



# Testing a modified Interactive Acculturation Model in Japan: American–Japanese coworker relations

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## ABSTRACT

Japan is the world's fastest "graying society." Numerous experts advocate expanding the non-Japanese workforce to prevent a debilitating labor shortage. To promote positive intercultural relations between Japanese and incoming non-Japanese workers, it is prudent to examine which factors have contributed to creating a smooth acculturation process so far for both groups vs. those which have not. This research aimed to do so by assessing how the acculturation strategy compatibility between Japanese and American coworkers affected their quality of intercultural relations ( $N=194$ ). Bourhis and colleagues' Interactive Acculturation Model ("IAM") was used to predict which acculturation strategy combinations were most likely to produce positive intercultural relationships. With the independent variable of acculturation strategy alignment (i.e., Consensual, Problematic, and Conflictual acculturation strategy combinations, or "IAM types"), five dependent measures of quality of intergroup relations were employed. Statistical analyses revealed that Conflictual IAM types often scored lower on the dependent measures than Consensual or Problematic IAM types—as predicted by the IAM. However, Consensual IAM types did not score significantly higher than Problematic ones on any of the dependent variables, which contradicted one of the IAM's fundamental premises. Problematic IAM types' constructive use of stress, as well as their deeper acculturation to their cultural outgroup, likely resulted in them posting comparable scores to Consensual types. Consequently, Consensual and Problematic types were expanded to four subtypes to better explain these findings. Finally, recommendations were made for modifying acculturation expectations among Japanese and Americans to better integrate both groups into their work organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

Japan is the world's fastest aging society: concurrent trends of a growing retiree population and declining birthrates will result in a debilitating labor shortage if no counteractive measures are taken. Consequently, the government plans to at least partially counteract these demographic developments through accepting more foreign workers (Sakanaka, 2004, June 10). But importing labor is not a painless panacea. Japan will need not only to physically accommodate new workers but also create conditions that allow companies to attract and retain top talent.

Such efforts have met with mixed success in the past. While some foreign workers have thrived, others have experienced glass ceilings and various barriers related to national cultural differences which hindered organizational participation (Life,

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1993; McConnell, 2000; Murtagh, 2005). The acculturation of non-Japanese in Japan concerns not only foreigners: many Japanese who regularly interact with non-Japanese (for example, in the workplace) will also experience both opportunities for personal growth and acculturative stress, as change resulting from intercultural contact affects both dominant and nondominant cultural group members (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997; Rudmin, 2003). Thus, the aim of this study is to facilitate smooth mutual acculturation processes for both non-Japanese (with a focus upon Americans) and Japanese coworkers so that work organizations in Japan can successfully integrate culturally diverse workers into their folds and build synergistic multicultural workforces.

The Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) (1954) defined *acculturation* as “cultural change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems” (p. 974). Acculturation was first proposed as a group-level phenomenon referring to changes in social structure, economic base, and/or political organization, but now studies of *psychological acculturation* are common, which specifically address shifts in behaviors, attitudes, values, and identities of individuals (Berry, Kim, & Boski, 1988; Smith Castro, 2003). *Acculturation attitudes* occupy an important place in psychological acculturation, which Berry, Kim, Power, Young, and Bujaki (1989) described as attitudes held by acculturating individuals “towards the ways in which they wish to become involved with, and relate to, other people and groups they encounter” (p. 186). The broader concept of acculturation strategies was used by Berry (1997) to include both acculturation attitudes and related behaviors that are exhibited in day-to-day intercultural encounters. Such strategies play a critical role in intergroup processes because they relate specifically to outcome expectations and behavioral consequences towards ethnocultural outgroups—particularly in terms of who is expected to become an ingroup member (e.g., within a nation or a work organization) and to what extent they can readily achieve such status. By clearly grasping how acculturation strategies diverge between mutually-acculturating group members, gaps between them can be more easily bridged for better intercultural relations and more effective work relationships.

Thus, this study addressed psychological mutual acculturation as it occurs on the individual level with a focus on the dynamics of American and Japanese actors in diverse work organizations in Japan. The data generated focused upon participants' perceptions of the acculturation process at work and the consequent effects on their relations with cultural outgroup members who were colleagues. Specifically, the aim was to assess the extent and manner in which the degree of compatibility of Japanese and American acculturation strategies affected the quality of intercultural relations between members of the two groups, including their effectiveness when working together. From this goal, two research questions were formulated:

1. Is acculturation strategy compatibility related to coworkers' quality of intercultural relations and job effectiveness?
2. Which acculturation strategy combinations are associated with the most positive outcomes in terms of quality of intercultural relations between coworkers and job effectiveness?

Job effectiveness is considered to be an outcome of interest because the quality of work that subjects perceive themselves doing in tandem with members of the cultural outgroup is both a tangible product of their relationship as well as an important influence upon future interactions. Nevertheless, job effectiveness as an outcome variable has been only sparsely considered in the acculturation strategy literature, with Aycan (1997a, 1997b) being an exception. Therefore, one goal of this study was to establish a bridge between acculturation strategy fit and performance for those working abroad and their host culture coworkers. However, this constituted just one aspect of the broader aim of this study: as the impact of acculturation strategy compatibility upon quality of intercultural relations has not been assessed before in Japan, the author intended to test this relationship in a novel national context.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. The Berry framework of acculturation strategies

Berry (1997) delineated two key factors in differentiating acculturation strategies, namely “*cultural maintenance* (to what extent are heritage cultural identity and characteristics considered to be important, and their maintenance strived for), and *contact and participation* (to what extent should people become involved in other cultural groups, or remain primarily among themselves)” (p. 9). When these two issues are considered simultaneously on attitudinal dimensions represented by bipolar arrows, a conceptual framework is generated positing four acculturation strategies for both dominant and nondominant group members (see Fig. 1). Each strategy carries a different name—depending upon whether the dominant or nondominant ethnocultural group is being considered.

Individuals who value both cultural maintenance and intergroup relations for the nondominant ethnocultural group endorse Integration if preferred by nondominant group members for themselves and Multiculturalism when promoted by dominant group members for those in the nondominant group. People who espouse cultural maintenance for the nondominant group but do not attach importance to or oppose intergroup relations adopt Separation (if nondominant group members) or Segregation (if dominant group members), while those who encourage intergroup relations but reject or are relatively unconcerned with cultural maintenance for nondominant group members favor Assimilation (in the nondominant group) or Melting Pot (in the dominant group). Finally, individuals who value neither cultural maintenance nor intergroup relations for the nondominant group are characterized by Marginalization strategies (nondominant group members) or

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