

Expatriate learning: exploring how Japanese managers adapt in the United States

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Abstract

We present an exploratory study of how Japanese expatriates adapt to working in the United States over time. We view expatriate adaptation to a host culture through the lens of Experiential Learning Theory and learning style. Results of two studies, using quantitative and qualitative data, conducted in Japanese multinational corporations doing business in the United States reveal how learning style in Japanese expatriates changes over time and how Japanese managers differ from their US counterparts. Results suggested that Japanese managers become more concrete and more active in their learning styles over time spent in the United States, that larger expatriate cohorts are related to slower adaptation, and that language acquisition is related to concrete learning. Results also revealed that the learning style of expatriates changes in response to cultural demands and that the patterns of change do not necessarily reflect that of US managers. We suggest that Japanese managers do not directly assimilate into US culture but develop specialized modes of adaptation to their host culture. Results of the study are generalized into eight propositions to guide future research on expatriate adaptation to a host culture.

Keywords: Experiential learning; cross-cultural learning; expatriate adaptation; Japan-US business

Approach everything rationally, and you become harsh.

Pole along in the stream of emotions, and you will be swept away by the current.

Give free rein to your desires, and you become uncomfortably confined.

It is not a very agreeable place to live, this world of ours.

Soseki Natsume, *Kusa Makura*

Most Japanese adults would know the first paragraph of the classic novel *Kusa Makura* (Natsume, 1956), translated as ‘Grass Pillow’ in English. Its author, Soseki Natsume, is a famous Japanese writer of the early 1900s. His description of the way of ordinary life a century ago may transcend time and space and provide a lesson that is culturally embedded into Japanese spirits and minds. This lesson, in one sense, seems to reflect an unavoidable confrontation between a rational mode of individual learning and one aspect of Japanese social values, the prioritization of harmonized interpersonal relationships. The social value of harmonized interpersonal relationships, central to the Japanese socialization process, may resonate to Japanese expatriates who are required to work in a social system built on different cultural values and norms, like that of the United States (US). This study explores how Japanese managers working in the US seek to create, in the words of Natsume, ‘agreeable places to live’.

Globalization creates new business opportunities for multinational corporations (MNCs) (Black *et al.*, 1999). MNCs increasingly use expatriation strategies to facilitate entry into new markets as well as to manage their subsidiaries (Ronen, 1989; Selmer, 1995; Shaffer *et al.*, 1999). While the role of expatriates abroad becomes more important for MNCs (Aycan, 1997), the expatriate strategy remains tangled with risk. The risk of expatriates failing their assignments often results in enormous financial costs (Shannonhouse, 1996; Mervosh and McClenahan,

1997). The failure of expatriates not only is expensive to MNCs in financial terms, but also strikes at individual expatriates psychologically. Those who have failed at overseas assignments may lose self-esteem, self-confidence, and prestige among their peers (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002).

Research often cites the ability to learn as a reason for expatriate failure or success in adapting to a new culture. Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) argue that successful expatriation requires significant learning from essential transitions and experiences. Effective learning appears important for successful adaptation to cross-cultural settings because learning describes the primary force for adaptation to culture (Kolb, 1984). For over 20 years, research has described how expatriates adjust and become socialized to overseas assignments (Bolino and Feldman, 2000); however, little research has focused on a linkage between expatriate adaptation and learning. Further, little research has explored the specific processes of how people learn and how such learning may change during adaptation to a new culture.

The present study seeks to explain how expatriates adapt to a new culture by looking at how expatriates learn through experience by enlisting Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1976, 1981, 1984; Kolb and Fry, 1975). We suggest that ELT is a robust and important lens through which to view expatriate adaptation to a new culture because it provides a means to understand how people learn and a way to understand changes in learning. We investigate expatriate learning in a sample of Japanese MNCs located in the US through two studies using demographic data and data obtained from self-report questionnaires. From this exploratory study we propose future directions for research in expatriate adaptation.

Experiential Learning Theory

Learning does not mean simply problem-solving (Argyris, 1999) or passively accepting information (Senge, 1990). Learning describes how people recreate themselves in response to external changes to gain a new appreciation of the world (Senge, 1990). Kolb (1984: 31) argues that learning goes beyond descriptions of socialization or change by describing a holistic process of adaptation to the environment: '[Learning] involves the integrated functioning of the total organism—thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving'.

Even though learning concerns the whole of human activities, individuals are thought to develop specialized abilities and preferences for such activity. These specialized preferences are called learning style. Keefe (1979) suggests that learning style refers to cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that perform as relatively stable indicators of how people perceive, interplay with, and respond to the learning situations they face.

Among learning theories, Kolb's ELT has received special attention, especially relative to the examination of cross-cultural activity (Hoppe, 1990; Yamazaki, 2002) and because of its usefulness and empirical validity in operation (Auyeung and Sands, 1996). Another reason for the proliferation of Kolb's model is that it encompasses the entirety of human experiences and, thus, encompasses multiple cultural dimensions of learning (Hoppe, 1990; De Vita, 2001). Kolb's theory, as well as recent extensions to it, challenges other learning models that tend to be biased toward certain cultural assumptions that do not easily translate across cultures. For example, behavioral theories of learning mostly focus on how individuals respond to stimuli from the environment, while cognitive theories of learning largely involve mental processing of information (Hilgard and Bower, 1975). Because of these biases, Black and Mendenhall (1991) conclude that both the behaviorist and the cognitive learning theories are inappropriate to explain

processes of expatriates working across cultures and thus cannot be properly used in studies of cultural differences in learning activities. Consequently, the present study used Kolb's learning theory to analyze learning styles for adaptation to cross-cultural environments.

The process of learning

Kolb's (1984) learning model articulates the central role of experience in the learning process. Learning involves four fundamental modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In learning situations, concrete experience abilities require people to grasp the wholeness of immediate experiences and to handle human relationships smoothly. The focus of concrete experience abilities is to use feelings, intuitions, and sensitivities in the here and now. Abstract conceptualization abilities, in contrast, require people to apply logical reasoning and conceptual analysis. The emphasis of abstract conceptualization abilities is to produce ideas, concepts, and theories by thinking. These two abilities, concrete experience and abstract conceptualization, are dialectically opposed to each other so that strength in one mode is often in direct conflict with strength in the other mode.

