

Intercultural Communication and Stereotypes

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1. Abstract

For the current analysis, I begin by providing a definition of the term ‘stereotype.’ Next I introduce the research of Dean Barnlund (1975) and explain his hypothesis regarding differences in Japanese and American ‘self-disclosure’. I then overview Barnlund’s findings on Japanese and American stereotypes of their own and each other’s communication style. The point of this analysis is to assess whether Barnlund’s hypotheses regarding self-disclosure are reflected in his stereotype data. Finally, I introduce data collected in 2011 by students of my seminar on intercultural communication. Given that Barnlund’s data is 40 years old, these data provide insight into the current nature of Japanese and American stereotypes as well as any changes that have occurred since Barnlund’s now classic study.

2. What is a stereotype ?

The origin of the modern term ‘stereotype’ can be traced back to Lippmann (1922). Originally, the term was used in the printing industry. In early printing technology, letters or images were combined and tightened within a frame. The frame was then spread with ink and pressed against a sheet of paper to transfer the image. This frame was originally called a ‘ste-

reotype.’ Because the ‘stereotype’ allowed for an identical image to be replicated multiple times, Lippmann used the same term to refer to the cognitive phenomenon that we now understand as stereotypes.

Building on Lippmann’s original insight, researchers today define stereotypes as the set of characteristics which are associated with specific social groups (e.g., intelligent/unintelligent, serious/funny, rude/polite, shy/outgoing). Eagly and Chaiken (1993), for example claim that a stereotype consists of “attributes that an individual ascribes to a social group” (p. 104). Such attributes can easily be prompted by completing sentences similar to the ones shown below.

1. Japanese are _____.
2. Americans are _____.

It has been noted that because they associate characteristics with all members of a specific social group, stereotypes are necessarily over simplified representations. Because viewing others based on such a limited understanding causes us to overlook important individual characteristics, stereotypes often lead to misunderstanding. They prevent us from truly ‘seeing’ the other and thus hinder our achieving of true ‘inter-personal’ understanding.

An additional dimension of stereotypes which must not be overlooked is that stereotypes are essentially a social phenomenon (Macrae, Stangor and Hewstone, 1996). This means that they are shared by members of a given community and acquired as part of the socialization process typically in a subconscious manner. As such, people are often unaware of the stereotypes they

hold and which exist within their own society. As a result, stereotypes (and any resulting prejudice) are perpetuated within a given society.

Given their potential impact on human behavior, the investigation of stereotypes has occupied a central position in intercultural communication research. One such example is the research of Dean Barnlund (1975).

3. Barnlund's research

Dean Barnlund, a professor and researcher of intercultural communication at San Francisco State University, visited Japan twice and taught at International Christian University in Tokyo (once in 1968 and once in 1972). During his stays in Japan, Barnlund carried out a number of studies on Japanese communication style. These findings he compared with similar research carried out on American university students. One of the core theoretical concepts underlying his research is 'self-disclosure.' The following section overviews this concept and as well as Barnlund's hypotheses regarding Japanese and Americans and potential misunderstandings that occur as a result of differences in self-disclosure.

3.1. Self-disclosure

The central idea behind the concept of self-disclosure is quite simple. It essentially describes the act of 'sharing' or 'exposing' some dimension of self with another. This act of sharing can consist of verbal information (e.g., likes/dislikes, weaknesses/strengths) as well as physical dimensions of the self (e.g., touching, holding hands, kissing).

As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, Barnlund postulated that the self con-

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Figure 1 : Japanese Public and Private self

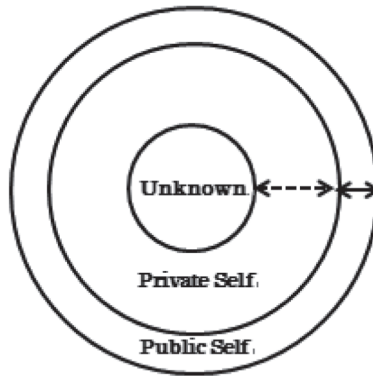
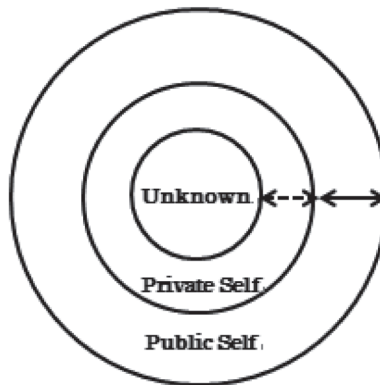


