

***The Implications of Japanese people's Cross-cultural Social Skills in Turkey:  
Forming Relationships with Turkish Muslims***

Sachiko Nakano, International Students Center, Yamaguchi University, Japan  
Tomoko Tanaka, Okayama University, Japan

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**Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the cross-cultural social skills adopted by Japanese people in Turkey to construct satisfactory interpersonal relationships with Turkish Muslims. In semi-structured interviews, 18 Japanese people living in Turkey were asked about their coping strategies to overcome interpersonal difficulties (Nakano & Tanaka, 2016) and behaviors to construct good relationships. Responses were summarized using the KJ method. The results indicated that subjects used two coping strategies. The first was cognitive, namely understanding and tolerating cultural and religious norms and characteristics or differences. The second was behavioral, which entails behaviorally accommodating these characteristics and differences through observation and mimicry. The content of these coping strategies can be classified into three categories: 1) *Religious norms*, 2) *frank self-expression*, and 3) *behavior as a manner or common sense*, and eleven sub-categories including *discussions about religion*, *consideration of religious practice*, *individual private space*, and *greetings*. Seven native Turkish people perceived these coping strategies and behaviors as being effective and viable. Conclusively, this study was able to identify specific social skills that proved effective in interpersonal relationships with Turkish Muslims.

Keywords: Japanese people in Turkey, cross-cultural social skills, forming relationships with Turkish Muslims

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## Introduction

In 2014, 2,049 Japanese people were living in Turkey. There are many “Japanophiles” in Turkey: 83.2% of Turkish people are friendly towards Japanese people and interested in Japanese culture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014). More than 90% of the Turkish population is Muslim. Muslims have specific religious needs and behavioral patterns, which differ from those of the Japanese and affect their cultural adjustment. As such, the Japanese have experienced some interpersonal behavioral difficulties when interacting with Turkish Muslims (Nakano & Tanaka, 2016a). However, it is unclear which coping strategies can help them overcome their difficulties and which cross-cultural social skills they need to develop to form relationships with Turkish Muslims. To investigate the cross-cultural social skills used by Japanese people in Turkey to construct satisfactory interpersonal relationships with Turkish Muslims, 18 Japanese people living in Turkey were asked about the coping strategies they used to overcome interpersonal difficulties (Nakano & Tanaka, 2016a) and about the behaviors that help them form good relationships. Seven native Turkish Muslims were asked about the efficacy of these coping strategies.

## Methods

### Participants

The informants were 18 Japanese people living in Turkey (9 in the west and 9 in the center; 3 men, 15 women). They had resided in the country for a period of 1 month to 11 years. The average age of informants was 34.6 ( $SD= 9.07$ ) years. Participant characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Informant	Age	Gender	Area	Occupation	Turkish level	Years of stay in Turkey
A	20s	Female	West	Student	Intermediate	8 months
B	20s	Male	West	Student	Beginner	6 months
C	20s	Female	West	Student	Beginner	2 months
D	40s	Male	West	Worker	Advanced	9 years
E	30s	Male	West	Worker	Intermediate	4 years and 6 months
F	30s	Female	West	Worker	Beginner	8 months
G	40s	Female	West	Worker	Advanced	11 years
H	30s	Female	West	Worker	Intermediate	2 years
I	50s	Female	Center	Worker	Beginner	3 years

J	50s	Female	Center	Worker	Intermediate	5 years
K	20s	Female	West	Worker	Beginner	1 month
L	40s	Female	Center	Housewife	Advanced	8 years
M	30s	Female	Center	Housewife	Advanced	10 years
N	40s	Female	Center	Housewife	Advanced	10 years
O	30s	Male	Center	Housewife	Advanced	4 years
P	40s	Female	Center	Housewife	Beginner	5 years
Q	30s	Female	Center	Housewife	Advanced	7 years
R	30s	Female	Center	Student	Beginner	3 months

**Table 1 Characteristics of informants**

### **Procedures**

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, each lasting from one to two hours. Informants were first asked to state their attributes (e.g., “How long have you stayed in Japan?”; “What is your occupation?”; “How old are you?”). Following this, informants were each asked to describe their experience in Turkey, especially that pertaining to interpersonal behavioral difficulties (e.g., “How would you describe your relationships with the Turkish Muslim people around you?”; “Are you dissatisfied with Turkish culture or the behaviors of Turkish Muslim people?”). After these questions, they were asked about coping strategies to overcome their difficulties and social skills to construct relationships with Turkish people.

In this paper, we report data on their social skills and coping strategies as cross-cultural social skills in Turkey. Informants extensively discussed concerns related to life in Turkey. Interviews were recorded with a voice recorder with the informant’s consent and later transcribed for analysis. Informants were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that their privacy would be kept confidential. We obtained informed consent from all informants before the interviews.

