

Japanese Communication

Avoidance, anxiety, and uncertainty during initial encounters

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Abstract

This research explores the behavior (avoidance), feelings (anxiety), and thoughts (uncertainty) of Japanese people in communication during initial encounters with strangers of the same and different cultures in Japan and in a foreign culture. The aim of the study is to explore whether the cultural background of the stranger and the cultural context where the encounter takes place influences avoidance, anxiety, and uncertainty in Japanese people. The results show that in Japan, anxiety was not significantly different in encounters with conational and foreign strangers. However, uncertainty was higher in encounters with foreign strangers than in the encounters with conational strangers. In Germany, on the other hand, Japanese uncertainty when meeting a conational stranger was higher than uncertainty when meeting a foreign stranger; whereas Japanese anxiety in initial encounters with foreign strangers was higher than in initial encounters with conational strangers. Avoidance of encounter and of communication was not significantly different in initial encounters with conational and foreign strangers in Japan or Germany. Comparing the variables in both countries, the data revealed that Japanese anxiety in encounters with foreign strangers was higher in Germany than in Japan. Japanese uncertainty in encounter with conational and foreign strangers was lower in Germany than in Japan. In addition, in Germany, Japanese people's difficulty predicting foreign strangers' behavior decreased more than the difficulty predicting the behavior of a conational stranger. Lastly, neither the cultural background of the stranger nor the cultural environment where communication took place influenced Japanese behavior in initial encounters with strangers.

Many Japanese tend to avoid communication with non-Japanese because they consider it an unpleasant experience. Japanese perceive their communication style as greatly different from the communication styles of their foreign counterparts (KOWNER, 2002). Scholars have focus on the shyness (*hazukashisa*) Japanese feel when approached by foreigners (ETO, 1977). According to Eto, the shyness is the result of the fear of failure in the communication process with strangers from different cultures. Eto has also associated Japanese cultural homogeneity with communication difficulties. Because Japanese are one of the

most homogeneous people, there is the assumption that one's own perceptions do not differ from those of other Japanese, whereas Westerners generally believe that others naturally have different feelings from their own. Previous studies have shown that Japanese people also exhibit a high level of communication apprehension when communicating with their compatriots in Japan (KLOPF, 1984; KEATEN, KELLY, & PRIBYL, 1997). Hence, the problem of communication with foreigners could be merely an extension of a general difficulty with communication.

Although the explanations mentioned above account for part of the communication difficulties manifested by Japanese when interacting with foreigners and conationals, they do not take into account the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of Japanese communication. Moreover, previous studies do not take into account the influence of the cultural environment where communication is taking place. In an attempt to better understand Japanese communication, the present study examines the behavior, emotions, and thoughts of Japanese people in their first encounters with conational and foreign strangers in Japan and in a foreign culture (Germany). Understanding the factors that influence Japanese communication with strangers is critical to the development of favorable interpersonal and intercultural relations.

Avoidance, anxiety, and uncertainty in communication with strangers

This study uses Wood's (1934) definition of the meeting of strangers as "the first face-to-face meeting of individuals who have not known one another before" (p.43–44). Communication with strangers is one type of situation that is potentially replete with novelty, unfamiliarity, anxiety, and uncertainty. Uncertainty is a cognitive phenomenon. There are at least two distinct types of uncertainty: predictive and explanatory. Predictive uncertainty is the lack of ability to predict others' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behaviors (BERGER & CALABRESE, 1975). Explanatory uncertainty refers to the inability to explain the behavior, attitudes, feelings, thoughts and beliefs (e.g., making casual attributions) of strangers. According to Turner (1988), to be motivated to interact with strangers, we need to 'trust' others. We need to feel that they are, to some degree, reliable and predictable.

