



## **Forms of communication: A cross-cultural comparison of older married couples in the USA and Japan**

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**Abstract.** Interviews were conducted with 24 older couples in the USA and Japan. Spouses participated in a causal conversation during which they discussed their marital history. The dialogue between the spouses was examined in relation to five forms of communication: prompting, questioning, echoing, contradicting, and teasing. Results from this analysis challenge some of the stereotypes concerning Japanese and American communication patterns. Couples in both countries engaged in teasing but the purpose of these kinds of exchanges differed for the American and the Japanese spouses. Findings are discussed in relation to cultural and gender differences and similarities in forms of communication between older spouses.

**Keywords:** Communication, Couples, Gender, Japan, USA

### **Introduction**

Communication is a vital component of marriage. Conversations between spouses can build a sense of intimacy and identity as a couple (Berger & Kellner 1975; Fitzpatrick 1988) or promote disharmony and stress (Buehlman, Gottman & Katz 1992). The effects of communication between marital partners may become particularly salient as couples grow older and experience the loss of other significant relationships. With increases in longevity (Kono 1994; Schick & Schick 1994), more couples are living together for longer periods of time. Understanding the communication patterns of these couples provides us with important insights into their marital relationships.

Comparing forms of communication between marital couples from different countries is also a fruitful way of identifying cultural uniqueness. Communication between spouses has been studied in both the United States (Crawford 1995; Fitzpatrick 1988; Tannen 1990) and in Japan (Blood 1967; Lebra 1984; Lock 1993, 1996; Salamon 1986). However, much of this research has focused on couples in the earlier stages of marriage result-

ing in what Sillars and Wilmot (1989: 225) refer to as a 'young model of couple communication'. In this paper, we extend upon previous research by examining forms of communication among older couples in Japan and the USA.

Early work by communication researchers in the USA indicated that men and women spoke quite differently to each other. For example, the influential work of Lakoff (1975) identified several distinct features of 'women's language' such as tag questions (e.g., '... isn't it?') and hedging (e.g., 'sort of'). Such features suggested that women's style of communication is more tentative and less powerful than that of their male counterparts. A review of more recent research demonstrates additional ways in which men dominate conversations with women by using interruptions, selective responding, and silence (Crawford 1995).

While this view of male control and female powerlessness is pervasive throughout the communication literature, Tannen (1994) suggests that communication styles may be misinterpreted as powerful or powerless, unless the context of the conversation is considered. She argues for 'the need to distinguish linguistic strategies by their interactional purpose' (p. 35). For example, Tannen (1994) points out that a communication style such as interrupting may be an attempt to dominate a conversation or may be an effort to display enthusiasm and connectedness. Some individuals interrupt others to change the topic while others interrupt to show solidarity with the previous speaker.

This difference in intent may differ both by gender and by culture. One difference concerns the use of indirectness. Americans tend to associate direct communications with masculinity and power and indirectness with femininity and subservience. However, in countries such as Japan, indirectness is the norm for both men and women (Tannen 1994). Japanese men and women use indirect communication to maintain harmony, preserve their own privacy, and to insure that no one is embarrassed by direct confrontation (Gudykunst & Nishida 1994; Tomita 1994). Tannen (1994) points out that, among Japanese, 'saying no' is considered face-threatening. Therefore, negative responses are phrased as positive ones. Japanese rarely says 'no', but listeners understand whether the form of the 'yes' is a true 'yes' or a polite 'no'.

Other ways in which Japanese and American communication patterns differ is in styles of showing attentiveness and amount of talking. Hayashi (1990, in Gudykunst & Nishida 1994) notes that Americans tend to use feedback devices such as asking questions and making comments to show interest. However, Japanese show interest and maintain a smooth flow of communication by using backchanneling which includes such words as 'yes', 'soo' and 'indeed'. Yamada (1990, in Gudykunst & Nishida 1994) further notes

that Americans participate in long monologues and uneven turn-taking, while Japanese take short turns which are evenly distributed between speakers.