### **Analysis**

To identify cross-cultural social skills in interpersonal behavior, we analyzed informants’ comments using the KJ method (Kawakita, 1967), a bottom-up method employed to form new concepts from the data gathered. Their comments were sorted according to units of meaning. First, we extracted segments of the transcribed narratives corresponding to points in the interviews during which informants discussed their skills to establish relationships with Turkish Muslims. Second, all information was written on individual cards. The cards were shuffled, spread out, and

those containing similar content were grouped together. Following this, a title was given to each group and placed on the group of cards. This process of grouping was repeated to further divide the primary categories into secondary categories.

## Results and Discussion

In total, 296 segments were obtained from the analysis of comments of international Japanese people living in Turkey. The number averaged at 16.3 ( $SD = 3.64$ ) per informant. The results indicated that the subjects used two coping strategies. The first was *cognitive*, whereby they attempt to understand and tolerate cultural and religious norms, characteristics, and differences. The second was *behavioral*, whereby they behaviorally adapt to these characteristics and differences through observation and mimicking. After the analysis, these cross-cultural social skills were classified into three categories: *behavior in terms of manners or common sense*, *frank self-expression*, and *religious norms*. These are further detailed in Figure 1.

The first category was *behavior in terms of manners or common sense*, which comprises three sub-categories: *order of observance*, *social conventions*, and *greetings*. Japanese people in Turkey use coping strategies as skills to cover the cultural gap to develop relationships at social occasions and as a way of greeting. We explain the sub-categories below by using informants' descriptions to ensure easier understanding.

*Order of observance* refers to skills to cope with Turkish cultural characteristics such as not being punctual and easily changing plans. The Japanese informants spoke about cognitive skills that entailed expecting that Turkish people might not be on time or getting rid of a

sense of Japanese culture as a social skill. For example, they described specific actions as setting the time of a meeting slightly earlier, giving up Japanese standards, not making plans too early, not setting a specific time for a meeting, not confirming meeting times, or repeatedly making promises. An example of the narrative is provided below.

*It is better to set a meeting time well in advance. I always say that the meeting time is a little earlier. For example, I sometimes say it is one hour earlier, because I do not want to be irritated when they arrive late. This skill prevents me from being irritated. (Informant A)*

The skills concerning *social conventions* include how to behave on social occasions. Specific behaviors indicated are expressing when wanting to leave without hesitating, acting welcoming even if uninvited friends or friends arrive, accepting invitations as much as possible, having tea with others, inviting someone over if invited, or giving reasons and excuses if wanting to refuse an invitation. Turkish people have the habit of frequently drinking chai tea. Therefore, a Japanese informant recognized having tea together as an important change to form relationships with Turkish natives.

*I think the best opportunity for making friends is having chai tea or coffee with them. I was invited many times: every day, every time, everywhere when meeting someone I am asked, "Would you like chai tea?" even when meeting the first time. This means*

*“welcome to our country,” so drinking chai tea together is not like in Japan.  
(Informant Q)*

In addition, Turkish people prefer expressing their feelings honestly. If wanting to refuse an invitation, an excuse is needed, because this indicates that you wanted to go, but could not.

*Greetings* refer to skills regarding behavior when greeting others. Because the Japanese do not generally hug, kiss, or shake hands as a greeting, some become confused (Nakano & Tanaka, 2016a). They therefore needed to acquire social skills to appropriately greet Turkish people. Specific strategies cited included refusing to shake hands with or hug members of the opposite sex who are not family, following other people’s ways of greeting, and greeting people every time they are met. Examples of the narratives are shown below.

*You usually do not hug people of the opposite sex, unless they are your family or a relative. I sometimes do not touch hands and shake hands depending on the case. If I hug or shake someone’s hand, I may make him or her uncomfortable. In contrast, I may also make someone of the opposite sex think strange things like I love them.  
(Informant G)*

*I think one can also follow other people’s ways of greeting. I recommend following ways in which other people greet each other as your first step. (Informant A)*

The second category was *frank self-expression*, which comprises three sub-categories: *assertion*, *close relationships*, and *individual private space*. The Japanese acquired frank expression similar to Turkish people’s assertion and distance in interpersonal relationships.

We explain the sub-categories below.

*Assertion* is a skill related to how to communicate. Specifically, it is expressing feelings and opinions clearly without expecting that they are obvious, avoiding indirect and unclear expressions, not taking the words of the other person too seriously, apologizing while making excuses if encountering problems, speaking loudly, and expressing jealousy on purpose. Communications skills such as evading ambiguous expressions and stating something gently are also learned as skills from Japanese hosts who interchange with international students studying in Japan (Tanaka & Fujiwara, 1991). A cultural characteristic of Japanese communication is using indirect expressions. Completion of a framework tends to make them misunderstand or become uncomfortable (Nakano, Okunishi, & Tanaka, 2015). The results of this study indicate that they need to acquire social skills regarding communication with Turkish people, because the cultural distance between the Japanese and Turkish cultures is large.