Figure 2 : American Public and Private self



sists of three domains. The outer-most dimension represents the aspects of self that one is comfortable sharing (what Barnlund calls 'public self'). The next inner dimension represents aspects of the self that one is not comfortable

sharing ; the 'private self.' Finally, the center dimension consists of aspects of the self that are unknown and hence not the conscious object of self-disclosure.

Clearly, the process of self-disclosure is central to the human communication. People are continuously sharing (and not sharing) various physical and verbal aspects of themselves with others. However, Barnlund further hypothesized that the boundaries of these dimension can vary across cultures. For example, the people of some cultures may have a wider range of self they are comfortable sharing compared with the people from other cultures. This is precisely what Barnlund claimed regarding Japanese and Americans. Specifically, Barnlund predicted that Japanese have a smaller public and larger private self compared to Americans. Moreover, such differences, he argued, lead to specific types of misunderstandings.

3.2. Japanese and American self-disclosure and misunderstanding

Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrate the type of misunderstanding Barnlund predicted would occur in Japanese/American intercultural communication. First consider potential misunderstandings from the perspective of the American. As shown in Figure 3, because the domain of public self is wider for the American, the Japanese degree of self-disclosure fails to penetrate to the full capacity of the American expectation. That is, although the Japanese has fully exposed him/herself according to the accepted norms regarding self-disclosure, the degree falls short of the American expectation, as shown by the gray area. Because of this gap in expectations, the Japanese is potentially the target of a negative evaluation by the American. Specifically, the Japanese

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Figure 3 : Japanese Self-disclosure as seen by Americans

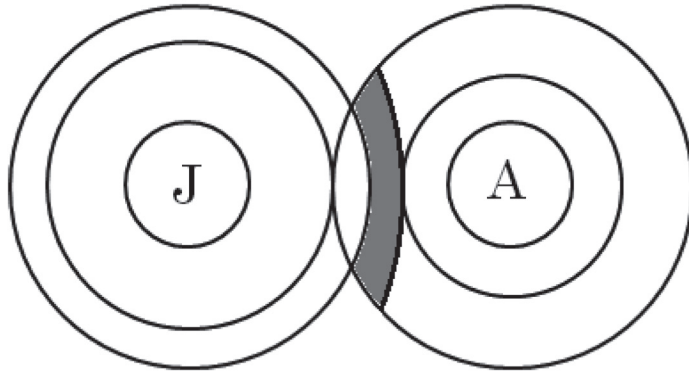
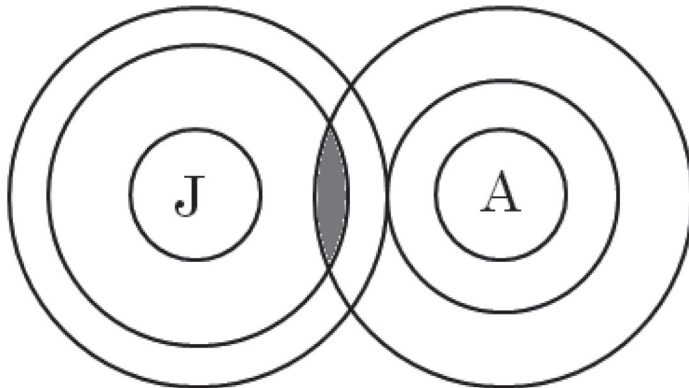


Figure 4 : American Self-disclosure as seen by Japanese



may be perceived as standoffish, shy, not forthcoming and other characteristics related to the withholding of self.

In contrast, the American may be viewed as overly forthcoming, pushy or

overbearing. Such a negative evaluation can similarly be explained by differences in expectations regarding the degree of self-disclosure. As shown in Figure 4, the American although exposing a degree of self that is consistent with his/her cultural norms, it violates the domain of private self according to Japanese norms. This violation (shown in gray) is the potential target of negative evaluation by the Japanese.