Anxiety is the affective (emotional) equivalent of uncertainty (GUDYKUNST & NISHIDA, 2001). Anxiety has been defined as a "generalized or unspecified sense of disequilibrium" (TURNER, 1988, p.61). Anxiety is based on the anticipation of negative consequences (STEPHAN & STEPHAN, 1985). We experience an increase in our anxiety level when we communicate with strangers. Stephan and Stephan (1985) argue that when individuals communicate with members of other groups (e.g., encounters with strangers of different cultures), they often experience higher levels of anxiety than when communicating with members of their own group (e.g., encounters with strangers of the same culture). Turner (1988) contends that if anxiety is too high, individuals will not be motivated to communicate with others; instead, they will try to avoid them.

Avoidance is considered to be one of the behavioral consequences of high anxiety (STEPHAN & STEPHAN, 1985). We avoid strangers because it allows us to manage our anxiety. When we experience anxiety and we are unable to avoid the interaction with strangers, we tend to terminate the interaction as soon as possible (GUDYKUNST, 2002). Avoidance, therefore, is behavior that prevents communication by eluding the encounter or the opportunity for communication with the stranger.

Within this study, two kinds of avoidance are considered: avoidance of encounter and avoidance of communication. Avoidance of encounter is characterized by evading contact with strangers, thereby ensuring that there is no opportunity for an initial conversation. The transmission of messages through non-verbal communication, such as standing or sitting away from other people, avoiding eye contact, and standing with arms folded, signals to others that a person is not interested in communication. All these messages tend to reduce communication initiation attempts from others. Similarly, verbal communication is substantially reduced when a person wishes to withdraw from communication. Avoidance of communication occurs when the encounter could not be avoided and some communication has taken place. The person avoids sharing information with the stranger, and attempts to finish the conversation as soon as possible.

Cultural context of communication

The cultural context in which the communication is taking place has an important influence on avoidance, anxiety, and uncertainty in communication during initial encounters with strangers.

Cultures promote distinctive communicative norms, which influence the personal style of communication of the members of a determined culture. Differences in child rearing practices may give rise to a difference in communicative focus as well. Each society interprets and attributes meaning to events in a particular way. Therefore, communication between cultures is communication between different systems of logic. Since a culture is essentially a value system, it cannot tolerate or completely understand a different values system. Values describe patterns, which give a sense of order, stability, and predictability to a culture. Values are a kind of organizing tool for outsiders, who have to conform with what members of the society believe to be good. Values change slowly and they are reflected in the language. Frequently the values approach gives a broader perspective. Values help to define situations in intercultural communication and help to clarify certain problems that are encountered in such situations. One way to make a person aware of his own values and assumptions is by putting him in direct contact with somebody who thinks and acts differently.

When people are engaged in communication, the context in which that communication takes place can have a strong impact on the interaction due to communication norms and competencies that are culture-bound. The actual situation in which intercultural communication occurs affects the result of the interaction.

After all, personal relationships and communicative acts always reflect the context in which they are set. Time, place, and culture shape every moment and every human encounter.

To date, there are not enough data on the way Japanese people behave, feel, or think during their first encounters with strangers. The first purpose of the present study, therefore, is to study Japanese avoidance (behavior), anxiety (feelings), and uncertainty (thinking) in communication with strangers of the same and different cultures. Moreover, there is not enough information on how the cultural context influences the way Japanese people behave, feel, or think during initial encounters with strangers. Hence, the second purpose of this study is to explore the influence of the cultural context on Japanese avoidance, anxiety, and uncertainty.

To examine the influence of the strangers' cultural background on Japanese avoidance, anxiety, and uncertainty, the following hypotheses are proposed for study:

- Hypothesis 1: Japanese avoidance of encounter and communication is higher in initial encounters with foreign strangers than in initial encounter with conational strangers in Japan.
- Hypothesis 1a: Japanese avoidance of encounter and communication is higher in initial encounters with foreign strangers than in initial encounter with conational strangers in Germany.
- Hypothesis 2: Japanese anxiety is higher in initial encounters with foreign strangers than in initial encounters with conational strangers in Japan.
- Hypothesis 2a: Japanese anxiety is higher in initial encounters with foreign strangers than in initial encounters with conational strangers in Germany.
- Hypothesis 3: Japanese uncertainty is higher in initial encounters with foreign strangers than in initial encounters with conational strangers in Japan.
- Hypothesis 3a: Japanese uncertainty is higher in initial encounters with foreign strangers than in initial encounters with conational strangers in Germany.