*Close relationships* refers to skills pertaining to how to develop and maintain good relationships. Specifically, it was described by informants as responding cheerfully when making friendly physical contact, spending time with others, making excuses to secure personal time, and using physical contact to express familiarity. Nakano and Tanaka (2016) researched cross-cultural interpersonal conflicts of the Japanese, and

reported that Japanese people felt that relationships with the Turkish were too close. If they try to develop relationships as per Japanese values, it does not turn out well. Therefore, they need ideas and coping mechanisms. An example of the narrative is shown below.

*If I interact with Turkish people in a Japanese sense, we cannot make friends. They may think of me as “a cold person” or say, “you must hate me.” Japanese people take a long time to become friendly. After becoming friends, we can state our real intentions and make friendly physical contact. However, Turkish people are very friendly, very close, even when meeting for the first time. If you want to become friends, you must mimic the Turkish way of forming relationships. (Informant F)*

On the other hand, additional comments noted that it is necessary not only to mimic Turkish relationships, but also to secure one’s personal time to preserve wellbeing. Therefore, Japanese people needed the skills to make time for themselves.

*When I first came to Turkey, when I was invited, I would say, “Yes, thank you. Yes please,” because I thought that I had to make friends. As a result, I had no personal time at all. I got irritated: “I want time to be alone.” This is not good for forming interpersonal relationships. Therefore, we need skills to secure personal time to preserve our own wellbeing. If I refuse an invitation, I explain, “I am sorry, I have something to do concerning my job” as an excuse to not make the other person uncomfortable. (Informant B)*

The sub-category of *individual private space* refers to the skill of protecting personal privacy and keeping a distance that feels comfortable. Specifically, informants mentioned as examples answering personal questions broadly and loosely and greeting someone if he or she stares. According to research by Nakano et al. (2016), Japanese people found it difficult that regular questions by Turkish people involved much private information. Therefore, they need skills so as not to have a wry face and to avoid such questions. Examples of the narratives are shown below.

*Because I heard questions more after relationships deepen in Japan, we need the skills to reply to such questions. For example, if asked, “When do you make a child,” the answer is, “Maybe another time.” In other words, dodge the question through joking. The name of the game is practice, practice, practice. (Informant R)*

The third category was *religious norms*, which comprises three sub-categories: *consideration of religious practices*, *discussion of religion*, and *interacting using religious values*. This category is a skill that corresponds to differences in Turkish Muslim religious norms. We explain the sub-categories below.

*Consideration of religious practices* is a skill pertaining to consideration of the religious practices of Turkish Muslims. Muslims follow religious norms and practices based on Islam, for example, eating halal food, daily worship, and observing the month of Ramadan (Shimada, 1997). Other examples include avoiding close conversations with other sexes unless they are family members and covering parts of the body in front of people of the other sex outside the family (Tanaka, 2012). The informants of this study described that consideration of the purpose so as not to bother (prevent) their religious practice is necessary during exchanges with Turkish Muslims.

Specifically, informants described skills such as checking the ingredients of food when bringing souvenirs from Japan; avoiding meeting with people when it is time for prayers; confirming religious needs, because the degree of faith varies depending on the person; wearing clothes that are less revealing when meeting; and asking if it is acceptable to drink alcohol. Examples of the narrative are shown below.

*It is a basic behavior to consider religious customs. However, the degree of religiousness differs depending on the person. Therefore, you must confirm with each person. For example, "Is there any food you cannot eat" or "How about prayers?" (Informant N)*

The category of *discussion of religion* is a skill pertaining to responses regarding religious topics. Specifically, informants mentioned not stating being an atheist if asked about religion, giving an excuse to avoid the result of being urged to convert to Islam, and avoiding religious topics as much as possible. According to Matsushima (2016), Japanese people tend to not recognize that they believe in any particular religion. They report that 50% of Japanese people responded that they did not believe in religion to a question on religious beliefs. Turkish people find the response, "I have no religion" strange, and may sometimes lose trust (Nakano, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to avoid providing such an answer. In addition, informants reported that when Turkish Muslims talk to them about religion, they use a coping strategy to change the topic, which is a skill to form good relationships. It is difficult for the Japanese, who are not familiar with religion, to participate in religious discussions. Examples of the narratives are provided below.