3.3. Cultural profiles

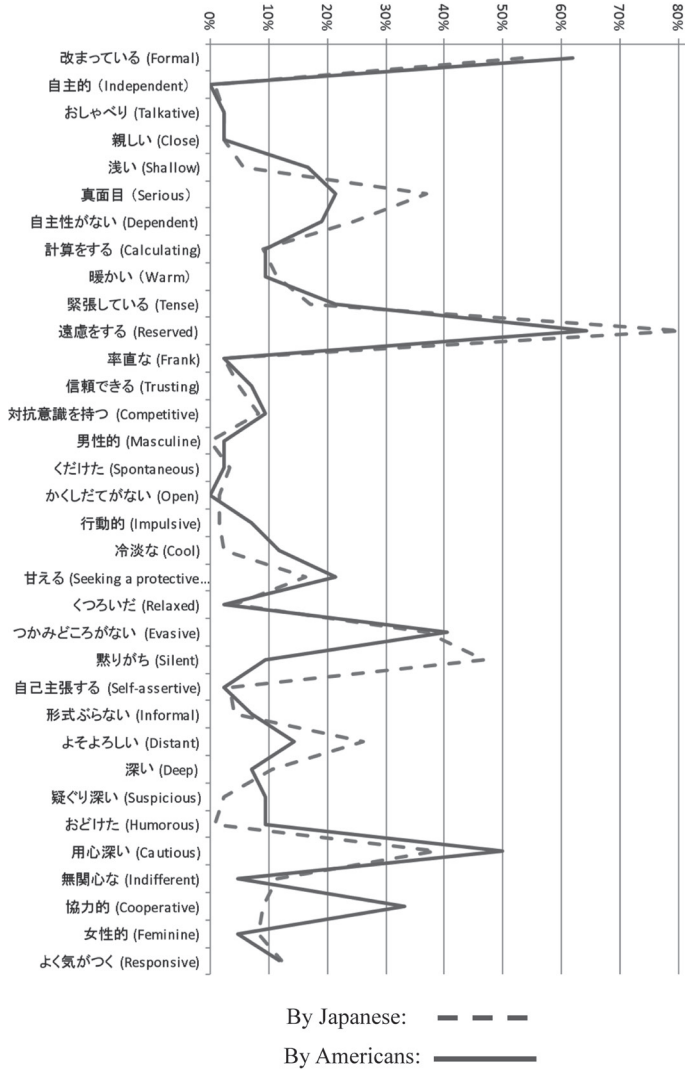
To assess the validity of his hypotheses regarding Japanese and American self-disclosure, Barnlund investigated Japanese and American stereotypes regarding their own and each other's communication style. He reasoned that if, in fact, such differences existed they could be detected by assessing Japanese and American impressions of communication style in Japan and the US (i.e., their stereotypes). It should be noted that because Barnlund does not investigate actual communication style, any evidence he obtains is necessarily indirect. Regardless, his studies provide insight into Japanese and American communication style which remain important even today.

3.3.1. Barnlund's study

To investigate Japanese and American images of their own and each other's communication style Barnlund utilized a list of 34 adjectives (shown in Figure 5~Figure 8). The list was given to 122 Japanese and 42 American university students who were instructed to select 5 adjectives from each list which they felt best describe the communication style of Japanese and Americans when interacting amongst themselves. Although these methods are surprisingly simple, they yield interesting and insightful results.

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Figure 5 : Stereotypes of Japanese Communication Style
(data reported in Barnlund, 1975)



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Figure 6 : Stereotypes of American Communication Style
(data reported in Barnlund, 1975)