To further examine the influence of the cultural environment on Japanese avoidance, anxiety and uncertainty in initial encounters with foreign and conational strangers, the following hypothesis is proposed for study:

- Hypothesis 4: Avoidance, anxiety and uncertainty in Japanese communication with both foreign and conational strangers are higher in Germany than in Japan.

Method

To test the four hypotheses, data were collected in Japan and in Germany describing communication during initial interactions between strangers from both the same culture (Japanese-Japanese) and from different cultures (Japanese-foreign).

Respondents

The respondents in Japan were 114 Japanese university students who answered questions about communication with other Japanese university students and with an international student during their initial encounters at their universities in Japan. There were 57 (50%) males and 57 (50%) females in the sample. 76 respondents (67%) were undergraduate students, and 38 (33%) were graduate students. The average age of the sample was 21.4 (SD= 3.04).

The respondents in Germany were 19 Japanese university students who went to Germany for a month to learn the German language. There were 4 (21%) males and 15 (79%) females in the sample. All were undergraduate students. The average age of the sample was 20.8 (SD= 1.05).

Materials

Respondents answered questions regarding their initial communication with a stranger of the same sex that they recently met at their University. The questionnaire had three parts: background information, communication with foreign strangers, and communication with Japanese strangers.

The questionnaire was constructed in English and translated to Japanese. Several bilingual Japanese/English speakers verified the translation with discussion.

Measurement

Avoidance. Avoidance of encounter was measured using 4 items, regarding the behavior of the respondents during their first encounters with strangers, before they had had a conversation with them: "When I saw this person, but before I had had a conversation with him or her ____." "I maintained a great distance", "I showed that I was interested in talking to him/her", "I approached him/her as usual", "I took the initiative to talk with him or her". The respondents were asked to choose one of the four items. The items imply an incremental degree of avoidance. The first item shows the highest avoidance and the last item the lowest.

Avoidance of communication was measured using 6 items, regarding the behavior of the respondents after meeting a stranger for the first time: "After having had a conversation with that person at my university ____." "I was open to sharing my personal experiences with him/her", "I asked questions about his/her personal experiences", "I created circumstances to get together with him/her

again in the future”, “I was invited to attend parties that he or she organized”, “I invited him or her to participate in social activities with my group of friends”, “I tried to finish the conversation as soon as possible”(*). The item marked (*) contained reversed scoring. The responses were yes or no. Yes implied that there was no avoidance, while no implied that there was avoidance.

Anxiety. Anxiety was measured using 10 items adapted from Stephan and Stephan (1985), which were used by Gudykunst and Nishida (2001). The items took the general form: “I felt _____ when I met this person for the first time.” The adjectives used were calm*, frustrated, confused, worried, anxious, relaxed*, irritated, impatient, comfortable*, and awkward. The responses ranged from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. The higher the score, the greater the anxiety. The items marked (*) were reversed for scoring.

Uncertainty. Uncertainty was assessed by modifying Gudykunst and Nishida's (1986) low and high-context measure of attributional confidence, which incorporates Clatterbuck's (1979) attributional confidence scale. Low-context attributional confidence is based on low-context communication (Hall, 1976; e.g., direct, precise). The low-context attributional confidence items were presented as follows: “When I met him/her for the first time, I was confident in my ability to predict this person's _____”. The predictions were about the person's behavior, attitude, feelings, values, willingness to communicate, feelings about himself/herself, what he/she meant when they communicated.

High-context attributional confidence is based on uncertainty reduction during high-context communication (HALL, 1976; e.g., indirect, ambiguous). The high-context attributional confidence items were presented as follows: “When I met him/her for the first time, I was confident that _____”. “He/she would make allowances for me when we communicated”, “He/she could understand my feelings when we communicated”; and “He/she would like me”. The response scale was the same as it was for anxiety. The higher the score, the higher the uncertainty.

Results

Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations for the variables in Japanese communication with strangers from different cultures (Japanese – foreign) and from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) in Japan and in Germany.

