate into the second language (forward translation). This second version is then given to another bilingual specialist(s) who independently translates the instrument into the first language (backward translation). The two copies of the instrument are then compared. Where they are an exact copy of each other, it is assumed they are linguistically similar; where they are not, the researchers modify the original instrument until the two versions produce an equivalent test form [often checked by a third bilingual specialist(s)].

While this procedure will assure that the forms used in the two cultures are linguistically alike, there is another form of equivalence that is often more critical. We would refer to this as experiential equivalence. It is not enough that the two forms say the same things or ask equivalent questions with respect to the terms used, but they must be comparable experiences within the two cultures. If people in one culture travel by plane and in the other by train, then finding equivalent terms in both languages is not enough. The experiences referred to in the instrument may have to be adapted to each culture, and that may mean that some items deliberately differ in the two forms used but they do so in the interests of comparability of the life experiences.

Japanese and American Associates

As one might imagine, all of this requires extended sacrifices of time and money. This effort is no exception: It has taken a decade to complete and has involved dozens of colleagues and hundreds of respondents in both countries. Last, there is the necessity of interpreting the results and sharing them with the public. It seems important that behavioral scientists resist the temptation to publish their findings in an esoteric jargon to a minuscule community of specialists; any understanding of what stifles or fosters our humanity rightly belongs to all who might benefit from it. Here we address that wider audience, which requires some adjustment in format and style.[5]

When the subject is human behavior, researcher and reader share a unique relationship. When physicists speak, no ordinary person challenges their conclusions for few know enough to raise objection. This is not the case with social life.[6] As George Homans reminds us, "Nothing is more familiar to men than their ordinary, everyday social behavior; and should a sociologist make any generalization about it, he runs the risk that his readers will find

him wrong at the first word and cut him off without a hearing."[7] We are all experts, of sorts, on human relationships: We all have them, have all succeeded in them, have all failed in them.

Yet the socially responsible social scientist would not want it any other way. When the experience of readers confirms or challenges the findings of research, readers ought to talk back. Specialist and nonspecialist alike benefit from such a dialogue: the specialist from sharpening his or her conclusions about human nature, the nonspecialist from the wider perspective that research provides. To obtain a clearer view of our own behavior is the first emancipating step toward choosing rather than blindly following norms that may promote or limit a fuller realization of our humanity.

Difficult and complicated as cross-cultural research may be, the argument for it is compelling. In "Reconstituting the Human Community," the delegates to Colloquium III in Bellagio, Italy, concluded: "There is an urgent need for study and research in the many problems of intercultural relations and the history of culture-contact and culture-change, a field largely neglected by today's social scientists. Here is an area deserving of the highest priority."[8] At present what little cross-cultural research occurs is made possible by the perseverance of a small group of highly dedicated people.

This study, a decade in process, received an initial grant from the Japan Foundation to permit collection of data in Japan. A Faculty Development Grant from San Francisco State University funded the initial phase of computer processing of the findings. The Agency for International Development was instrumental in securing the assistance of specialists abroad.

No prefatory comment can possibly express my indebtedness to Dr. Kay Campbell. Together we spent nearly a year conceptualizing and designing the Barnlund-Campbell Dimensions of Interpersonal Relations inventory, an instrument consisting of eight subscales and over fifteen hundred items. She remained associated with the project throughout the long and tedious process of entering and computer processing the accumulated data. Nomura Naoki and Araki Shoko, although heavily involved in their own graduate research at the time, contributed hundreds of hours to transferring the questionnaire data into suitable form for computer analysis. It is fitting that this collaboration itself reflects the qualities of affection and commitment that the study sought to explore.

In Japan, as well, close colleagues provided continuous encouragement and endless assistance. Without their help so large an undertaking would certainly have failed. Sano Masako and David Reid carried out the forward and backward translation of the research instruments, often making perceptive suggestions for its improvement. Huge Burelson, Chief, Policy and Research Division, USIS, gave the questionnaire its final critical reading in both languages and arranged for its printing and distribution.

In cross-cultural research not only must culturally appropriate instruments be constructed but also equivalent samples must be obtained and the instruments must be consistently administered by speakers of both languages.

In this case over a dozen professionals in Japan and the United States helped. To all the scholars listed below, a note of special gratitude for their critical support of this undertaking.

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Cross-cultural research may serve as a model of international cooperation because it involves diverse talents, collaborative effort, empathic communication, and sustained effort. And it creates strong bonds of allegiance distinguished by mutual respect and deep affection.

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Contents