Reflective observation abilities require people to perceive the meanings of situations and ideas by careful observation and listening. The focus of reflective observation abilities is to gather many different perspectives and to make sense of things that happen. Those with reflective observation abilities are good at making patient and thoughtful judgments. In contrast, active experimentation abilities involve taking actions. The emphasis of active experimentation abilities is to actively influence people and change situations. Those with active experimentation abilities are willing to take responsibility, to take risks, and to achieve tasks. Active experimentation abilities are dialectically opposed to reflective observation abilities.

These four modes of learning—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, corresponding to feeling, perceiving, thinking, and doing, respectively—form a learning cycle. First, concrete experiences establish the foundation for reflection and observation. Reflective observation transforms tacit knowledge from immediate experiences that are assimilated into abstract conceptualization, through which explicit knowledge is produced. Then, abstract conceptualization entails the basis for active experimentation, which deductively tests the newly created explicit knowledge. Finally, active experimentation generates new concrete experiences.

Figure 1 illustrates the fourfold process of learning in relation to the four learning styles. Learning style describes how individuals develop preferences or specific abilities for using two of the learning modes over others. ELT provides four fundamental types of learning styles (Kolb, 1984; Kolb and Fry, 1975). The Diverging learning style specializes in two modes of learning, concrete experience and reflective observation. The Converging learning style specializes in abstract conceptualization and active experimentation; the Assimilating learning style, in abstract conceptualization and reflective observation; and the Accommodating learning style, in concrete experience and active experimentation. Each of the four learning styles possesses the abilities that are combined by two learning modes.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Experiential Learning Theory and cross-cultural adaptation

Kolb (1984) hypothesized that learning styles are determined by the interplay between persons and their environments. Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) recently extended Kolb's model to account for cultural and national influences on the process of learning and learning style. Viewed from the macro level of environment, cultures have an influence on how people learn (Hayes and Allinson, 1988); therefore, learning styles that dominate in one country may differ from those in another culture. In more scientific terms, learning style is expected to vary between and converge within cultures (De Vita, 2001; Pratt, 1991). Hofstede (1997) basically supported this proposition and argued that a country's culture shapes its people's preferred modes of learning through their socialization experiences. Several empirical cross-cultural studies supported this conclusion (Auyeung and Sands, 1996; Hayes and Allinson, 1988; Hoppe, 1990; Katz, 1988; Yuen and Lee, 1994). Katz (1988), for example, examined the learning styles of 821 Israeli subjects and drew the conclusion that Israeli learning styles are clearly oriented towards an active learning mode. Yuen and Lee (1994) studied 1,032 Singapore undergraduate students and found that their learning styles were more abstract and less concrete. Moreover, a comparative study of Auyeung and Sands (1996) showed that 329 accounting students from Hong Kong and Taiwan were significantly more reflective and less active than 303 accounting students from Australia.

Furthermore, the proposition can also be extended to the process of expatriation. When a person is transferred to a different culture, the new culture will affect the way a person learns because the environment requires the acquisition of certain skills for survival (Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004). That is, expatriates' learning styles will likely move from the original style dominated by the home culture to a revised style that matches that of the host culture.

The present research focuses on understanding how managers learn, understanding how learning style forms their experiences of expatriation, and understanding how learning style changes over time so expatriates can manage effectively in another culture. We sought to answer questions in the specific cultural context of Japanese MNCs operating in the US and to then generalize these lessons to a wider expatriate context.

Japanese nationals working for an extended period in the US provide both a unique and representative sample to understand expatriate learning for several reasons. First, research shows cultural distinctions between the US and Japan on several important dimensions. For example, Japan tends to be a high-context culture whereas the US tends to be a low-context culture (Hall, 1976). Other research shows that the Japanese culture is more collective and the US culture is more individualistic (Hofstede, 1997; Triandis, 1995). Research suggests that disparities like these between home and host cultures may present particularly difficult challenges to which expatriates need to adapt (Furnham and Bochner, 1982). In fact, Japanese managers experience extreme difficulty in dealing with their counterparts in the US (Linowes, 1993; Hayashi, 1993; Hayashi, 1999), suggesting that Japanese and US cultures provide fertile ground to understand the disparities that are encountered with cross-cultural adaptation.

The other reason why Japanese expatriates are a useful study group is the success of Japanese MNCs worldwide and in the US. Many Japanese MNCs are represented in *Fortune* magazine's 2004 list of 'World's Most Admired Companies'. Four Japanese MNCs were listed in the international top 10 companies outside the US, and several made the top 50 overall (Hjelt, 2004). This suggests that, despite the large measurable differences in culture between Japan and other western cultures, such as the US, Japanese MNCs have achieved relative success in

overcoming these differences. Based on this success, it seems that Japanese MNCs can provide important insights into understanding effective expatriation as an international business strategy.

Expatriates' learning styles in cross-cultural circumstances have yet to be examined, but we could conjecture that cultures are such powerful forces that they would drive expatriates to adequately respond to transitional environments. Our first research question focused on the nature of learning and change in expatriates working in a host country:

Question 1: How does the learning of expatriate managers change during an assignment in the host country?

From the review of research, it seems clear that a dominant learning style is likely to prevail in any particular organization that reflects the dominant learning environment of its particular culture. For example, it appears that the Diverging style (concrete experience and reflective observation) tends to dominate in Japanese MNCs. In contrast, the Converging style of learning (abstract conceptualization and active experimentation) would be more likely to dominate in US MNCs (Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004). Thus, our second question focused on specific differences between Japanese managers and their US counterparts working in a Japanese MNC:

Question 2: How does the learning of expatriate managers differ over time from that of host country managers?

In the next section we present the results of two studies that sought to explore these two questions for Japanese and US managers working in a Japanese MNC and the implications of these findings for cross-cultural adaptation.

Study 1

Methods

Data collection procedures

We designed a cross-sectional correlation study since this approach is effective in generating propositions for future research (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). *The Directory of Japanese-Affiliated Companies in the USA and Canada* (2002 and 1999) published by JETRO guided the identification and selection of the research samples. Data collection focused on the Midwestern US to acquire a sufficient number of samples that were in relatively homogeneous types of businesses. Data collection was concentrated during 12 consecutive weeks. The data collection strategy had three phases: 1) an initial contact and visit, 2) a confirmation by telephone call, and 3) a data collection visit.