A 2-tailed *t*-test was used to assess the differences between avoidance of encounter and avoidance of communication, anxiety, and uncertainty in Japanese communication with strangers from the same and different cultures.

In Japan, avoidance of encounter ($M=1.02$ $SD=0.64$) and avoidance of communication ($M=3.38$ $SD=1.27$) in initial encounters of strangers from different cultures (Japanese – foreign), were not found to be significantly higher than avoidance of encounter ($M=0.99$ $SD=0.65$) [$t=0.74$, D.F.=110, $p=0.46$] and avoidance of communication ($M=3.10$ $SD=1.35$) [$t=1.63$, D.F.=108, $p=0.10$] in communication between strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese). These results force the rejection of Hypothesis 1.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations in Japan and in Germany

Variables	Group	Mean	SD
Avoidance of encounter (Japanese – foreign)	Japan	1.02	0.64
	Germany	1.16	0.60
Avoidance of encounter (Japanese – Japanese)	Japan	0.99	0.65
	Germany	1.16	0.60
Avoidance of communication (Japanese – foreign)	Japan	3.38	1.27
	Germany	3.11	1.28
Avoidance of communication (Japanese – Japanese)	Japan	3.10	1.35
	Germany	3.16	0.76
Anxiety (Japanese – foreign)	Japan	3.03	1.10
	Germany	3.94	1.06
Anxiety (Japanese – Japanese)	Japan	2.91	0.92
	Germany	2.96	0.82
Uncertainty (Japanese – foreign)	Japan	4.80	0.98
	Germany	2.55	0.89
Uncertainty (Japanese – Japanese)	Japan	4.29	1.09
	Germany	3.12	0.89

Similarly, in Germany, avoidance of encounter ($M=1.16$ $SD=0.60$) and avoidance of communication ($M=3.11$ $SD=1.28$) in communication between strangers from different cultures (Japanese – foreign), were not found to be significantly higher than avoidance of encounter ($M=1.16$ $SD=0.60$) [$t=0.35$, $D.F.=18$, $p=0.54$] and avoidance of communication ($M=3.16$ $SD=0.76$) [$t=-0.23$, $D.F.=18$, $p=0.81$] in communication between strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese). These results confirm the rejection of Hypothesis 1a.

In Japan, anxiety ($M=3.03$, $SD=1.10$) in communication between strangers from different cultures (Japanese – foreign) was not found to be significantly higher than anxiety ($M=2.91$, $SD=0.92$) [$t=1.97$, $D.F.=110$, $p=0.05$] in communication between strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese). Hypothesis 2 is thus rejected. In Germany, on the contrary, anxiety ($M=3.94$, $SD=1.06$) in communication between strangers from different cultures (Japanese – foreign) was found to be significantly higher than anxiety ($M=2.96$, $SD=0.82$) [$t=4.13$, $D.F.=18$, $p=0.001$] in communication between strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese). This result supports Hypothesis 2a.

In Japan, uncertainty in communication between strangers from different cultures (Japanese – foreign) ($M=4.80$, $SD=0.98$) was found to be significantly higher than uncertainty in communication between strangers of the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=4.29$, $SD=1.09$) [$t=5.73$, $D.F.=110$, $p=0.000$]. This result supports Hypothesis 3.

In Germany, on the contrary, uncertainty ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.89$) was higher in Japanese encounters with conational strangers (Japanese – Japanese) than in encounters with foreign strangers (Japanese – foreign) ($M=2.55$, $SD=0.89$) [$t=-3.12$, $D.F.=18$, $p=0.006$]. These results contradict Hypothesis 3a.

ANOVA analysis was used to assess the differences between the variables in Japan and Germany. Japanese anxiety in initial encounters with strangers from a different culture (Japanese – foreign) was the only variable significantly higher in Germany ($M=3.94$, $SD=1.06$) than in Japan ($M=3.03$, $SD=1.10$) [$F(1,113)=10.98$, $p=0.001$].

