Cultural Mediators in Overseas Japanese Companies

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ABSTRACT
The main aim of the current study was to examine the roles played by cultural mediators in managing conflict within multicultural organizations. We were interested in understanding the language needs and the benefits experienced by cultural mediators in Japanese companies in Australia. We used a qualitative approach where in-depth interviews were conducted with 68 informants who were staff employed in Japanese companies in Australia. The results revealed language competence is not a requisite of cultural mediators. Regardless of language competence, cultural mediators obtain benefits that coincide with benefits acquired by staff with language competence. Establishing reciprocal relations with Japanese expatriates via demonstrating adaptive work attitudes towards the parent company is essential to obtain these benefits.

Keywords:
Cultural mediators; Intercultural communication; Overseas Japanese companies; Australia; Qualitative research; International management

Scholars have noted that the management of white-collar staff in overseas Japanese companies is challenging (Byun & Ybema 2005; Kameda 2005). For instance, the relationship between Japanese expatriate managers and their non-Japanese host country staff has been criticized as being a distant relationship (Yoshimura & Anderson 1997). Others such as Chikudate (1995) argue that ‘bicultural’ staff could be used to assist in improving the relationship between Japanese expatriates and their non-Japanese co-workers, especially in managing intercultural conflict in overseas Japanese companies (Hayashi 1996).

In the social psychology literature, individuals who are capable of reconciling between culturally different groups are referred to as ‘cultural mediators’ (Bochner 1981). While the bicultural individual’s contribution to an organization is acknowledged (Bochner 1981), there is limited empirical information on why individuals play the role of a cultural mediator (Taft 1981). Identifying the characteristics of cultural mediators would allow managers in Japanese overseas subsidiaries to adopt human resource strategies to attract and develop their staff in order to improve their intercultural interactions.

The current paper commences with reviews of the literature on cultural mediators in intercultural interactions. This is followed by a description of our research design undertaken in a sample of Japanese
overseas subsidiaries in Australia. Findings are then reported, followed by a discussion in relation to the research questions. The current paper concludes with managerial implications in relation to cultural mediators in intercultural interactions.

STAFF RELATIONSHIPS IN OVERSEAS JAPANESE COMPANIES

Relationships between Japanese expatriate staff and non-Japanese host country staff in overseas Japanese companies are acknowledged as distant (Yoshihara 2001; Yoshimura & Anderson 1997). It is shown that a common cause of the distant relationship is communication (Byun & Ybema 2005; Kameda 2005). For instance, Ishii (1996) notes that a characteristic of the Japanese communication pattern requires guessing and the use of all possible cues (inference or ‘Sasshi’).

The literature has also shown that Japanese expatriate managers are dissatisfied with the work attitudes of non-Japanese host country staff (Byun & Ybema 2005). This is because working overtime is common practice in companies in Japan (Ericsson & Fujii 1995), and Japanese expatriate managers tend to expect a work environment where their employees routinely work longer hours (Byun & Ybema 2005).

The above problems signify there is a gap in relationships between Japanese expatriate managers and non-Japanese host country local staff in overseas subsidiaries. A key to improving the relations between people with different cultural backgrounds is to seek assistance from a bicultural person (Hayashi 1996).

CULTURAL MEDIATORS AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Researchers of organization studies acknowledge bicultural staff are capable of managing conflict and synthesizing staff of different cultural groups in intercultural or multi-cultural organizations (Chikudate 1995; Hayashi 1996). Bochner (1981: 6) analyzes bicultural persons from a social psychological perspective, and uses the term ‘cultural mediator’ for those who are able to assist communication, promote accommodating each other, and reconcile culturally different people.

The ability of understanding both cultures is an indispensable trait for a cultural mediator (Bochner 1981; Taft 1981). Acquiring deep understanding about the culture of the host country requires an advanced level of language skills (Block 1996). Bochner (1981) and Taft (1981) state the necessity of
translating different languages in performing as cultural mediator. These claims suggest language skills are necessary skills for cultural mediators. Although the language skills of cultural mediators are acknowledged in social psychology, no further attention has been paid to the language skills.

Hayashi (1996) proposes that language skills may be necessary in mediating intercultural communication difficulties between people of different cultural backgrounds. He, however, places more importance on understanding work cultures. In contrast, Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, and Säntti (2005) stress the importance of language skills, arguing those who possess language skills are likely to become a communication channel. Language skills are therefore crucial to assist staff of different cultural and language backgrounds.