Japanese MNCs that chose to participate received the necessary number of survey packets for their Japanese colleagues. The survey packet contained a cover letter, a consent document for participation in this study, a set of instruments, and a return envelope. In the second phase, the principal investigator phoned Japanese managers in charge of this research three to five days prior to the tentative due date for the collection. The aim of this call was to confirm that the collection date was still convenient for them. Finally, the principal investigator visited them again on the due date and received the sealed envelopes including filled questionnaires and consent documents. During the site visits, the principal investigator also conducted several unstructured interviews with Japanese expatriates to provide examples of learning situations and to aid in the generation of propositions.

Sample

The sample was confined to Japanese expatriates who had been transferred from Japan to the US for overseas assignments. Japanese businesspersons with short business trips to the US or Japanese workers who were hired as local staff in the US were excluded. A total of 410 Japanese expatriates from 44 Japanese MNCs received this survey packet through the internal distribution system in the organization. Of the 410 expatriates, 267 completed questionnaires and returned consent documents. The response rate was 65%, consistent with prior research on Japanese expatriation (Black, 1993).

To investigate learning style transitions of Japanese expatriates, we divided the sample into four groups based on the duration of continual exposure of Japanese expatriates to the US: 1) less than one year; 2) one to less than two years; 3) two to less than three years; and 4) three years or over. This classification was guided by Hull's (1978) study of foreign students' cultural adaptation in the US and was within the range of three to five groups used in past empirical studies of learning style changes.

Measures

Learning style. The study employed Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) (1999) to examine learning style. The LSI is one of the most frequently used instruments to assess learning styles (Davies *et al.*, 1997; West, 1982) and has been widely used to examine learning styles in cross-cultural settings. The instrument measures an individual learning orientation on each of the four learning modes: concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and active experimentation.

The LSI is composed of 12 questions, each of which asks persons to complete a sentence by ranking four choices that correspond to the four learning modes encompassed by ELT. For example, the first question in the LSI is 'When I learn', and the four choices to be ranked are 'I like to deal with my feelings'; 'I like to think about ideas'; 'I like to be doing things'; and 'I like to watch and listen'. These four items reflect, in turn, the concrete experience mode, the abstract conceptualization mode, the active experimentation mode, and the reflective observation mode of learning. 'You learn most' is ranked a 4; 'you learn least,' is ranked a 1. The sum of responses for each mode is determined and represents the degree to which a person relies on that mode of learning. The final score for each learning dimension is determined by subtracting one score from another in the same dimension, i.e., the sum for abstract conceptualization minus the sum for concrete experience (a continuum from abstract to concrete) and the sum for active experimentation minus the sum for reflective observation (a continuum from abstract to concrete). The two remaining dimensional scores provide the individual's relative preference for each of the four modes.

The forced-choice method of the LSI not only reflects the dialectical nature of human learning activities (Kolb, 1984; Hickcox, 1991) but also effectively controls for response-set biases such as social desirability, acquiescence, and central tendency (Saville and Wilson, 1991). Veres *et al.* (1991) showed that the earlier version of the 12-item LSI indicated strong test-retest reliability, with coefficients of the four learning modes reaching 0.91 to 0.99. The 1999 version of the LSI used in this study reflects the changes in psychometrics suggested by early research.

Demographic characteristics. Research participants self-reported demographic characteristics including 1) how long they have been in the US for their present overseas assignment; 2) their experience with previous overseas assignments; 3) their experience with

studies abroad; 4) their marital and family status; 5) their level of competency in English conversation; 6) their hierarchical job positions; 7) their organizational job functions; 8) their gender; and 9) their age.

Translation procedures. Brislin *et al.* (1973) recommended three techniques to translate psychometric instruments to achieve the equivalence of the original versions. These techniques include 1) comparing the meaning between the original and translated version; 2) using a test-retest method by which to statistically analyze the data of both versions collected from a sample of bilinguals; and 3) comparing the meaning between the original and back-translated version. We used all three techniques in the translation process of the LSI.

The first phase represents the comparing of meaning between two language versions. For this phase we enlisted an independent advisor with a doctorate in organizational behavior, who was an expert in the LSI and has demonstrated technical writing capacity in both English and Japanese. The second phase refers to the test-retest method of statistical analysis. For the second phase, we administered the revised version to 26 Japanese bilinguals. Results of the test-retest analysis showed that correlation coefficients of the six variables in the LSI ranged from 0.92 to 0.83 ($p < .001$). The paired-samples t-test of the LSI scaled scores showed no significant difference between each pair of questions in the Japanese and English versions. The third phase was to compare the meaning between the original and back-translated version in English. A professional Japanese-English translator who was not familiar with the LSI translated the reshaped Japanese version into English. Then, the expert reviewed the language used in the back-translated English version with the principal investigator. The researchers concluded that there was no discrepancy between the original and back-translated LSI in English.

Results of study 1

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics and descriptive statistics of study participants, including industry and organizational demographics. The table shows that 96% of subjects worked in manufacturing, and 74% of the companies studied had between 100 and 999 employees. Nearly all subjects (94%) had no experience of studying at overseas schools, and a majority (80%) had no overseas work experience before their present assignment. Most of the sample consisted of executives and middle-level managers between the ages of 30 and 50 years.

Insert Table 1 about here

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables in the study, including numeric demographic variables, are presented in Table 2. The table shows the number of employees in the organizations studied, the number of Japanese expatriates in the organization, their degree of English conversation ability, and the months spent in the US, as well as their scores on individual and combined dimensions of learning style.