Japanese uncertainty in initial encounters with strangers from a different culture (Japanese – foreign) ($M=4.80$, $SD=0.98$) and from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=4.29$, $SD=1.09$) in Japan was significantly higher than Japanese uncertainty in initial encounters with strangers from a different culture (Japanese – foreign) ($M=2.55$, $SD=0.89$) [$F(1,113)=85.41$, $p=0.000$] and the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.89$) [$F(1,11)=19.13$, $p=0.000$] in Germany.

Avoidance of encounter with strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=0.99$, $SD=0.65$), avoidance of encounter with strangers from different cultures (Japanese – foreign) ($M=1.02$, $SD=0.64$), avoidance of communication with strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=3.10$, $SD=1.35$) and from different cultured (Japanese – foreign) ($M=3.38$, $SD=1.27$) in Japan were not found significantly different from avoidance of encounter with strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=1.16$, $SD=0.60$) [$F(1,10)=1.08$, $p=0.30$], avoidance of encounter with strangers from a different culture (Japanese – foreign) ($M=1.16$, $SD=0.60$) [$F(1,13)=0.72$, $p=0.39$], avoidance of communication with strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=3.16$, $SD=0.76$) [$F(1,10)=0.03$, $p=0.84$] and from a different culture (Japanese – foreign) ($M=3.11$, $SD=1.28$) [$F(1,13)=0.70$, $p=0.40$] in Germany. Similarly, Japanese anxiety in initial encounters with strangers from the same culture in Japan (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=2.91$, $SD=0.92$) was not found significantly different from anxiety in initial encounters with strangers from the same culture (Japanese – Japanese) ($M=2.96$, $SD=0.82$) [$F(1,10)=0.52$, $p=0.81$] in Germany. These results reject Hypothesis 4 except for the case of Japanese anxiety in initial encounters with strangers from a different culture.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine Japanese behavior before the conversation started (avoidance of encounter), behavior after conversation started (avoidance of communication), feelings (anxiety), and thoughts (uncertainty) in communication during initial encounters with conational and foreign strangers within their home cultural environment (Japan) and in a foreign cultural environment (Germany). This study, consequently, aimed to evaluate the influence

on Japanese avoidance, anxiety, and uncertainty of the strangers' cultural background and of the cultural environment where initial encounters took place.

According to the results, neither the cultural background of the stranger nor the cultural environment where communication took place influenced Japanese behavior (avoidance) in initial encounters with strangers. Avoidance in encounters with foreign and conational strangers before engaging in conversation (avoidance of encounter) and after conversation started (avoidance of communication) was not significantly different. Furthermore, avoidance in encounters and communication with conational and foreign strangers in Japan and in Germany were alike. Japanese people behaved similarly when meeting a foreign or a conational stranger in both cultural environments, Japan and Germany. These results suggest that even though Japanese might have felt or thought differently depending on whom and where they met for the first time (results discussed below), those emotions and thoughts were not reflected in their behavior.

Moreover, the data suggest that in Japan, the cultural background of the stranger did not influence Japanese feelings (anxiety), whereas in Germany the cultural background of the stranger had a significant influence on Japanese anxiety. The tension or stress (anxiety) Japanese experienced when meeting a foreign stranger for the first time was not significantly higher than the tension they experienced when meeting conational strangers in Japan. In other words, meeting strangers from either the same or different cultures was equally stressful for Japanese people in Japan.

In Germany, on the contrary, the tension (anxiety) that Japanese people experienced in initial encounters with foreign strangers was significantly higher than the tension they experienced in initial encounters with conational strangers. This result could be due to the influence of the cultural environment or/and personality features of the group. Anxiety in Japan and in Germany was compared to assess the influence of the cultural environment. Initial encounters with foreign strangers caused more anxiety to Japanese people when the encounter took place abroad (Germany) than when it took place in Japan. Therefore, the cultural environment where the communication took place seems to influence the tension (anxiety) that Japanese people experienced in initial encounters with foreign strangers but not with conational strangers. The fact that the anxiety that Japanese people felt in initial encounters with foreign strangers was higher in Germany than in Japan is a natural reaction. In their own cultural environment, Japanese would tend to feel more protected even when they are meeting strangers from a different culture, whereas being in a foreign environment increased Japanese stress or tension (anxiety), because both the stranger and the environment were unfamiliar.