Research on marital communications in the USA has focused predominantly on couples managing conflicts or problem solving (Fitzpatrick 1988). Typically, these couples are invited into the experimental laboratory and directed to talk to each other about areas in their marriage that are a source of conflict. The conversations are generally audiotaped, transcribed, and coded using a variety of coding schemas. Fitzpatrick has organized these coding schemas into three classes of conflict behavior: avoidant, cooperative, and confrontive.

Findings from such laboratory research highlight gender and age patterns in communication styles. For example, in a study of couples who represented different stages in the life cycle (ages 23–83), Zietlow and Sillars (1988) found that wives made more conciliatory and confrontive comments while husbands were more likely to change the topic or respond in a non-committal manner. The older retired couples in this study differed from the younger couples by exhibiting more confrontive comments when the topics they discussed were problematic in their marriage, and fewer confrontive comments when the topics were not problematic. In a study of marital problem solving among younger couples (ages 25–45), Ball, Cowan, and Cowan (1995) discovered salient gender differences depending upon the stage in the problem-solving process. Wives had greater influence in the initial stages by raising the issues to be discussed and by asking questions that would draw out their husbands. Despite this influence, many of the women expressed their feelings of powerlessness. In the words of one wife, 'It looks like I'm running the whole show here, but all the while that I'm going on and on, I'm waiting on edge with suspense, because what if he doesn't wanna work on this with me. I'll feel totally crushed and helpless' (p. 312). The study conducted by Ball and colleagues (1995) indicated that after the wives raised the issues to be discussed, the husbands influenced the focus of the problem and the depth of problem-solving discussion.

Such studies provide valuable information about communication among couples who are in conflict, but they provide little insight into their communication in causal conversations. The way in which couples communicate during pleasant, spontaneous conversations may be as important a marker of marital satisfaction as their ability to resolve conflicts (Fitzpatrick, Vance & Witteman 1984). When Fitzpatrick et al. (1984) asked young couples in a laboratory setting to conduct a 'pleasant conversation', they found no gender differences with respect to who dominated the conversation. Irrespective of family and relationship values, husbands and wives did not differ regarding the percentage of utterances they made throughout their conversations. Such

research provides valuable insights into couples' causal conversations but is limited by its relatively brief duration (ten minutes of interaction) and its occurrence outside of a natural setting.

An exception to these limitations is the research by Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) who combined an oral history interview in the couple's home with a marital laboratory visit in which the couple's interaction style was observed as they discussed two problem areas in their marriage. Couples were contacted again after a three-year interval. Those who separated or divorced during the three-year period differed from couples in stable marriages on several dimensions of the oral history interview. Couples who divorced were chaotic, negative, not fond of one another, did not have a sense of 'we-ness', dissatisfied with their marriage, and did not glorify the struggle of marriage.

In one of the few studies looking at long-term marriages (Carstensen, Gottman & Levenson 1995), older couples came to the laboratory to discuss the events of the day, a problem area of continuing disagreement in their marriage, and a mutually agreed on pleasant topic. This study found that elderly couples were more likely than middle-aged couples to temper negative emotional expressions with affection. Even when they discussed areas of substantial disagreement, older couples were more likely to also convey their positive feelings for each other.

The present research builds on the research conducted by Buehlman et al. (1992) and Carstensen et al. (1995) by addressing several gaps in the current literature on marital communication. First, it focuses on couples' causal conversations as they occur in their own homes. Our research augments existing communication research that is primarily centered on conflictual situations (Fitzpatrick 1988). Second, it uses a sample of older couples and thereby provides insight into forms of communication within long-term relationships, an area of needed exploration suggested by several communication researchers (Noller & Fitzpatrick 1991; Zietlow & Sillars 1988; Carstensen et al. 1995). Finally, it examines variability in communication patterns with respect to both gender and culture. Thus this study adds the dimension of culture to address the question of which forms of communication are culturally unique or transcendent in relation to gender.