Overall, the Japanese expatriates showed a preference for the Diverging learning style, abstract conceptualization–concrete experience (AC-CE) (*mean* = 0.2, *s.d.* = 13.5) and active experimentation–reflective observation (AE-RO) (*mean* = 3.3, *s.d.* = 12.8). There was a strong negative correlation between the length of time spent in the US and the AC-CE style ($r = -.15$, $p < .05$), indicating that the longer a Japanese expatriate remained in the US, the greater his preference for the concrete experience mode over the abstract conceptualization mode. The relationship between the length of time spent and preference for AE-RO was significant and

positive ($r = .21, p < .01$), showing that those who stayed longer in the US tended to learn more through active experimentation than through reflective observation.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics from results of the LSI and reports ANOVAs generated from the combined AC-CE and AE-RO scores, along with the dominant learning styles for each cohort. The table reveals significant differences in learning style scores across cohorts on both combined dimensions of learning style, AC-CE ($df = 3, 263, F = 2.7, p < .05$) and AE-RO ($df = 3, 263, F = 9.2, p < .01$). Specifically, it shows a movement towards more concrete (on the AC-CE) dimension and a movement toward more action (on the AE-RO) dimension as Japanese employees stay longer in the US. Table 3 also illustrates results of the Levene test for homogeneity of variance, suggesting there was no statistical violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variance for either the dimensions of AC-CE ($Levene = 2.0, p > .05$) or AE-RO ($Levene = 1.2, p > .05$).

Insert Table 3 about here

As shown in Table 3, the mean scores of AC-CE and AE-RO for the first cohort (less than one year) of Japanese expatriates were 4.9 and -4.1 , respectively, indicating that the first cohort has primarily an Assimilating learning style. This result suggests that the first cohort of Japanese expatriates demonstrated a strong tendency towards reflective observation rather than active experimentation. However, this cohort showed a weak orientation toward abstract

conceptualization: the mean score of 4.9 on the AC-CE experience scale is very close to the norm mean of 4.3.

 Insert Table 4 about here

Table 4 shows the results of the Bonferroni test as a post hoc test of ANOVA. Regarding the dimension of AC-CE, the table illustrated that the first cohort ($mean = 4.9, s.d. = 13.0$ in Table 3) had a significantly higher score than the fourth cohort of expatriates who were in the US for three or more years ($mean = -1.9, s.d. = 12.3, p < .05$) with a mean difference on AC-CE of 6.7. There was no significant difference between any other combinations of the four cohorts. These results indicate that the first cohort of Japanese expatriates was strongly more abstract and less concrete than the fourth cohort. That is, it could be interpreted that if Japanese expatriates stay in the US for three years or more, they will tend to become more concrete learners.

On the dimension of AE-RO, the first cohort ($mean = -4.1, s.d. = 12.0$ in Table 3) and the second cohort ($mean = -0.2, s.d. = 13.5$) had significantly lower scores than the third cohort ($mean = 6.5, s.d. = 10.9$) and the fourth cohort ($mean = 5.9, s.d. = 12.3$). As shown in Table 4, the mean difference in AE-RO between the first and the third cohorts was $-10.6 (p < .05)$; between the first and fourth cohorts, $-10.0 (p < .05)$; between the second and third cohorts, $-6.7 (p < .05)$; and between the second and fourth cohorts, $-6.1 (p < .05)$. There was no significant difference between the first and second cohorts and between the third and fourth cohorts. These results illustrate that the first and second cohorts of Japanese expatriates were significantly more reflective and less active than the third and fourth cohorts. This result suggests that if Japanese expatriates remain in the US for two years or more, they will tend to become more active

learners. In addition, it is reasonable to conclude, based on analysis of the results of the ANOVA and the post hoc test, that the longer the Japanese expatriates stay in the US for their overseas assignments, the more they learn using concrete experience and active experimentation rather than abstract conceptualization and reflective observation.

Moreover, a chi-square test of independence confirmed the different patterns of learning styles among the four cohorts. As shown in Table 5, the Pearson chi-square value indicated that the null hypothesis of independence was rejected ($X^2 = 17.2, p < .05$). That is, a relationship exists between learning styles and cohorts. The chi-square test of independence did not violate the number of cells assumption, with an expected count less than five and a minimum expected count of more than one (Norusis, 2000). Most notably, the cross-tabulation illustrated that the first cohort had the largest positive residuals for Assimilating and the largest negative residuals for the Accommodating learning styles. In addition, standardized residuals decreased for the Assimilating styles in the first through the fourth cohorts, while those for the Accommodating learning styles increased from the first cohort to the fourth cohort. This implies that the Assimilating and Accommodating learning styles were not independent of the cohorts.

 Insert Table 5 about here

Results of Study 2

Procedures and sample

In study 2, we sought to determine if there were significant empirical differences between Japanese expatriates and US managers working in the same MNCs in terms of the ways they adapt to managerial responsibilities within MNCs. To explore this question we returned to the

Japanese MNCs that participated in the study and asked eight of the medium to large organizations that supported the previous research to participate in a second study. Six Japanese MNCs agreed to participate in the second study. The participating organizations were administered the LSI and a revised demographic questionnaire. In the second study, we targeted US managers only. Of the 165 American managers that received the packets, 126 returned completed questionnaires, for a response rate of 76%.

Results of study 2

Table 6 describes demographic characteristics of the second sample of only US (non-Japanese) managers. All subjects in the second sample came from manufacturing companies with 100 to 1000 employees. Subjects have spent an average of 65.7 months with their company, and less than half (41%) are in top management positions. The sample was mostly male (73%). In comparison to the sample of Japanese expatriates in study 1, the second sample held slightly less senior positions, belonged to the company longer than the Japanese expatriates by nearly two years, and were more diverse in terms of gender, as the Japanese expatriate sample included no women.

Insert Table 6 about here

Tables 7 and 8 focus on the results of the independent test between American managers and Japanese expatriates. Table 7 compares American managers ($N = 126$) with Japanese expatriates as the entire sample ($N = 267$), while Table 8 compares American managers with

each of the four cohorts: the first ($N = 39$), the second ($N = 55$), the third ($N = 49$), and the fourth ($N = 124$).

As shown in Table 7, Japanese expatriates as a whole were significantly different from their American colleagues on the level of abstract learning orientation on the AC-CE dimension ($t = -6.59, p < .001$) and the level of action learning orientation on the AE-RO dimension ($t = -3.23, p < .001$), suggesting that Japanese expatriates are both more concrete and more reflective than American local managers. That is, Japanese expatriates demonstrate the Diverging learning orientation. American counterparts, in contrast, stress the Converging one.