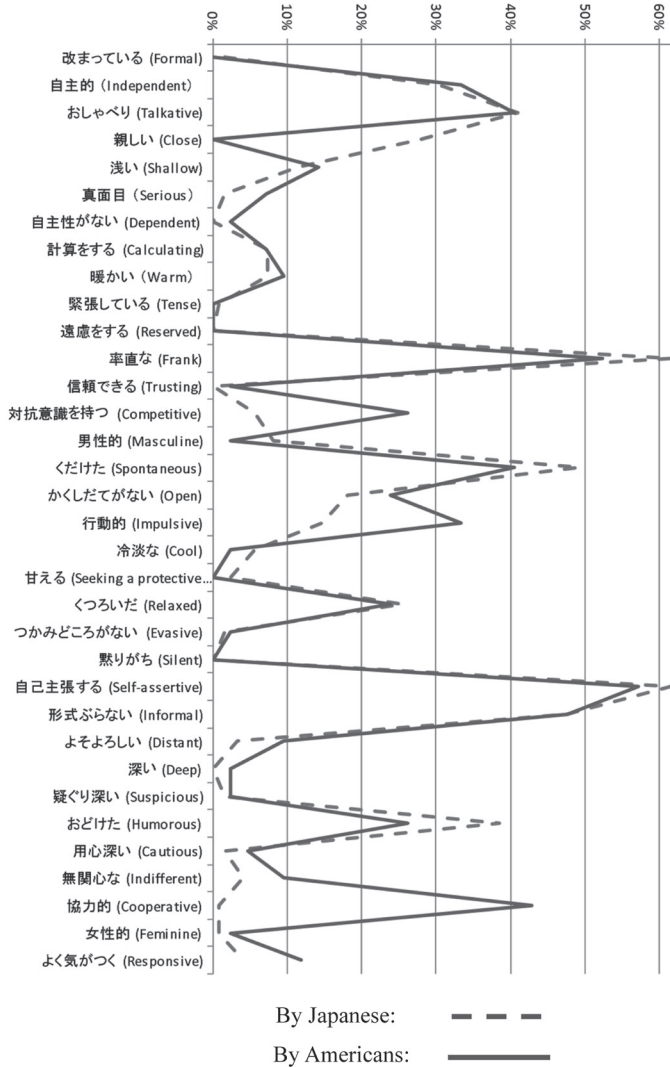


Figure 5 presents findings regarding Japanese and American perceptions of Japanese communication style. Barnlund argues that these findings support his hypothesis that Japanese have a restricted domain of public self compared to Americans. Evidence of this can be found in the overall similarity between the Japanese and Americans evaluations of Japanese communication style as 'reserved,' 'formal,' 'evasive,' and 'cautious.' These findings are consistent with a small public compared to private self because revealing little of oneself can result in a communication style characterized by such traits.

Regarding the American communication style, Barnlund's data also indicate a high degree of correlation between the Japanese and American respondents (Figure 6). These findings show that American communication style is viewed as 'frank,' 'informal,' 'spontaneous,' 'independent,' and 'relaxed.' As with the data on Japanese communication, these data provide support for Barnlund's hypothesis. They are consistent with the idea that American public self is large in comparison to Japan.

In addition to these similarities, there are some interesting differences in the responses of Japanese and Americans. First consider the image of Japanese communication style. One item that differs significantly is the view of Japanese 'cooperativeness.' Although a large percentage of Americans (33%) selected this adjective to describe Japanese communication style, very few Japanese (9%) did. This finding suggests that the stereotype of 'cooperation' so commonly associated with Asian cultures may not be equally shared by members of Asian societies. Similarly, evaluations of how 'silent' Japanese are differed between Americans and Japanese. In this case, however, a large percent of Japanese (47%) prescribed to the stereotype whereas few Ameri-

cans did (10%).

There were also interesting differences in Japanese and American evaluations of American communication style. For example, although 28% of Japanese thought American communication style expressed 'closeness,' no Americans selected this adjective to describe themselves. Conversely, the percentage of Americans who felt they were 'competitive' (26%) and 'impulsive' (33%) was greater than Japanese respondents (6% and 15% respectively).