In addition, the data suggest that the strangers' cultural background influenced Japanese people's ability to predict strangers' behavior (uncertainty) in Japan and in Germany. However, the pattern of uncertainty was different in each country. In Japan, uncertainty in initial encounters with foreign strangers was significantly higher than uncertainty in initial encounters with a conational

stranger. Thus, lack of confidence in predicting or explaining strangers' behavior appeared more problematic when meeting foreign strangers than when meeting conational strangers in Japan. In other words, Japanese people could more easily anticipate or explain the behavior of strangers from their own culture (another Japanese) than the behavior of a foreign stranger in Japan. In Germany, on the contrary, Japanese uncertainty in initial encounters with other Japanese people was significantly higher than the uncertainty in initial encounters with foreign strangers. These results suggest that Japanese people found it more difficult to anticipate or explain the way another Japanese would behave than the way a foreign strangers would behave during initial encounters in Germany. The Japanese had confidence in their ability to anticipate a conational stranger's behavior in their home culture because they know how Japanese people behave in Japan. Conformity to and identity with the group are dominant values in Japan. The group is more important than the individual and the Japanese tend to modify their opinions to be consistent with those of others around them (NAKANE, 1974). Nevertheless, the Japanese were not certain how Japanese people will behave, feel or think in a foreign country. In contrast, they felt they could predict or explain German peoples' behavior more easily than Japanese peoples' behavior.

Uncertainty in Japan and in Germany were compared to assess the influence of the cultural context where the encounter took place. The results demonstrate that the cultural environment influenced Japanese ability to predict and explain the behavior of strangers from the same culture and from a different culture. Uncertainty in initial encounters with both conational and foreign strangers decreased in Germany. Japanese revealed fewer difficulties in predicting or explaining conational and foreign strangers' behavior in Germany than in Japan. Moreover, uncertainty in initial encounters with foreign strangers decreased more than uncertainty in initial encounters with conational strangers. The fact that uncertainty in initial encounters with foreign strangers is lower in Germany than in Japan could be due to the better knowledge that Japanese people had about the cultural background of the foreign strangers (mainly Germans) in Germany compared with the knowledge they had of foreigner strangers' cultural background in Japan. The sample in Germany was a group of Japanese students who had been studying the German language at their universities in Japan and who had gone to Germany to attend a summer course on the German language. Therefore, they had some knowledge about German culture and language. This information could have given the Japanese students the certainty that they could explain or predict the Germans' behavior more easily than the behavior of foreign strangers of unknown cultural backgrounds in Japan. In Japan, Japanese people had very limited or no knowledge at all about the culture of the foreign strangers with whom they met for the first time. Moreover, in Japan, the Japanese might also have ignored the culture of the foreign strangers.

Another feature that could explain the different pattern of Japanese uncertainty in Japan and Germany is the fact that the Japanese group in Germany

might have had a more open attitude toward difference than Japanese students in Japan. Japanese students in Germany had decided to study a foreign language and travel abroad to continue their studies. This clearly indicates an open attitude toward difference and shows an interest in intercultural communication.

Nevertheless, Japanese uncertainty in initial encounters with conational strangers also decreased in Germany. Japanese considered it comparatively easier to predict or explain the behavior of another Japanese in Germany than in Japan. Initial encounters with conational strangers in Germany were within the context of the summer school, thus and even though the students had not met before, they had basic information about each other. All of them were university students from Japan, studying the German language and spending one month at Hamburg University in Germany to improve their language ability.

In comparison, initial encounters with conational strangers in Japan, although taking place within Japanese home culture, brought less information about the strangers' background and therefore the Japanese carried a different attitude toward them. Without information about the conational strangers' background, Japanese in Japan did not feel able to predict or explain the conational stranger's behavior as easy as they felt could predict the conational strangers' behavior in Germany.