Insert Tables 7 and 8 about here

As shown in Table 8, for the first cohort of Japanese expatriates compared with American managers, there was a marginally significant difference in AC-CE ($t = -1.76, p = .08$) and a significant difference in active AE-RO ($t = -5.62, p < .001$). Results imply that the first cohort of expatriates use more concrete experience on the AC-CE dimension than do American managers, while they heavily rely on a reflective learning mode on the AE-RO dimension, unlike American managers.

Results of the independent test revealed that the second cohort was different than American managers in both the learning dimensions of AC-CE and AE-RO (AC-CE: $t = -3.88, p < .001$; AE-RO: $t = -3.65, p < .001$). That is, the second cohort of expatriates are more concrete and more reflective than American managers.

Finally, results show that the third and fourth cohorts were significantly different on the AC-CE dimension than American managers (third cohort: $t = -2.96, p < .01$; fourth cohort: $t = -$

7.10, $p < .001$). However, there was no difference between them in terms of the AE-RO dimension (third cohort: $t = -0.41$, ns; fourth cohort: $t = -0.96$, ns). Results suggest that Japanese expatriates with two or more years of experience in the US demonstrate a different learning strategy using more concrete experience than do American managers; however, they become similar to American managers, who depend on an active learning mode.

Analysis

This section provides analysis of the research findings and generates propositions to guide future research in the area of cross-cultural adaptation and learning. Propositions 1 to 4 offer direction for future research regarding adaptation of Japanese managers in the US. Propositions 5 to 8 offer more general direction for the study of cross-cultural adaptation in a variety of cultural settings.

Length of assignment and learning skill acquisition

The correlations among the study variables reveal insights about potential relationships between the acquisition of English, learning style, and time spent in the US. The finding that concrete experience is related to a positive transition in a host culture (Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004) seems to be supported by this study. In their review of the literature on cross-cultural adaptation, Yamazaki and Kayes suggested that concrete experience was a primary learning skill for successful expatriation because it was related to valuing another culture and to developing positive interactions with the host culture. They suggested that learning style preference acted as a proxy for interpersonal skills. The present findings contribute to their proposition by suggesting that preference for using concrete experience is also related to the ability to acquire language.

Proposition 1: The concrete experience mode of adaptation is positively related to acquisition of English.

Analysis of the learning style differences across the four Japanese cohorts suggests that the distribution frequencies (percentage) of each of the four cohorts moves from the abstract to the concrete mode as well as from the reflective to the active mode. These changes suggest that Japanese expatriates transition from Assimilating to Accommodating learning styles. The results of the chi-square test along with the analysis of Figure 2 suggest two propositions regarding the nature of Japanese expatriate learning. These findings are supported by the correlations, which suggest a positive relationship between time in the US and active experimentation and a negative relationship between time in the US and abstract conceptualization. In addition, they are also congruent with the results of ANOVA and its post hoc test as shown in Tables 3 and 4. As discussed earlier, results imply that the longer the Japanese expatriates remain in the US, the more they will use concrete experience and active experimentation.

Insert Figure 2 about here

A Japanese general manager who was working in accounting and administration for a Japanese coating manufacturer in the US for two years provides an example. In an interview with the principal investigator, he stated:

You have to have face-to-face interactions with American co-workers. When I did not communicate with my American co-workers for the time being and did not occasionally give them feedback on their performance [through interaction], the atmosphere of my working place got bad. They didn't work well.

His story provides a personal example of how adopting the concrete experience mode in favor of abstract conceptualization can help to create a favorable working atmosphere. Another Japanese production manager explained an incident that occurred eight years previously in which he felt ineffective when trying to educate American co-workers.

We once had a training course for American co-workers so they could understand the difference between American and Japanese ways [of production]. I used a textbook and taught them. But, after this training, one American came and told me that ‘This is America and not Japan, so we want to do things our own [American] way.’ I thought this training wasn’t good for them.

The failure of this approach was likely related to his emphasis on the conceptual mode: one-way flow of information without interacting directly with US participants, who may place a high value on their actual production experience. These two stories indicate that the concrete mode of learning is crucial for Japanese manufacturers in the US and demonstrates the importance of adapting the concrete mode of learning for effective performance and adaptation to cross-cultural contexts.

Ratiu (1983) argues that successful international managers tend to be concrete learners rather than abstract learners, suggesting that the development of the concrete mode is a pivotal key for successful adaptation. The concrete learning competencies such as developing relationships with local residents and colleagues (Hawes and Kealey, 1979, 1981; Ratiu, 1983; Stein, 1966), demonstrating interpersonal respect (Hawes and Kealey, 1979), and showing greater sensitivity to the needs of others (Tung, 1998) make a difference to expatriates for cross-cultural adaptation (Yamazaki, 2003). Those interpersonal skills are associated with the concrete experience of learning (Kolb, 1984; Boyatzis and Kolb, 1991, 1995). Theoretical research of

expatriates' learning skills for cross-cultural adaptation also supports the perspective of the general requirement of the concrete mode for expatriates' adaptation (Yamazaki, 2003). In light of these findings, the following propositions are offered.

Proposition 2: The abstract conceptualization mode of adaptation is negatively related to time spent in the US.

The lengths of overseas assignments appear to vary based on culture. For example, Japanese expatriates typically rotate after four to five years; Americans after two to three years (Tung, 1984, 1987); and Europeans after two to three years (Oddou *et al.*, 1995). The length of the assignment term may depend on the personnel rotation practice of MNCs of each country (Mead, 1994). However, if MNCs expect their expatriates to successfully perform within their assignment periods, they may need to provide the expatriates with at least a three-year assignment. Unfortunately, short foreign postings may mean less successful opportunities for expatriates. They do not give expatriates sufficient time to learn how local culture determines the behavior of local managers (Mead, 1994) as well as to acclimate to the foreign environment (Tung, 1984). Selmer (1987) concluded with his study of Swedish managers that the three-year postings of overseas assignments also have drawbacks because they have insufficient time to develop an understanding of how local managers work.

Findings illustrate that Japanese expatriates need a minimum of two years to acquire active learning skills held by US managers and nearly four years to acquire concrete learning skills. Consistent with these findings, Japanese MNCs did not expect that their expatriates would demonstrate full performance until the third year (Tung, 1984). It stands to reason that by investing labor in the first and second years, the MNCs expect to see fruitful performance of

Japanese expatriates at the third year or later. Thus, a general statement of time related to learning in a new culture could be expressed as follows:

Proposition 3: The active experimentation mode of adaptation is positively related to time spent in the US.