## **Methods**

This study used a qualitative methodology referred to as a narrative approach (Riessman 1993). The approach is described in greater detail in our previous work (Ingersoll-Dayton, Campbell, Kurokawa & Saito 1996) and is summarized here. Japanese and American couples were asked to tell a joint story concerning their marriage. To focus their discussion, the interviewers showed

the couples a 'storyboard' (Veroff et al. 1993), which highlighted marital events (e.g., first meeting, wedding, having children, and retirement) and asked the couples to discuss these events in their own marriages. The Japanese interviews were conducted in Japanese by Japanese interviewers and the American interviews were conducted in English by American interviewers. These interviewers attempted to minimally guide the conversations with the couples to simulate a casual conversation.

The sample of eleven Japanese and thirteen American couples were gathered purposively to obtain diversity with respect to age, race (for the American spouses), health, and socioeconomic status. The Japanese couples resided in a large city in Japan while the American couples lived in a moderate-sized American town. The Japanese couples were slightly younger (ranging in age from 54 to 77) than the American couples (who ranged in age from 62 to 89). The Americans were also slightly more educated (an average of 14 years) than the Japanese (an average of 12 years). The duration of marriage for the Americans ranged from 28 to 62 years while the range for the Japanese marriages was from 30 to 52 years. Almost all of the marriages were the first for both the Japanese and the American spouses. Most of the Japanese marriages had been arranged and most of the women were full-time housewives. None of the American marriages had been arranged and most of the women had worked outside of the home during a portion of their married lives. Both the Japanese and the American couples represented a variety of professional and blue collar occupations.

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed with Japanese interviews translated into English. Subsequently, the transcripts were coded using a set of three decision rules: (1) A code was assigned to each speaking turn between husband and wife, (2) the unit of analysis was the last two sentences spoken by one spouse followed by the first two sentences of the other spouse, and (3) each speaking turn was assigned a single code. The communication codes were derived both inductively and deductively. We deductively applied codes from previous research (Hopper, Knapp & Scott 1981; Sillars, Weisberg, Burggraf & Wilson 1987) and inductively developed categories from repeated reading of our own transcripts.

Each of the authors read the same transcript to insure that codes were consistently applied to the conversational exchanges. A comparison of these codes indicated that there was some overlap among the codes. However, with the exception of exchanges which included questions between spouses and an additional form of communication (e.g., contradicting, teasing), it was generally possible to assign a single code to each exchange. When exchanges included both a question and another form of communication, we coded each.

After the research team developed the codes and the coding decision rules, all transcripts were coded by the third author. Specific codes that tended to be more ambiguous (i.e., prompting, contradicting, and teasing) were checked by an additional coder (the first or second author). The resulting communication codes were entered into the Ethnograph (Seidel, Kjolseth & Seymour 1988), a software package designed for interview data, so that narrative data relevant to specific codes could be easily retrieved and examined. For the purpose of this paper, five forms of communication were selected. These forms were chosen to represent supportive and harmonious exchanges (i.e., prompting, questioning, and echoing) as well as acrimonious and barbed exchanges (i.e., contradicting and teasing).

### *Prompting*

In general, American couples talked much more to each other during the course of the conversations than did Japanese couples. In the Japanese interviews, the couples responded to the interviewer and were less engaged in lengthy dialogue with each other. Japanese husbands and wives shared equally in the dialogue with their interviewer. They rarely prompted each other to speak and, instead, left this role to the interviewer. On average, Japanese husbands took 180 turns in the conversations while their wives took 186 turns and their interviewers took 188 turns.

Among the American couples, a different picture emerged because the wives took the lead in the dialogue. They took many more turns in the conversation, followed by their husbands, and then by the interviewers. On average, American wives took 293 turns, followed by their husbands at 240 turns. Their interviewers were less involved and averaged 190 turns.

American wives used prompting comments to direct the conversation so that their husbands talked about specific topics. These prompts characteristically began with, 'Tell about ...'. For example, one wife cued her husband when he had difficulty remembering his early years of employment, 'Well tell 'em what you done, honey. You worked at the club'. Another wife, whose husband appeared reticent to talk about his volunteer work, urged him with the prompt, 'Tell her about your Church Industrial Mission'. American wives often set the stage for the narrative by selecting the topic for discussion and then prompted their husbands to begin the narrative. In one such case, a wife orchestrated who would describe the different aspects of their marriage when she told her husband, 'You can answer the question how we made the decision ... how we made the decision when to marry. Let's do it that way ...'.

