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Japanese Students' Experience of Adaptation and Acculturation of the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Many Japanese students come to the U.K. to study. In general, studying is their primary aim but some have additional reasons such as personal development through exposure to another culture. As a result of the homogeneity of Japanese society, Japanese people are not necessarily used to other cultures especially if they have only lived within Japan. Due to the vast differences between Japanese and British cultures, many students have difficulties in adapting to British society (Nippoda, 2011). This article presents some culturally specific factors that affect students' adaptation based on research (Nippoda, 1993). It focuses on four main points arising from clinical work: the language barrier, differences in communication styles and educational systems, the individual's motivation and external pressure, and the effects of students' insecure status in the host country.

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Introduction

Nowadays, many Japanese people come to the UK and other countries to study a wide variety of subjects including the local language in order to learn skills which could make a contribution to Japanese international relations. According to recent statistics from the Japanese Embassy (2011), there are 62,126 Japanese people residing in the U.K., of which about 40% are students. Whilst they might have exciting and enhancing experiences, many of them can encounter difficulties arising from the vast cultural differences between the U.K. and Japan. I have found both from my research and from clinical work that many Japanese students suffer from mal-adaptation to British society and some of them even drop out of their studies. This leads some university staff to ask why Japanese students have more adaptation problems than students from other countries. In this article, I aim to give some insight into Japanese students' adaptation to the U.K. After explaining the background of Japanese students in the U.K., I present some culturally specific factors, identified through my research and clinical work that can affect the ease and extent of students' adaptation. The term "students" in this article refers to people who attend an institute in the U.K. as part of their studies and who are categorised as overseas students by the British government.

Backgrounds and Goals of Japanese Students in the United Kingdom

Japanese people often come to the U.K. as students to study and experience life in another country and to further their personal development. If their main focus is to study, it is advantageous for them to speak English and to have other specific international skills in order to obtain a good job and a high social status when they go back to Japan. Japanese students coming to the U.K. expect to make a contribution to Japanese society, which is largely unicultural, to help Japan to become a more international culture. Some of them come to the U.K. to study because they feel obliged to fulfil the wishes of third parties, such as parents, colleagues or their employers. These students who mainly focus on their studies in general have some vision for their future involving going back to Japan after they finish studying. In the case of students whose purpose is focused on personal development through different life experience, some of them might have felt stuck and have lost direction in Japan. So they want to come to the U.K. to choose a new direction for them. They wish to change their environment in order to find themselves.

Factors Affecting Japanese Students' Adaptation

Bochner (1982) introduced Japanese homogeneity in his book and addressed the fact that there is no country which is completely homogenous, but that the country closest to this would be Japan. Historically, Japan was closed to the rest of the world for about 300 years until the 19th century. It is geographically separated from the continent of Asia. In Japan there is not a great deal of influence from other countries. Japanese people grow up in an environment where everyone around them is Japanese. Japan has developed an

idiosyncratic culture. It means that Japanese people who have never left Japan are not very used to foreign cultures. At school, classes rarely include non-Japanese children as there are so few foreign children in the country. This kind of environment would make Japanese students' adaptation to other cultures fundamentally difficult. Besides this homogeneity, while working with Japanese students, I have come across a few culture-specific factors which may affect their adaptation.

1. Problems relating to the language barrier

The first difficulty that Japanese overseas students encounter is the language barrier. In research (Nippoda, 1999) conducted in order to investigate the needs for mental health services for the Japanese community, the majority (59%) answered that they have problems arising from the language barrier. Respondents said that the language barrier had a tremendous psychological effect on them. In Japanese school, English is learned as a subject, but only for the purpose of entrance examinations for high school and university. Students are not taught conversational English. When Japanese students come to the U.K., they cannot communicate as well as they might wish. Subsequently, they experience a sense of frustration and it sometimes leads them to withdraw from other people. The situation also creates a lack of self-confidence. In addition, they feel powerless because they cannot do what the majority of other students do and power dynamics can occur between them and native English speaking people.

In case studies carried out to determine how Japanese students adapt to Britain (Nippoda, 1993), three students' adaptation patterns were followed. All three experienced difficulties with the language barrier, and this led to poor adaptation. Particularly one student in the case study came to the U.K. to study some general subjects. At first everything was so fresh that she was hopeful about her studies in the U.K. Sometimes, she did not understand what others said and she could not make herself understood, but it did not trouble her that much. She was enjoying the start of her new life in the U.K. However, after some time, she started to feel frustrated with the language barrier. She tried to study very hard to improve her English so that she could communicate better with others. Nevertheless, she felt that she did not progress as much as she wanted. She lost her confidence. She became very aware that people did not understand her and started to feel lonely. She ended up withdrawing from other people. She became very depressed and tended to stay in her room more than before. One day, she was watching TV, but could not understand what she was hearing. She experienced total frustration and even felt like destroying the TV (Nippoda, 2011). She came to hate English.