Figure 2 shows the scores of each of the four Japanese cohorts on each of the four learning style variables. The orientation of Japanese learning preferences for each mode shifted towards the concrete and active modes across the four cohorts. Transitions toward the active mode were quite large between the first and second cohorts and third and fourth cohorts in particular. In terms of the magnitude of the active learning mode of Japanese expatriates, the results are consistent with the two previous findings presented in cross-cultural expatriate literature. Ishida (1992) discussed that Japanese expatriates are required to acquire decision skills in foreign countries, and Tung (1981) reported that they need to deal with responsibilities for overseas assignments. These two skills are clearly associated with active experimentation of the learning mode (Kolb, 1984).

The importance of the active mode in the US also emerged from two stories we heard during the interviews. The president of a Japanese MNC in the manufacturing and mining industry described the following:

I made a big decision in front of my American employees [not management] when they requested that I raise their wages. They threatened to go strike and stop producing goods. I felt pressure. . . . Of course, after I had a talk with headquarters [in Japan], I said to them [the American workers], ‘I won’t raise your wages’. My job is to make a decision.

His story sounded like the ordinary discourse of a top American manager, but taking on such an active role in making such an important decision is unusual in a Japanese context. His

active role in making a key decision in the US required him to take the active mode and resulted in the further demonstration of those skills. A Japanese treasurer who worked for a Japanese heavy-equipment manufacturer for five years in the US provided another example that suggested the shift toward the active learning mode:

I cut into a dispute between two Americans. I tried to reconcile them, and I managed to persuade them to stop fighting. I know that they don't like each other though. . . . I couldn't do this soon after I came here. . . . In fact, for the first year, I didn't talk with my American colleagues and even my subordinates.

An unexpected incident made the Japanese treasurer take an immediate action that would not have been taken in his first year. It also cannot be denied that an improvement in English conversation abilities would facilitate persuasion and reconciliation. The Japanese treasurer's story is particularly indicative of a learning style transition from the reflective to the active mode for his working in a cross-cultural environment. From this data we propose the following changes in learning of Japanese expatriates.

Proposition 4: Japanese expatriate managers become more concrete (less abstract) over time and more active (less reflective) over time in the US. Stated another way, Japanese expatriate managers adapt by transitioning from Assimilating to Accommodating modes over time.

The adaptation of Japanese and US managers

Propositions five through eight make general statements about the nature of cross-cultural adaptation based on the cultural-specific data presented here. Propositions five and six relate to differences between learning methods developed by expatriates versus those of the host culture.

The data from Tables 3 and 8 suggest a more complicated picture of the learning of expatriates compared with host culture nationals. Over time, as shown in Table 8, the four cohorts of Japanese managers and the US managers become more differentiated in terms of the degree of concreteness. Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) have described how cross-cultural adaptation requires learning in the concrete mode above others. For managers to learn to value different cultures, pick up on cultural cues, and interact successfully with those of another culture, the concrete mode must be developed. Thus, the foreign nationals require more concrete learning than the host culture.

Proposition 5: Expatriate and host country managers become more heterogeneous in terms of level of concreteness (AC-CE) as expatriate managers adapt to the host culture.

Table 8 also shows how the Japanese and US managers become more homogenous over time in terms of active experimentation. This is likely due to the fact that both cohorts are responding to the demand of action embedded in the US business culture. In addition, the industry and occupation of the sample, primarily manufacturing and production, have been shown to require more active learning (Kolb, 1984). In one interview, a Japanese material coordinator working in an electrical parts manufacturer had been in the US only six months when he mentioned the importance of adapting to US culture:

If you were in Japan, you would not need to say one by one what you were thinking. Japanese colleagues would understand what you are thinking in your mind, wouldn't they? And, you will understand roughly what they want to say. But, when I came here, I ran into several uncomfortable situations. American colleagues are so straight in saying what they are thinking. At first, I was listening to it in silence.

His story suggests how the manager moved from the Japanese reflective observation mode of adaptation to the active experimentation mode. Proposition 6 emerges from these findings.

Proposition 6: Expatriate and host country managers become more homogenous in terms of active experimentation (AE-RO) as expatriate managers adapt to the host culture.

The nearly significant correlation between English conversation ability and cohort size suggests that larger expatriate cohorts may be less effective in providing a foundation in the host culture for learning. Although the correlation was small ($r = -.15$), it highlights that being part of a large expatriate cohort may buffer the manager from learning in the new culture.

Proposition 7: The larger and more cohesive the cohort of managers, the lower the degree of assimilation into the host culture.

The patterns of learning displayed over the four cohorts and two cultures reveal a complex process of adaptation. It appears that expatriates in both the host culture of the US as well as the home culture of Japan must adapt in their early years of transitioning to a new organization, although the patterns of change are different in each culture. Overall, both the Japan and US cohorts adapted to the demands they faced. The host culture adapted by moving toward the active orientation of the dominant culture. In contrast, the expatriate managers required a more complex form of adaptation, moving toward the dominant culture in some cases but away from it in others. This complex movement represents what Kolb (1984) has referred to as adaptive flexibility. Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) have discussed how adaptive flexibility becomes a key component of successful cross-cultural adaptation. The current study provides an

example of how such flexibility works in one sample of Japanese managers. The final proposition grows out of these findings to suggest a complex method of adaptation in expatriates.

Proposition 8: Expatriates develop multiple mechanisms to adapt to a new culture such that they develop greater adaptive flexibility to use different modes of adaptation rather than relying on a single mode.

These eight propositions emerged from the results of our study, including the qualitative interviews, and are generally supported by prior research on cross-cultural adaptation. However, this study had two main limitations. First, the population of the study was Japanese expatriates in the US, but the sample was composed of Japanese expatriates who mostly worked in manufacturing industries in the Midwestern US. Other industry areas and locations must be examined for generalization against the population. Next, this research was designed to examine the change of learning styles in a cross-sectional study under an assumption that all people have similar traits and common experiences over time. A longitudinal study should be conducted to examine how expatriates changed their learning styles. The longitudinal design with quantitative and qualitative methods will provide rich information about the phenomena of expatriates' adaptation to cross-cultural environments.