American husbands more often used prompts to defer to their wives. They generally urged their wives to carry on with the narrative by saying, 'Go ahead'. In one instance, a husband offered to give an example of a marital

interaction. His wife encouraged him to speak but he apologetically deferred to her saying, 'I interrupted you'. In another interchange, a husband began talking about his career. His wife intervened to suggest that they should first talk about the birth of their children. Her husband acquiesced to her by saying 'You tell that. I didn't have them'.

### *Questioning*

Asking questions is an important mode of communication with a variety of purposes. In these interviews, questions between spouses were sometimes directed at seeking factual information or opinions from each other. Questions were also attempts to direct the process of the conversation or an effort to obtain agreement and consensus from spouses. While question-asking was common throughout the narratives of both the Japanese and the American spouses, the nature of these questions differed by culture and by gender.

Among the Japanese couples, most of the questions were related to facts and/or agreement. Spouses queried each other about dates, ages, and places. Each used the other to facilitate his/her own memory. Frequently, these questions had a dual purpose: to obtain factual information and to include the spouse by obtaining agreement. For example, a Japanese husband checked his memory with that of his wife when describing why they frequently used the train to visit their family during the early years of their marriage, 'It was inexpensive, too, so we visited them often, didn't we?' Another husband asked his wife when trying to remember how old he was when they married, 'I was 24 or 25 years old, wasn't I?' This tendency to look for consensus was particularly characteristic of Japanese wives. Like their husbands, they asked about facts and sought agreement. A Japanese wife described life at the end of World War II and then checked her memory by asking her husband, 'Therefore every day there was an air raid, and we were in and out of our shelter every day, weren't we?' However, unlike their husbands, Japanese wives also asked about and sought agreement about opinions. When one couple talked about the importance of understanding each other, the wife affirmed the significance of this quality in their marriage by asking her husband's opinion, 'We couldn't get along with each other [if we misunderstood each other], could we?'

Like the Japanese, American couples asked each other questions about factual information. These questions were particularly characteristic of the American husbands who appeared to view their wives as the repository of the couple's joint memory. For example, an American husband turned to his wife as he recollected a time when his son ran away from boarding school, 'I remember racing up there to . . . where was that place in Wisconsin?' Similar to the Japanese, such questions often included an element of asking for agree-

ment. Another American husband had difficulty remembering the details of how he ended his military career, 'They sent me on a recuperative leave and then I had to go back and report for duty. That's when I resigned, wasn't it?'

Unlike their Japanese counterparts, the questions of the American couples also directed the process of the interview. Their questions were often directed toward the topics posed by the interviewer, whereas the Japanese couples left this responsibility to the interviewer. For example, an American wife took charge of the narrative by noting that they were ready to talk about their retirement. To include her husband, she asked, 'Did you want to say something about the children before we go on?' In response, her husband queried her, 'Well, did we cover career years, our career years? I don't believe we covered that'.

The quality of these questions, however, differed by gender. American husbands tended to ask questions of their wives that confirmed whether the narrative was progressing adequately. For example, a husband who was concerned that he was speaking too quickly asked his wife, 'Am I racing?' In contrast, American wives asked questions that directed husbands to elaborate on their thoughts or opinions. When her husband asked what topic they were discussing, his wife simultaneously admonished and questioned, 'We're in the future and that's where we are supposed to be. Have you got any more thoughts for the future?' Another American wife scolded her husband for his superficial account about the best times during their marriage and directed him with a question, 'Well, that's not really telling her. Can't you isolate something?'

### *Echoing*

One of the ways in which husbands and wives displayed their agreement with each other and embellished on a point was by repeating the words of their spouses. We refer to this process as echoing and identified two distinct forms of echoing in our interviews. One form involved mirroring, that is repeating the exact words of a spouse. The second form involved augmenting, that is repeating words expressed by a spouse and elaborating with one's own thoughts.