It is not always easy to acquire other language skills, particularly for Japanese people, since Japanese is very different from Western language in terms of grammar, pronunciation and alphabet. However, in Japanese culture, failure is a reflection on internal self, whereas success results from external forces (DeVos, 1985). Many Japanese people blame themselves thinking that they are inadequate in learning English, when they do not learn as quickly as they expected. They exaggerate their difficulties and lose confidence.

Moreover, when Japanese people come to the U.K. to learn English, they naturally expect to make friends with British people. Of course, they will not meet British people in their language classes, so they only have opportunities to communicate with people from their own or other cultures in class. When they get to know some British people, they find it difficult to enter the social circle as they feel that British people can be reserved, and they feel marginalised. A client told me that he was very disappointed about his life in the U.K. He wanted to learn English and British culture. He read many brochures about English schools and he chose one. He came to the U.K. expecting to make many British friends and experience the culture. However, the reality was very different. The only British person he talked to was his English teacher. Outside school, it was difficult to make friends. Then he started to think, "What am I doing here?" He started to get depressed. In fact, many clients enter therapy due to feelings of depression. They want to adapt themselves to the new environment, but nothing is going according to their expectations. Their English does not progress and they start to experience disillusionment about their studies, their life in the U.K. and even themselves. Thus the language barrier affects their adaptation.

2. Difference of communication style and education system

The relationship between teachers and students in Japan is different from that in the U.K. In Japan, teachers just talk and students just listen, that is the dynamics of the relationship. It is often the case that, even when the teacher does ask questions, students hardly ever answer. Students play a passive role. According to a study by Thompson, Ishii, and Klopf (1990), Japanese students showed less assertiveness and more apprehension and reticence in their oral interaction than did Americans. When Japanese students come to the West, many of them are very quiet. It is partly due to the language barrier, but at the same time, they are not used to actively participating in the class. In the U.K., academic staff experience Japanese students as having a lack of confidence. Silence is valued in Japanese culture, and people do not show off very much. They are humble in expressing their achievements. This can be taken by Westerners as self-deprecating (Clarkson & Nippoda, 1997). This cultural and communication style can lead to students being evaluated differently. They feel that the teachers evaluate them as incompetent and they worry that they might get bad marks. Then they lose even more confidence.

A university lecturer told me that one of the differences between Japanese and British students is in note-taking in class. Japanese students try to copy down very neatly what is written on flipcharts or projector, whereas British students take notes in their own words. British university lecturers would associate verbatim copying with primary school pupils not with higher education students. Japanese people feel that they cannot form equal relationships with British people due to the language barrier. They are worried that they might not be taken seriously or they might not be heard. They can sometimes be treated like children. However, it is not just the language barrier, but their passive attitude which might result in creating a childlike image; and this image could lead to Japanese students being treated this way.

Many Japanese students I have seen for therapy express dissatisfaction with their tutors, academic staff or schools. They seem to feel that tutors do not show enough commitment often postponing things like appointments for their tutorials, and that they do not give enough suggestions or feedback. They do not feel supported when they ask questions about their studies, and they feel that their teachers are not sensitive enough to their overseas students' needs. Many students feel that they are not getting what they are paying for. However, when I talk to academic staff, they say that they are willing to help Japanese students and tell them to come to talk to them when they have problems, but that Japanese students do not tend to ask for help when they need it. They just answer "I am all right", when academic staff asks after them. There seems to be a big gap in communication caused by cultural differences. For example, academic staff sometimes brings together all the students from the Far East for a meeting in order to encourage them to speak in class as they often experience students from the region as quiet. However, the students may view this meeting differently feeling singled out and marginalised as the bottom of the class. These kinds of misunderstandings can happen often.

Japanese people have many shared values and many things are taken for granted due to the society's homogeneity. In Japan, organisations which individuals belong to generally look after their members because they already know what people need. People do not find that they have to voice their needs. Japanese schools look after students very well in this same way. Therefore, Japanese students expect school staff or the system, in general, to be very well organised in order to pro-actively meet students' needs. Humility is much valued and people do not assert their needs very much in Japan. In the same way, Japanese students do not present their needs to their tutors. Even when the Japanese students would like to receive the tutors' support, they feel awkward asking for it, and expect staff to give them support without being asked. They may not realise that, on the contrary, students have to ask for the help they need in the U.K. It is not the case that everything is prepared for students. To Japanese eyes, British schools can appear disorganised and academic staff can be seen as lacking in enthusiasm, when they do not provide services as expected. Japanese students are likely to feel that staff is not doing their job properly. On the other hand, from the tutors' points of view, Japanese students often come across as too passive, and as lacking confidence. They often struggle to find a way of approaching the students. Academic staff thinks that Japanese students do not seem to want their help. The Japanese would wait for the offer and the Western teachers would wait for the request. The gap tends to increase over time. These kinds of cultural differences affect their adaptation.