Implications for practice and future research

This study has several implications for research and practice in international business. It shows that cross-cultural adaptation of expatriates entails the association of learning styles. This study pointed out a unique aspect of cultural adaptation through expatriates' learning. Furthermore, it has often been expressed that the examination of cross-cultural adaptation tends to be atheoretical and methodologically problematic (Black and Mendenhall, 1991; Deller, 1997).

By applying Kolb's learning theory to study cross-cultural adaptation, the present study has attempted to build a theoretical framework of expatriates' adaptation through the lens of how expatriates learn from experience and measured through learning style.

The first cohort of Japanese expatriates was significantly different from the fourth cohort in terms of the abstract and concrete learning dimension. According to this result, concrete experience tends to be an important requirement, in general, for expatriates' adaptation to cross-cultural environments. Also, the first and second cohorts were significantly different from the third and fourth cohorts with respect to the active and reflective modes. This result suggests that the active mode of learning needs to be learned by Japanese expatriates for adaptation to their business contexts where this learning mode is culturally dominant. These two findings will contribute to the literature of international organizational behavior that involves expatriates' adaptation to the host country.

The study has several implications associated with international human resource practices. This study suggests supporting a useful concept of cultural match between learning styles, the person, and the environment for effective adaptation and adjustment. The research also suggests that Japanese expatriate assignments should include a minimum of two years for cross-cultural adaptation to occur. Consequently, the typical posting of Japanese expatriates, which is four to five years on average, should provide expatriates with the skills to perform effectively the rest of the assigned term after the initial adaptation period.

This study explored how the learning patterns in Japanese expatriates change over time when working in the US. Studying these specific cultural patterns helps identify more general patterns of learning in a cross-cultural context. The Japan/US context is particularly useful because Japanese MNCs have been so pervasive and successful. Specific patterns that emerged

include the movement from abstract to concrete and from reflective to active modes of learning. We believe such adaptation of Japanese managers is a direct response to working in a manufacturing environment in the US. The observation that Japanese and US managers become more distinct in terms of concreteness and more similar in terms of action orientation presents a complex picture. This movement shows that expatriates must develop a complex set of adaptive skills. Failure to develop such adaptive skills is likely to result in an organization that is not, in the words of Natsume, 'a very agreeable place to live'.

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Table 1 Demographic characteristics of sample organizations and subjects (study 1)

	No. of participants	Percent		No. of participants	Percent
<u>Type of industry</u>			<u>English conversation</u>		
Manufacturing	257	96	Can't speak	20	8
Shipping	5	2	Basic	137	51
Travel agency	5	2	Intermediate	94	32
			Advanced	13	5
<u>Location</u>			Almost native	3	1
Rural	123	46	<u>Job positions</u>		
Suburb	144	54	CEO/president	20	8
<u>Total Employees</u>			Executives	70	26
22–99	21	8	Middle managers	89	33
100–999	197	74	Assistant managers	37	14
1000–1500	49	18	Specialists	51	19
<u>No. of Japanese expatriates</u>			<u>Job functions</u>		
2–9	100	37	Managing entire firm	40	15
10–19	83	31	Division/plant management	22	8
20–25	84	32	Production/system control	44	17
<u>Length of time spent in US</u>			Engineering/design/research	86	32
(months)	mean:	42.2	Purchasing	9	3
	s.d.:	39.2	Accounting/HR/general admin.	23	9
<u>Overseas job experience</u>			Sales/marketing	43	16
Experience	52	20	<u>Gender</u>		
No experience	215	80	Male	267	100
<u>Overseas study experience</u>			Female	0	0
Experience	15	6	<u>Age</u>		
No experience	252	94	20–29	13	5
<u>Accompanied by family</u>			30–40	118	44
Married with family	199	74	41–50	88	33
Married without family	47	18	51–	48	18
Single	21	8			

Table 2 *Correlations between study variables (study 1)*

	mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Total employees	586.5	349.1									
2 Number of Japanese expatriates	13.6	7.5	.61 **								
3 English conversation ability ^a	2.4	0.8	-.07	-.15 *							
4 Months spent in US	42.2	39.2	.05	.03	.40 **						
5 CE	28.7	6.9	-.07	-.07	.16 **	.08					
6 AC	28.8	8.6	-.01	-.03	-.03	-.17 *	-.52 **				
7 RO	29.6	6.6	.01	-.01	-.13 *	-.14 *	-.46 **	.07			
8 AE	32.8	8.3	.07	.11	-.00	.21 *	.07	-.66 **	-.47 **		
9 AC-CE	0.2	13.5	.03	.02	-.10	-.15 *	-.84 **	.90 **	.28 **	-.45 **	
10 AE-RO	3.3	12.8	.04	.07	.07	.21 **	.28 **	-.46 **	-.82 **	.89 **	-.44 **

^aMeasured on a five-point scale ranging from 5 = "Almost native speaker" to 1 = "Cannot speak."

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

CE indicates concrete experience; AC, abstract conceptualization; RO, reflective observation; AE, active experimentation.

Table 3 Mean, standard deviations, and results of ANOVA of learning style characteristics by cohorts (study 1)

Group	<i>N</i>	<u>AC-CE</u>		<u>AE-RO</u>		<u>Primary learning styles</u>
		mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.	
All Japanese expatriates	267	0.2	13.5	3.3	12.8	Diverging
First cohort (<1 year)	39	4.9	13.0	-4.1	12.0	Assimilating
Second cohort (1 to <2 years)	55	0.3	14.0	-0.2	13.5	Diverging
Third cohort (2 to <3 years)	49	1.4	15.4	6.5	10.9	Accommodating
Fourth cohort (≥ 3 years)	124	-1.9	12.3	5.9	12.3	Diverging
<i>D.F.</i>		3, 263		3, 263		
<i>F</i>		2.7*		9.2**		
<i>Levene test</i>		2.0		1.2		

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

AC-CE indicates abstract conceptualization–concrete experience; AE-RO, active experimentation–reflective observation.

Table 4 Results of the Bonferroni post hoc test of ANOVA by cohorts (study 1)

Bonferroni test	<u>AC-CE</u>			<u>AE-RO</u>		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
1 First cohort						
2 Second cohort	4.5			-3.9		
3 Third cohort	3.4	-1.1		-10.6*	-6.7*	
4 Fourth cohort	6.7*	2.2	3.3	-10.0*	-6.1*	0.7

* $p < .05$.