Japanese husbands and wives used both forms of echoing. When Japanese women echoed the narratives of their husbands, their repetitions were equally divided between mirroring and augmenting. For example, a Japanese wife mirrored her husband's opinions concerning changes over time in men's involvement in housework. The husband stated, 'This is the difference between us and young people today. The time has changed'. She then repeated his last thought by echoing, 'The time has changed'. In another section of dialogue, this same wife augmented what her husband said. Refer-



ring to their children, he said, 'They grew up freely'. The wife repeated this point and then elaborated, 'They really grew up freely. I took care of my two children. My elder son was in kindergarten ...'. While Japanese men also used both forms of echoing, their use of augmenting was more prevalent. For example, a Japanese wife described the location of the first apartment in which they lived as a couple. She said, 'Near here, it was behind here. It had been rebuilt'. Her husband echoed his wife's narrative and then augmented with a further description, 'Yes, it had been rebuilt, but it was a small apartment. The rent was 60 hundred yen'. This tendency for Japanese husbands to augment the accounts of their wives occurred throughout the interviews.

Whereas Japanese husbands tended to augment their wives' narratives, the opposite pattern emerged among the Americans. American husbands were more inclined to repeat what their wives said and frequently used words that exactly mirrored their wives. When a husband told of his garden and was groping for words to describe why he enjoyed it, his wife interjected, 'To keep him busy'. The husband immediately mirrored his wife by repeating, 'To keep me busy'. Like the Japanese husbands, American wives were more likely to embellish on what their spouses talked about. For example, a husband described what he did as part of the couple's volunteer job at a local hospital, 'Anything they asked me to do. Mostly we had the gift cart'. His wife used augmenting not only to agree with her husband's recollections but to add her own, 'The gift cart was a big cart, almost from here over to there, and it had a lot of shelves and things. Sold all kinds of stuff. We went from room to room'. American women frequently echoed the narratives of their husbands and embellished on these accounts. Such embellishments represented another way in which American wives, like Japanese husbands, maintained control over the narrative.

### *Contradicting*

In addition to encouraging the expression of a spouse's account, there were also ways in which spouses discouraged each other from speaking. One such form was contradicting or disagreeing with the spouse. Contradicting one's spouse occurred in both the American and Japanese conversations. These contradictions were sometimes expressed in a direct way, such as by saying 'no' and then correcting the spouse. At other times, these contradictions were expressed more indirectly. Indirect contradictions generally involved correcting the spouse without indicating that s/he was wrong.

Surprisingly, Japanese couples generally contradicted each other directly and emphatically. For example, a Japanese husband explained to the interviewer that he has made some notes in preparation for their interview. His wife admonished him, 'If you've written wrong things, it would come to

light now'. The husband emphatically retorted, 'I didn't write wrong things at all'. Another Japanese husband and wife discussed the way in which they first met. They were on a train together and she began feeling ill. Her future husband described how he helped her and explained, 'I saved her life'. The wife sharply contradicted, 'That's not correct'. When a third couple discussed the high cost of getting help, the wife explained that hiring young people required a considerable amount of money. The husband interrupted his wife and declared, 'That is not the point. You know with any professional work, just because you did it for two or three years does not make you a master of it'.

While Japanese husbands contradicted directly, their wives contradicted both directly and indirectly. Their indirect contradictions often involved correcting their husbands without directly telling them that they were wrong. In one conversation, a Japanese couple talked about the repercussions of their limited finances. The husband reminisced about how the family did not have enough money to celebrate Schichigosan (an annual holiday for children aged 3, 5, and 7 involving expensive preparations) which resulted in delaying the oldest daughter's celebration. The wife indirectly corrected her husband by simply stating, 'It was the younger one's'. This form of indirect disagreement minimized the harshness of the contradiction by correcting the spouse without seeming to do so. The correction was slipped into the conversation without noticeable emphasis. In another instance, the interviewer asked a Japanese couple if they had experienced any troubles during a particularly problematic period in their family business. The husband promptly responded, 'No'. The wife, however, indirectly challenged his perception by noting that she had additional responsibilities at home, 'But I had a lot of problems then. I had to pay more attention to the boarders'. These kinds of indirect contradictions were more characteristic of Japanese wives, who used both indirect and direct contradictions whereas their husbands relied more exclusively on direct contradictions.