**BENEFITS OF LANGUAGE SKILLS**

The benefits of language skills have been identified (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch 1999a; Vaara et al. 2005). Those who have language skills of the corporate language or Head Office are powerful staff in an organization (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch 1999b). Vaara et al. (2005) investigated corporate language policies of newly merged organization and their impact on power, and propose a framework on language and power in organizations. Their analysis includes power at the social interaction level and the identity construction level. Analysis at the social interaction level shows that language skills allow staff to reinforce communication and understanding. Vaara et al. (2005) also argue that, as a language based communication network develops, staff with language skills are able to exchange knowledge and information to a greater extent than those without language skills; thus, staff with language skills are more empowered than those with limited language skills. In this manner, language skills affect professional competence of staff.

Analysis of the investigation at the identify construction level by Vaara and his associates (2005) indicates that language influences the reconstruction of membership categories in multicultural organizations. They explain language skills lead staff to identify themselves and other staff by nationality as reflected by their language background. It induces segregation and confrontation among staff. This is because the differences in language skills create perceptions of superiority and inferiority among staff
where staff with language skills are perceived as superior. These claims signify staff equipped with language skills enjoy benefits including empowerment, increased access to information, and better career opportunities. Language skills are requirements of cultural mediators (Bochner 1981; Taft 1981). It may thus be possible that cultural mediators also experience the benefits of language skills.

Research attention on cultural mediators is directed towards what they contribute and what benefits organizations are able to obtain from their assistance (e.g. Chikudate 1995; Hayashi 1996). Limited information exists on how to encourage and train people to become cultural mediators (Taft 1981). Bicultural persons do not necessarily become cultural mediators; they have a choice of becoming a cultural mediator or not (Bochner 1981; McLeod 1981). Choosing to become a cultural mediator requires willingness to assist in teaching cultures to both groups (McLeod 1981). It is thus crucial to understand the benefits of being a cultural mediator as it will provide a path to explore how to nurture cultural mediators in overseas subsidiaries of international organizations. Hence, the following research questions:

1. Is there a need for language skills in individuals who act as cultural mediators in Japanese companies in Australia?

2. What are the benefits that encourage a bicultural person to be a cultural mediator?

METHODS

Our qualitative study explored cultural mediators, involving their characteristics and perceptions of their experiences. For the sake of increasing reliability and validity, multiple sources of data were collected. This included in-depth interviews, direct observation, documentation, field notes, and archive records. Miles and Hubermann (1994: 215-216) claim counting the number of phenomena is effective to verify a hypothesis and reduce researcher bias. Thus, the frequency of text segments under the categories were counted in the process of analyzing our data. Japanese companies participating in the current study were randomly selected from large Japanese multinational corporations operating in a large metropolitan city in Australia. Due to the nature of the study and the absence of a formal directory of Japanese expatriates, informants were selected based on a snowballing approach, where some were introduced by the first author’s network. Others (such as host country nationals) were introduced by those who were
participants of the study. Altogether 68 white-collar informants participated in the present study and they comprised 23 non-Japanese local staff, 14 locally hired Japanese staff, and 31 Japanese expatriates. In-depth interviews which spent for 45 - 120 minutes were undertaken in their office. Interview protocol was developed from the literature, in particular, a study conducted by Tokusei (1994) who explored problems exist in American and Japanese managers of a Japanese companies in the US. Additional questions were designed according to the research lens, that is, Role theory and intercultural interactions.

With regard to gender, the Japanese expatriates were all male. Among non-Japanese local staff, 14 were male and 9 were female. As for locally hired Japanese staff, 4 were male and 14 were female. All locally hired Japanese staff were native Japanese speakers and were born and educated in Japan. They also had some experience of being in the workforce in Japan. In terms of position, both staff who held managerial and those who held non-managerial positions were included. There were 10 non-Japanese local staff who held managerial positions. Only 3 locally hired Japanese staff held a managerial position.

**FINDINGS**

The current study identified nine individuals who reported characteristics and/or features similar to the features normally associated with cultural mediators. These people were non-Japanese local staff and locally hired Japanese staff. These individuals stated that they assisted in communication and alleviation of problems that occurred between Japanese expatriate staff and non-Japanese local staff, where necessary. The remaining informants did not report these features. We found their characteristics proved to be peculiar to them alone and different from all other staff participating in the current study. Table 1 lists their characteristics in the left column. Each informant who participated in the current study was given four capital letters as an identification code, shown on the second row.