4. How about now?

4.1. 2011 survey

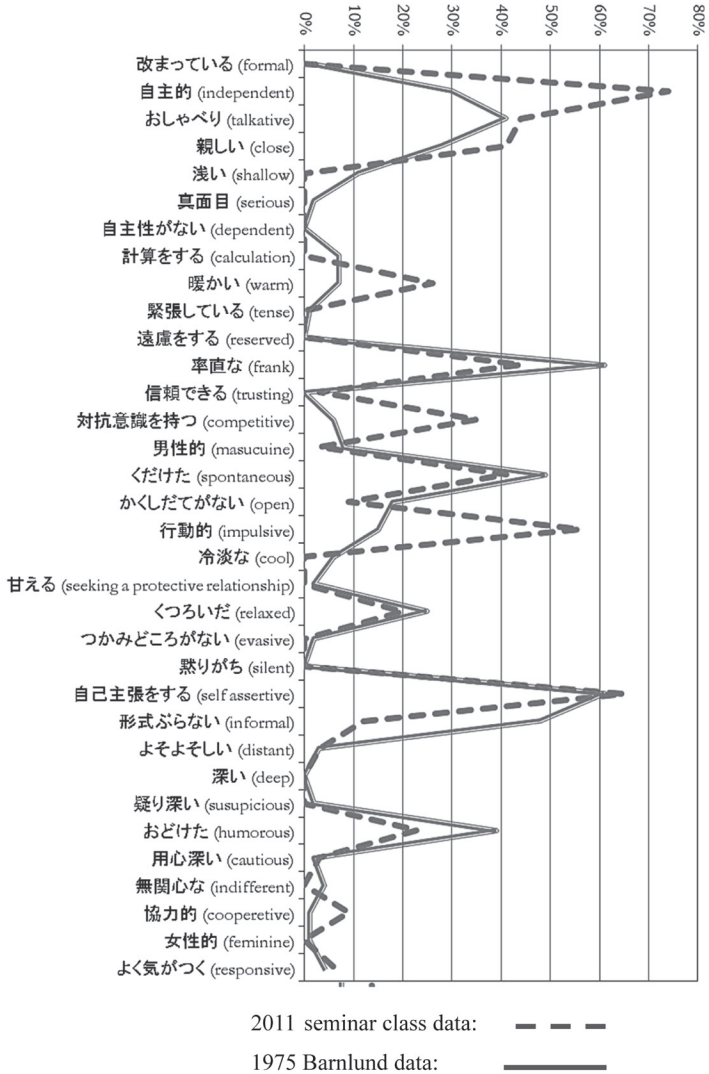
Although Barnlund's research provides valuable insight into differences in American and Japanese perceptions of their own and each other's the communication style, the findings are arguably outdated. In order to investigate the current state of Japanese and American stereotypes, students in my seminar on intercultural communication replicated Barnlund's survey in 2011.

For the replication study, 34 Japanese university students and 20 Americans were investigated¹. The items investigated and methods employed were identical to those of the Barnlund study. Participants were provided with a list of 34 adjectives and instructed to select 5 items that best represented their impressions of Japanese and American styles of communication. Figure 7 and Figure 8 present the results of the investigation compared with findings reported by Barnlund (1975).

1 American data were gathered using social media and are not necessarily from university students.

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Figure 7: Japanese stereotypes of American Communication Style
(data collected in 2011 seminar class)



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Figure 8 : American stereotypes of Japanese Communication Style
(data collected in 2011 seminar class)