American couples tended to use more indirect than direct contradictions. American couples frequently disagreed with each other while appearing to agree. One couple discussed their search for an apartment when moving to a new location. When the wife asserted, 'There were no apartment buildings', her husband imperceptibly corrected her by stating, 'Except there was on Main Street and it was full'. Another wife obliquely corrected her husband's stoic assertion about his pain-free condition. When he stated, 'I have very little pain', she replied, 'Well, he takes pain killers. Parkinson's is . . . does a lot of things hard for people'.

When contradicting indirectly, American couples used several strategies to soften the harshness of their contradictions. One method was to retort by

asking a question. For example, when an American husband disagreed with his wife's statement about their wedding date, he questioned, 'That's not the wedding date, is it?' A second method was to soften the tone of the challenge by adding a modifier. For example, when an American husband talked about where he lived when he met his wife, she pointed out, 'You're a little bit mixed up in that'. A husband gently disagreed with his wife's assertion that they saw their adult son once or twice a month. 'Closer to once a week, I think, on average'. Another way couples minimized their disagreement was by including an endearment such as 'honey' or 'dear'. One American wife softly corrected her husband when he told how her father had intercepted and read their love letters, 'Honey, he was blind'. A final strategy was to profess ignorance. By indicating, 'I don't remember that' or 'I didn't know that', American husbands and wives decreased the onus of disagreeing with one another.

### *Teasing*

Both Japanese and American couples engaged in a considerable amount of teasing. Most of this teasing was lighthearted with each spouse making gentle fun of the other accompanied by much laughter. However, couples in both countries teased for other purposes as well. In some instances teasing was used to denigrate the spouse while in other instances it was used to detoxify painful experiences. In such cases, the nature of teasing differed among Japanese and American couples.

Teasing among the Japanese couples generally involved power and status. A Japanese wife discussed her superior memory and denigrated her husband by comparing herself with him to confirm his inferiority, 'This person doesn't remember anything'. A Japanese husband similarly belittled his wife by teasing, 'Women remember worthless things'. Another husband, who had given a lengthy description of an air raid during the war, ridiculed his wife's brief remark concerning the importance of food during that incident by saying, 'Oh, that story is not that important'.

For the Japanese couples, teasing had a competitive edge. Their teasing involved considerable needling, as if they were trying to goad each other into responding. For example, one Japanese husband and wife argued about who was responsible for their son's intellectual abilities. The husband asserted that the son took after him and the wife replied, 'You say only good things for yourself. But my brother's children went to the Nada [a prestigious public high school]. So he takes after me'. During such dialogues, Japanese couples were particularly engaged with each other.

Insulting their spouses was even more characteristic of Japanese wives than of their husbands. A Japanese wife denigrated her husband's ideas about

the importance of parents sanctioning their children's marriages, 'That is an old way of thinking. It is fine to marry the person you love'. Another wife who had been particularly disappointed by her husband's lack of attentiveness in their marriage used teasing as a barb. She expressed her dissatisfaction by recalling how even her family had been critical of her husband. 'In the end my family said, "Forget about such an impudent person."'

Teasing among American couples was less overtly competitive than among the Japanese. Instead, teasing was used to detoxify issues that might pose threats to the relationship. One such threat centered on the effects of health limitations on the relationship. For example, when a wife explained how she had assumed responsibility for driving due to her husband's poor health, he lightened the tone by interjecting, 'She needs the practice'. A wife joked about her health, a very real problem in the couple's relationship, by teasing, '(I'm) hoping we can stay together but you never know, you know. When I get too much for him, he'll have to throw me out'. Another couple joked with each other about the husband's physical problems and her psychological ones. The wife said, 'Between us you could put (my husband's) head on my body and you'd have a good healthy person'. Her husband teasingly responded, 'A strange androgynous one'.