<< Insert Table 1 about here >>

As indicated in Table 1, these cultural mediators did not necessarily hold managerial positions. Four out of nine cultural mediators were non-Japanese local managers and three were non-Japanese local staff who occupied non-managerial positions. In terms of gender, there were five male and four female cultural mediators.
The first characteristic, ‘Taking on Additional Tasks’, signified that informants claimed that they took on tasks which fell outside their job description whenever necessary, and regarded themselves as having a flexible work attitude. All the nine cultural mediators except one stated that they had this work attitude. This meant that the majority of cultural mediators were also flexible about conducting their duties and took on extra tasks and overtime.

The second to fourth characteristics, ‘Guessing Skills’, ‘Japanese Language Skills’, and ‘English Language Skills’, were all concerned with communication. ‘Guessing Skills’ refers to informants who could practice the ‘guessing’ technique, common in Japanese communication, when dealing with Japanese expatriate staff. Nearly half of non-Japanese local cultural mediators claimed that they had the ability to practice the ‘guessing’ technique in communication with Japanese staff. With regard to local Japanese staff, since they were brought up, educated, and worked in Japan, they did not experience any problems in use of the ‘guessing’ technique when communicating with Japanese expatriates.

In terms of Japanese language skills, three out of seven non-Japanese cultural mediators were Japanese speakers. Their Japanese language skills were not, however, sufficient to be able to conduct all their work in Japanese. The two locally hired Japanese cultural integrators regularly used their native language, Japanese, when they communicated with Japanese expatriate staff. Although their English was fluent, their English competence did not reach near-native level. All cultural mediators were thus either non-Japanese speakers or partially bilingual in English and Japanese.

The fifth and sixth characteristics, ‘Visited/Lived in Japan’ and ‘Lived Outside Japan Over 5 yrs’, were concerned with familiarity with Japanese culture and international experiences. All of the seven non-Japanese cultural mediators and the two locally hired Japanese cultural mediators had experienced either living in or visiting Japan for the purpose of studying or traveling, or for business reasons.

The seventh and eighth characteristics, ‘Worked with Japanese Over 5 yrs’ and ‘Worked with Non-Japanese Over 5 yrs’, signified familiarity with working with both Japanese and non-Japanese staff. All of the nine cultural mediators worked with Japanese and non-Japanese staff for over 5 years. They
were familiar with an intercultural workplace, as well as the work culture and customs of both Japan and Australia.

The ninth characteristic, ‘Trusted by Japanese Expatriate Staff’, demonstrated that the cultural mediators acknowledged in their interviews that they knew they were trusted by Japanese expatriate staff. There were six such informants. Apart from these six informants, no other non-Japanese local staff participating in the current study claimed that they were trusted by Japanese expatriate staff. This suggests that cultural mediators tended to have the ability to gain the trust of Japanese expatriate staff, and in this context, they differed from all other local staff in the company. The informants who won this trust understood that it was critical to one’s success when working for overseas Japanese companies.

Cultural mediators who won the trust of Japanese expatriates, mentioned two types of benefits associated with being a cultural mediator. The first benefit related to the ability to establish good personal relationships with Japanese expatriates. Cultural mediators demonstrated a willingness to work hard and displayed the cooperative work attitudes expected by Japanese expatriates. In return, Japanese expatriates acknowledged and rewarded them by providing them with support. The informants understood that such rewards would not be received unless this kind of relationship was established. It was a fair and well-balanced reciprocal style of relationship.

The second benefit involved greater access to information, in terms of both quality and quantity, than was available to other local staff. In particular, information sent from the Head Office in Japan tended to be held by Japanese expatriates. Access to this particular type of information was considered to be a privilege for local staff, and those locals who could play the role of cultural mediator were granted this privilege.

In addition to the characteristics of cultural mediators, we revealed two findings that explain why the presence of cultural mediators is required in intercultural interactions within overseas Japanese companies. The findings revealed empirical evidence relating to inter-cultural communication difficulties between Japanese expatriate staff and non-Japanese local staff. In particular, 70 percent of non-Japanese local managers who participated in the present study found it difficult to carry on a candid conversation...
with Japanese expatriate staff. This led to misunderstanding and uncertainty. Similarly, insufficiency of English language competence of Japanese staff was revealed. Approximately 55 percent of Japanese expatriate staff and 43 percent of local Japanese staff expressed difficulties in communication owing to their lack of English language competence.