Overall, the data imply that for Japanese people in Germany, other Japanese people proved more unpredictable as strangers than Germans. The fact that uncertainty in initial encounters with foreign strangers in Germany decreased more than the uncertainty in initial encounters with conational strangers could be due the better knowledge the Japanese had of foreign strangers in Germany. Conational strangers, on the contrary, where Japanese in Japan and in Germany, and the background knowledge in Germany was better than in Japan.

To better understand the results of this study it is necessary to consider the characteristics of the Japanese culture. Japan is a high uncertainty avoidance culture (HOFSTEDE, 1991, p.119). In high uncertainty avoidance cultures "what is different, is dangerous" and deviant behavior is not acceptable because there is a strong desire for consensus.

Gudykunst & Kim (2003) affirm that the uncertainty avoidance concept is useful in understanding differences in how strangers are treated. Interaction with strangers in high uncertainty avoidance cultures is characterized by the presence of rules and rituals that govern every situation, as these cultures try to avoid ambiguity. People from high uncertainty avoidance cultures need clear rules when they interact with strangers; otherwise, they may ignore strangers, treating them as though they did not exist.

Japan is also a high context culture. In high context cultures, great distinctions are made between insiders and outsiders whether they belong to the same or different cultures. Because high-context cultures place emphasis on nonverbal communication, they need to know whether others understand them when they do not verbally express their ideas and feelings. In these cultures, verbal skills are considered suspect, while high confidence is placed on nonverbal as-

pects of communication. Japanese people use high-context communication in ways that maintain harmony within their ingroups. High-context communication is ambiguous and indirect (HALL, 1976). Personal information is not used to predict behavior in high-context communication. Rather, group-based information is required (GUDYKUNST & NISHIDA, 1986). In addition, people from high-context cultures need to know if others will make allowances for them. They also need to know if they can understand others under the same circumstances, in order to reduce uncertainty. Sources of uncertainty in high-context cultures include: knowledge of social background; knowledge of whether or not people will behave in a socially appropriate manner; and an understanding of the feelings of individuals.

Okabe (1983) argues that the cultural values of interdependence and harmony require members of high-context cultures to use words implicitly and ambiguously. Emphasis on indirect forms of communication, silence, telepathy, and making allowances for others is related to the value of harmony within high context cultures. Similarly, Nakane (1974) argues that the Japanese ignore individuals whose background is unknown, because their behavior is unpredictable and it is unknown whether they will follow the norms/conventions appropriate in the context. Background information not only tells the Japanese people whether a stranger's behavior is predictable, but it also tells them how to talk with the stranger. Without this knowledge, it is impossible for the Japanese person to communicate with strangers with any degree of comfort.

In summary, the results of this study show that the cultural background of strangers influenced Japanese communication differently in Japan and in Germany. In Japan, the cultural background of strangers influenced Japanese thoughts (uncertainty) during initial encounters. Uncertainty was higher in encounters with foreign strangers than in encounters with conational strangers in Japan. However, the cultural background of strangers in Japan did not have a significant effect on Japanese emotions (anxiety) and behavior (avoidance).

In Germany, on the contrary, Japanese uncertainty when meeting a conational stranger was higher than uncertainty when meeting a foreign stranger. Furthermore, in Germany, the cultural background of the stranger influenced Japanese emotions (anxiety). Japanese anxiety in initial encounters with foreign strangers was higher than in initial encounters with conational strangers. Nevertheless, the strangers' cultural background did not have a significant effect on Japanese behavior (avoidance) in Germany.

Comparing the variables in Japan and in Germany, the data reveal that the cultural context where the initial encounters with strangers took place influenced Japanese anxiety and uncertainty but did not have a significant effect on avoidance. Japanese anxiety in encounters with foreign strangers was higher in Germany than in Japan. Japanese uncertainty in encounters with conational and foreign strangers was lower in Germany than in Japan. Additionally, in Germany, the difficulty of Japanese people to predict foreign strangers' behavior decreased more than the difficulty predicting the behavior of a conational

stranger. On the contrary, Japanese behavior (avoidance) did not show a different pattern in either culture.

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