In several instances, spouses teased each other about extra marital relationships. One wife listened patiently to the story of her husband's infatuation with another woman prior to their marriage. She playfully joked with her husband about her own imaginary affair by saying, 'All the time I was running around with that guy, he didn't bother you?' Her husband teasingly replied, 'He was so big he scared me and then I got the baseball bat and he ran'. Another happily married husband and wife bantered about the husband's desire for another woman. The husband teased, 'I'll look around and see if I can find myself someone else, because I don't have to get no divorce after 50 years . . .'. His wife continued in this playful mode and teased back, 'We already divorced'. Such teasing occasionally extended to a particularly toxic issue – that of death. An American couple playfully discussed this topic with the wife offering a final dig about her husband's driving skill:

*Husband:* Well as long as I have my health. I don't want to be a burden on (my wife). I want to statistically go first as men do.

*Wife:* Thanks a lot.

*Husband:* And I want to make sure that she is comfortable.

*Wife:* My thought was that we were always gonna die in an (chuckles) automobile accident together.

*Husband:* Well, that may happen. Then it's all taken care of.

*Wife:* Particularly if you're driving.

## Discussion

Findings from our study highlight the similarities and differences between older Japanese and American couples based on their forms of communication. Our research challenges some of the stereotypes regarding Japanese and American communication. English speakers view Japanese as vague, polite, formal, abstract, and repetitious (Nisugi 1974, in Gudykunst & Nishida 1994). However, our study on communication within marital relationships portrays a different perspective. Japanese spouses, particularly husbands, are very direct in their contradictions of each other. While, on the one hand, we might view these direct confrontations between husbands and wives as attempts to gain the upper hand in the conversation (e.g., to be more powerful), we could also view these disagreements as consistent with the Japanese value of modesty. A basic tenant in interpersonal relations in Japan is that deference should be paid to others while humility is directed toward the self. Japanese etiquette requires that, when a third party is present (in our case, the interviewer), individuals should display modesty via deprecation of self and other others who are close to the self (Condon 1994). Condon (1994: 53) notes, 'There is a set expression in Japanese, which means 'my foolish wife', that is used by men who in fact are very proud of their wives'. Indeed, several of the spouses' attempts to discourage each other from talking by contradicting or teasing may have been ways of deprecating the other and displaying humility to the interviewer.

Our research also challenges the pervasive stereotype of American directness in contrast to Japanese indirectness. We observed numerous instances in which American husbands and wives tried to soften disagreements by being indirect. In support of this observation, Condon (1994: 43) quotes a Japanese professional interpreter who states, 'Americans can be just as indirect as the Japanese, but they are indirect about different things, and being indirect carries a different meaning. Americans are usually indirect when something very sensitive is being discussed or when they are nervous about how the other person might react'. This indirectness may also represent learned behavior among couples over the years. There is some evidence that older American couples learn how to manage emotional exchanges by using strategies that optimize positive experiences and minimize negative emotional experiences (Carstensen, Gottman & Levenson 1995).

In contrast, our sample of the Japanese couples often appeared to be more direct with each other than the American couples. Their sharp interchanges suggest that, at least within the marital relationship, rigid rules about politeness may stand in abeyance. Anthropologists have pointed out the unique mixture of friendliness and antagonism in teasing such that 'the playful nip may easily be mistaken for a hostile bite' (Straehle 1993: 177). Straehle sees

teasing as providing an outlet for conflict that might otherwise threaten social ties. Teasing was particularly prevalent among the Japanese wives in our sample. Given the anger many Japanese women in this sample expressed about their early married years (Ingersoll-Dayton et al. 1996), teasing may function as a vehicle to express revenge that is safely cloaked in humor. Aging may serve as a liberator for Japanese women whose narratives indicated that, as they grew older, they became less hesitant to express what they were really thinking.