*If they come to talk about religion, it is better to avoid the topic as much as possible. The Japanese may say, "I do not believe in religion," which may be something impolite to say to them. Therefore, in my opinion, if discussing your religion, it may be better to answer, "I am Buddhist." After that, you change the topic. (Informant D)*

The sub-category *interacting using religious values* is a coping strategy for religious values when Japanese people are involved in an exchange with Turkish Muslims. Specifically, informants mentioned various interpretations of the word "Insha' Allah." An example of the narrative is shown below.

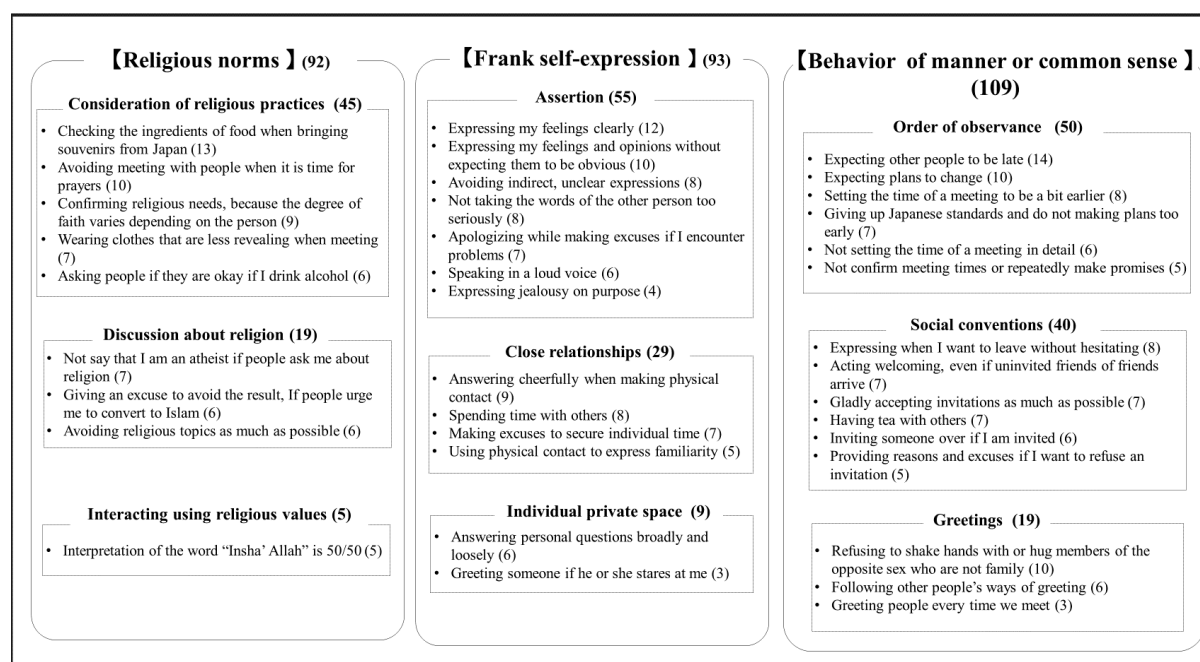
*If I ask someone for something or make a promise, the Turkish Muslim answer is "Insha' Allah," the meaning of which differs depending on the person. It does not mean "yes" 100% of the time, so you cannot interpret it as "we promise." You can rather interpret it as, "I hope so" and as "yes" only half the time. (Informant J)*

These skills concerning religious value and behavior are similar to the social skills of Japanese people in Indonesia used to establish relationships with Indonesian Muslims (Nakano & Tanaka, 2016b).

Based on the study, it was revealed that the skills and consideration needed to avoid misunderstandings due to differences in religious norms are required when Japanese people try to form relationships with Muslims in Islamic countries.

Finally, seven native Turks viewed these coping strategies and behaviors as both

effective and viable. Therefore, these skills could be regarded as cross-cultural social skills to form and maintain good relationships between Japanese people and Turkish Muslims.



**Figure 1 Cross-cultural social skills in Turkey to form relationships with Turkish people**

## Conclusions

In this paper, we focused on the cross-cultural social skills adopted by Japanese people in Turkey, as related to the construction of good interpersonal relationships with Turkish Muslims. The results revealed the intercultural social skills used in their interactions with Turkish people based on culture-specific aspects of their behavior and cognition. The Japanese used two coping strategies. The first was cognitive, whereby they attempt to understand and tolerate cultural and religious norms, characteristics, and differences. The second was behavioral, whereby they behaviorally adapt to these characteristics and differences through observation and mimicking. There are three types of social skills pertaining to behavior as a manner or common sense, frank self-expression, and religious norms.

Finally, these coping strategies and behaviors were viewed as both effective and viable by seven native Turkish people. In conclusion, this study identified specific social skills that proved effective in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with Turkish Muslims.

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**Contact email:** s-nakano@yamaguchi-u.ac.jp