AC-CE indicates abstract conceptualization–concrete experience; AE-RO, active experimentation–reflective observation.

Table 5 Results of the chi-square test of independence by learning styles and cohorts (study 1)

		<u>Learning Styles</u>				Pearson Chi-square	d.f.
		Accommodating	Diverging	Assimilating	Converging		
<u>First cohort</u>	% within 4 cohorts	21	23	51	5	17.2*	9
	Std. Residual	-1.6	0.2	2.3	-1.1		
<u>Second cohort</u>	% within 4 cohorts	35	29	31	6		
	Std. Residual	-0.2	1.2	0.0	-1.2		
<u>Third cohort</u>	% within 4 cohorts	35	18	31	16		
	Std. Residual	-0.2	-0.5	-0.1	1.2		
<u>Fourth cohort</u>	% within 4 cohorts	43	19	25	13		
	Std. Residual	1.2	-0.6	-1.2	0.7		

* $p < .05$

Table 6 Demographic characteristics of sample organizations and American managers (study 2)

No. of participants (%)			No. of participants (%)		
<u>Type of Industry</u>			<u>Job Positions</u>		
Manufacturing	126	100	Top and middle managers	51	41
			Assistant managers and supervisors	74	59
<u>Location</u>			<u>Job Functions</u>		
Rural	72	57	Manufacturing	35	28
Suburb	54	43	R & D	15	12
<u>Total Employees</u>			Quality control	20	16
100 - 1000	126	100	Purchasing	4	3
			Finance & accountings	21	21
<u>No. of Japanese Expatriates</u>			Human resources	10	10
2 - 9	65	52	Sales	10	10
10 - 19	0	0	<u>Age</u>		
20 - 25	61	48		mean:	39.0
<u>Length of Time Spent</u>				s.d.:	9.5
(months)	mean:	65.7	<u>Gender</u>		
	s.d.:	55.3	Male	93	73
			Female	33	27

Table 7 Results of the independent t-test between Japanese expatriates' and US managers' learning preferences (study 2)

	N	<u>AC - CE</u>			<u>AE - RO</u>			<u>Learning styles</u>
		mean	s.d	t	mean	s.d	t	
American managers	126	8.5	10.8		7.3	10.8		Converging
Entire Japanese expatriates	267	0.2	13.5	-6.59***	3.3	12.8	-3.23***	Diverging

***p > .001

AC-CE indicates abstract conceptualization–concrete experience; AE-RO, active experimentation–reflective observation.

Table 8 Results of the independent t-test between American managers and each of four Japanese cohorts regarding learning preferences (study 2)

	<u>AC-CE</u>	<u>AE-RO</u>
American managers vs. First cohort (less 1 year)	-1.76+	-5.62***
American managers vs. Second cohort (1 to less 2 years)	-3.88***	-3.65***
American managers vs. Third cohort (2 to less 3 years)	-2.96**	-0.41
American managers vs. Fourth cohort (3 years or over)	-7.10***	-0.96

+ $p < .10$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Figure 1 *Experiential learning cycle and corresponding learning styles*

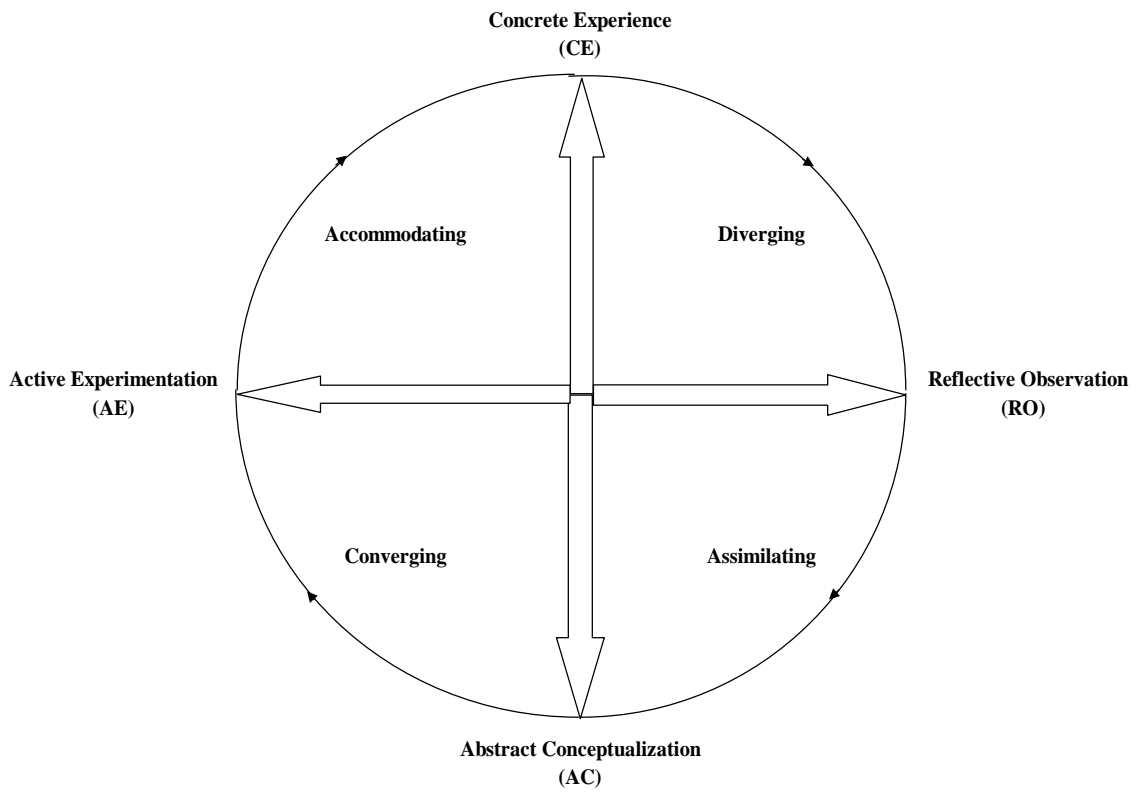


Figure 2 *Change in learning preferences of Japanese managers over time*