This research highlights cultural differences in terms of turn taking and talk time. The Japanese couples spoke less than the Americans and their responses were brief and relatively evenly distributed between spouses. In contrast, the Americans spoke at greater length with less even distribution between the spouses. Our observation concerning this cultural difference is supported by the views of Japanese scholars (Yamada 1990, in Gudykunst & Nishida 1994). The greater length of the American interviews is consistent with cultural beliefs about 'talk'. Mizutani (1981, in Gudykunst & Nishida 1994) notes that although Japanese have become more talkative in recent years, not talking too much is still viewed (especially by older Japanese) as an indication of adulthood. In addition, the presence of the interviewer may have differentially influenced the communications of the Japanese and the American spouses. Watanabe (1993) found that Japanese group members wait for cues from the higher status group members as to when to talk, while American group members talk among themselves with minimal attention to hierarchy. Our Japanese couples, in contrast to our American couples, may have placed more emphasis on the status differential between themselves and the interviewer and adapted their dialogue accordingly.

This study also identified gender differences in talk time among Americans, but not among Japanese. American wives spoke more often than did their husbands, but there was relatively little difference between the turns taken by Japanese spouses. American women tended to orchestrate the conversations of their husbands by prompting, asking questions, and explaining factual details of their relationship. Their husbands appeared more vague about the specifics of their mutual story and were more likely to defer to their wives as an expert in remembering such details. Telling the story of the marital relationship was the clear domain of American wives, giving support to research that has found that women think more about relationships once they are formed than do men (Acitelli & Antonucci 1994).

While American wives appear to dominate these causal conversations about their marital history, we can not necessarily infer that they are more powerful. A sizable portion of the American women's talk time is devoted to encouraging their husbands' involvement in the conversation. Salamon

(1986) has pointed out that, to the extent that women assume the role of relationship builder, they can become subjugated by this role. Thus we see a complex dynamic among the American spouses in which women appear to dominate the conversations but may, in fact, be deferring to their husbands.

In contrast to the Americans, the gender difference in turn taking between the Japanese spouses is not as prominent. This similarity in the extent to which husbands and wives were involved in the conversation may be related to factors external to the marriage. That is, among the Japanese, much of the marital story transcended the immediate domestic relationship and incorporated life events such as World War II. The War was an event that was experienced deeply by both husbands and wives which may be one reason that both Japanese men and women participated more equally in the conversation. Japanese men, however, often took the lead in telling the story and were usually very firm about the facts and their views of the situations they were describing. Unlike American men, the Japanese husbands needed no encouragement from their wives to contribute to the conversation.

These findings must be considered within the context of the limitations of our study. First, this study examined discrete interchanges between husbands and wives rather than broader segments of dialogue. In so doing, the meaning of these interchanges may have been misinterpreted. This difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that the Japanese dialogues were translated into English. To enhance the interpretation of meaning, future studies should involve researchers who can analyze the narrative in their native language and should focus on lengthier segments of dialogue between the spouses.

Second, while the focus of this paper was on gender and culture, it is important to be aware of other variables that affect communication. For example, the quality of a marital relationship may affect the styles of communication differentially depending upon gender and culture. Further work in this area should consider the use of a standardized measure of marital quality to allow for an analysis of the interaction between gender, culture, and marital quality. In addition, variables such as race, age, disability, and class are salient factors that can affect relationships (Crawford 1995). The influence of disability on marital communication was particularly striking. In our sample, a few spouses had a chronic illness (e.g., Parkinson's Disease) or cognitive deficits associated with dementia. Such deficits were often associated with less participation by the afflicted spouse and more involvement in the conversation by the healthier spouse. Further research among older couples needs to be particularly attentive to the role of health in communication patterns.

This research has important implications for practice and future research. Knowledge about communication styles among elderly couples has been very

meager. Even more limited is our understanding of cross-cultural patterns of communication among older married couples. Our research addresses this gap and provides data that are inconsistent with stereotypes of communication. Specifically, American couples make considerable use of indirect contradictions and teasing is often used to address topics that are particularly toxic within the relationship. In contrast, Japanese couples use teasing to prod each other into conversation and to cloak hostility concerning past grievances. Such findings suggest that practitioners working with older couples from diverse backgrounds need to be aware of nuances in communication. Forms of communication such as teasing may have different interpretations based on cultural background. By exploring the intersection of culture and gender, this study identifies important forms of communication that merit more attention among practitioners and researchers.

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