3. Motivation and pressure to perform well

Motivation could be one of the key issues influencing adaptation to another society (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Some students' studies in the UK are sponsored by a third party in Japan. The sponsor's needs are sometimes different from the students' in the case of exchange programmes. Usually the students' aim is to get a degree or diploma but the

sponsor expects them to be a facilitator for both countries and to bring back new concepts and technologies. This could put unbearable pressure on a student.

Japan is a collectivistic society and people generally meet others' needs and live up to other's expectations. Many students come to the U.K. to study not only for their own sake, but also to meet other people's expectations, such as parents, benefactors, schools or communities. In Japan, a sense of self is reflected in one's social role, and individuals are merely representative of groups. Therefore, individuals' failure leads to community failure. Norbeck and DeVos (1972) explain that when one fails to meet social expectations, one hurts family members. As a result, one suffers unhappiness and feelings of guilt. Students are also under tremendous pressure not to fail as failure would bring shame to the group they belong to. Pedersen (1981) explains,

Guilt is internalised conscience which prevents deviation from cultural norms and enforces conformity. Shame is less dependent on internalised norms and depends on real or projected power by others in the community to punish deviation from cultural norms. (p. 13).

If Japanese students experience breakdown and drop out of their courses, they feel that they cannot go back to Japan because they cannot face the shame.

4. Insecure status of students

The difference between students and expatriates is that students are in general self-supporting. Sometimes parents support them financially, but other times they live on their savings or a low income from their part-time job. They have to constantly think about their financial situation, and their life is not as secure as described by Suzuki (1998). Whereas expatriates come to the U.K. with their family and the sponsor, their company, supports them, students are by themselves and far from their family. In spite of this insecurity, some people might feel more comfortable being in the U.K. and do not wish to go back to Japan as they find individual freedom here. In Japan, due to its collectivistic nature, they have to think about group needs first. In the U.K., there is more freedom to fulfil individual needs. Women particularly are more oppressed in Japan and might be unwilling to return to a subordinate role at home, having had greater freedom in the U.K. Many Japanese men also have difficulties in re-adjusting to conformity on their return home. While the Japanese might enjoy the freedoms offered by life in the U.K., they might be surviving on minimal financial resources at the same time and this instability can be another source of mal-adaptation.

Implications for Better Adaptation

As outlined above, there are many factors which contribute to the poor adaptation of Japanese students in British schools. Training in intercultural skills would aid adaptation (Furnham, 1989). Unfortunately, there is almost no training offered for students in Japan

before they come to Britain. Universities also offer little of this kind of training for cultural adaptation to Britain. As Adams (1976) suggested, people can make the experience of transition meaningful for their positive future development. I feel that people who are involved in the education of overseas students have to be more aware of cultural differences and understand where the potential difficulties may lie, so that they can help students' progress towards better adaptation.

Conclusion

Many Japanese students come to the UK, hoping to help the internationalisation of Japan and their own self-actualisation. However, they experience difficulties in adapting to British culture and society, due to the cultural difference between the East and West. The main factors affecting this are the language barrier, differences in communication styles and educational systems, motivations and pressures for high achievement, and insecure financial status. They do not seem to receive the support they need from British establishment and can feel isolated. Also, a lack of awareness of the difficulties that Japanese students can experience when they come to the U.K. may contribute to mal-adaptation. Training in intercultural skills before students depart for the U.K. would be beneficial for the students enabling them to have a more meaningful life and productive time in the UK.

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Yuko Nippoda is a UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) registered psychotherapist and BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) Senior Accredited Counsellor with more than 20 years of experience in the field of counselling and psychotherapy in Japan and England. As a bilingual psychotherapist and counsellor, she has worked with clients from many different cultures on a wide range of issues. Her special interest is in cross-cultural issues. She conducts research and has published many academic and professional papers on this subject. She is based in London, UK. Websites: <http://www.japanuktherapy.com> (Bilingual) and <http://www.change-growth.com> (English only)

Discussion Questions

1. What are the reasons Japanese students go to the U.K. for their studies?
2. How do you think these reasons are connected to their adaptation here?
3. Discuss how homogeneity within Japanese society would make their adaptation to life in the U.K. difficult?
4. What is your view about the psychological effect of the language barrier?
5. Some students experience depression due to the fact that they lose meaning of their life in the U.K. Extract the examples in the chapter and discuss them.
6. How do you think Japanese students are perceived in class in the U.K.?

7. Compare the Japanese educational system presented in this chapter with that of your own culture.
8. What is your opinion about misunderstandings between British academic staff and Japanese students?
9. Discuss shame and guilt that Japanese students could experience studying in the U.K.
10. What kind of training would be beneficial to the adaptation of Japanese students in the U.K.?