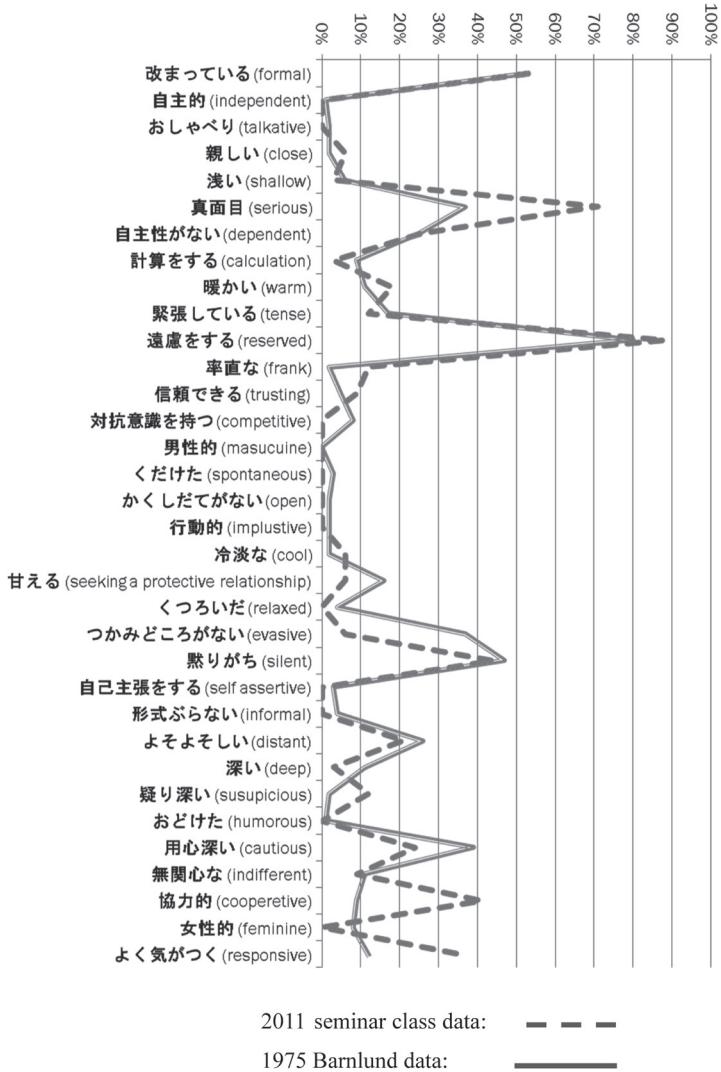


Figure 7 summarizes the findings with regards to Japanese stereotypes of American communication style. First, it can be noted that many similarities remain between the current findings and findings reported in Barnlund. For example, Japanese both then and now view Americans as 'independent,' 'talkative,' 'frank,' 'spontaneous,' 'relaxed,' and 'self-assertive.' However, a number of interesting differences can also be found. For example, Japanese views of Americans as 'independent,' 'impulsive' and 'warm' show a marked increase compared with 40 years ago. In contrast, the number of Japanese who evaluated Americans as 'informal,' 'humorous,' 'shallow,' and 'frank' decreased.

Thus although the stereotypes of Japanese today are overall consistent with those of Japanese 40 years ago, evaluations of some items which reflect a high degree of self disclosure (e.g., 'independent,' 'impulsive,' and 'warm') have grown in strength. Conversely, a mild decrease in some similar items ('informal,' 'humorous,' 'shallow,' and 'frank') was also detected. Overall, then, there appears to be a strengthening of Japanese stereotypes of Americans as having a large public self. The degree to which this change reflects a actual change in the self-disclosure patterns of Americans, however, remains a topic of future investigation. It is possible, for example, the increase has resulted from increased proliferation of stereotypes via mass media (e.g., movies)

Similarly, the findings on American stereotypes of Japanese indicate a number of similarities and differences compared to Barnlund's research. As with Japanese stereotypes, overall the stereotypes of Americans appear to have remained constant. Both groups, for example, view Japanese as 'formal,' 'reserved,' 'cautious,' and 'serious.' Significant changes include a decrease in

evaluations of Japanese as 'dependent,' 'calculative,' 'cautious,' and 'reserved.' Conversely, a greater percentage of American respondents currently view Japanese as 'talkative,' 'open,' and 'relaxed.' These changes suggest that a widening of the boundaries of Japanese public self has occurred. Confirmation of such a trend, however, is required before any final conclusions can be drawn.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The current analysis considered the interrelationship between stereotypes and intercultural communication. Specifically, it introduced Barnlund's now classic study on Japanese and American communication style and his hypotheses regarding self-disclosure. It was demonstrated how Barnlund's study provides indirect support for his claim that Japanese public self is narrower than that of Americans and the potential for misunderstanding in Japanese/American intercultural communication as a result of these differences.

However, because Barnlund's results are now over 40 years old, it was argued that there is a need for more current data. As such, research conducted in 2011 by students in a seminar on intercultural communication was presented. This research followed an identical procedure to that of Barnlund and revealed a number of interesting similarities and differences between Americans and Japanese then and now.

On the whole the findings show a pattern consistent with Barnlund's research. Japanese are still viewed as 'reserved' and Americans as 'frank.' However, these stereotypes also appear to be shifting. On the one hand Japanese stereotypes of Americans as possessing a wide boundary of public self appear to have grown. Conversely, American stereotypes of Japanese as hav-

ing a limited in domain of public self appear to have decreased. Whether these changes are indicative of actual changes in Japanese and American levels of self disclosure, however, are beyond the scope of the current analysis and, as such, remain an important question for future investigation.

6. Works Cited

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