In terms of frequency of informal communication among staff, the results found that approximately half of the non-Japanese local staff and Japanese expatriate staff perceived communication between them to be insufficient. Nearly half the Japanese expatriates also mentioned that the staff with whom they spent time and communicated with the most were their fellow Japanese expatriate staff. This was partly because they did not have to use their second language, English. They thus felt a greater extent of comfort in communicating with their fellow Japanese expatriates. The results suggested communication difficulties, including English language competence and lack of communication between Japanese expatriate and non-Japanese local staff, increased the need for cultural mediators.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Language Skills of Cultural Mediators

The present study identifies nine cultural mediators who are non-Japanese local staff and locally hired Japanese staff from our Australian sample. Three of the seven non-Japanese local cultural mediators have Japanese language competence. Their Japanese competence, however, is not of a level such that they are able to use Japanese in any work situation. Similarly, two local Japanese cultural mediators’ English competence is not at near-native level. While the literature shows that individuals who are equipped with language skills tend to assist communication between staff of different cultural and language backgrounds (Vaara et al. 2005), the present study did not find the empirical evidence to support this particular view. The cultural mediators identified in the present study are not fully bilingual in English and Japanese. This finding contradicts the assertions. Our study suggests that language skills are not mandatory in order for one to become a cultural mediator, which contradicts the literature that suggests that language skills are acknowledged as important for cultural mediators (e.g. Bochner 1981; Taft 1981).
The findings reveal that Japanese staff lack English language competence, which leads to communication difficulties with non-Japanese local staff. Nevertheless, the cultural mediators found in our study are not fully bilingual. This indicates there are skills more crucial than being bilingual required for cultural mediators. Although the cultural mediators found in this study are not fully bilingual, they are familiar with intercultural workplaces and communication style, as well as Australian and Japanese cultures. The results thus suggest understanding of each other’s cultures, an intercultural workplace, and communication skills are more vital than being fully bilingual.

**Benefits of Cultural Mediators**

The findings are analyzed at the social interaction and identify construction levels of the framework of Vaara and his associates (2005). Table 2 below provides a summary of the findings.

<< Insert Table 2 about here >>

Social interaction level analysis involves communication networks and power. As shown in Table 2, the findings reveal the benefits cultural mediators experienced. First, they have more communication opportunities with Japanese expatriate staff in comparison to non-Japanese local staff. They are able to obtain a greater extent of information from Japanese expatriate staff. Receiving information indicates an increase in power (Macdonald 1996). The findings thus suggest cultural mediators are empowered.

Vaara et al. (2005) claim staff with language competence have a wider communication network and greater access to information. Thus, they are more empowered compared with those without language competence (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a; Vaara et al. 2005). A bicultural person, who is able to mediate culturally different groups, can choose whether they are to become a cultural mediator or not (Bochner 1981; McLeod 1981). Staff with language competence thus does not equate to staff who are cultural mediators. The findings suggest cultural mediators obtain benefits, and these benefits coincide with the benefits attained by staff who have the necessary language competence. Moreover, cultural mediators are also able to obtain these benefits even though they do not have the language competence. In other words, the benefits of language competence are applicable to the benefits of cultural mediators including those cultural mediators who do not have the language competence.
Identity construction level analysis involves recreation of membership categories in organizations influenced by language competence (Vaara et al. 2005). It refers to an increased tendency of staff identifying other staff by nationality as reflected by language competence, which results in segregation and confrontation between employees. Coinciding with this framework, the current study identifies segregation in relation to communication and working relationships between non-Japanese local staff and Japanese expatriate staff. This is illustrated by two findings: difficulties in communication between them owing to Japanese staff’s lack of English competence, and insufficient communication between non-Japanese local staff and Japanese expatriate staff. It is reasonable to suggest that the segregated relations between the two groups increases the demand for a cultural mediator’s assistance.

Reciprocal Relations

Cultural mediators recognize themselves as having more communication with Japanese expatriate staff, and receiving more information, care, and support from Japanese expatriate staff. They also regard themselves as being trusted by Japanese expatriate staff. These qualities differentiate cultural mediators from other local staff. The cultural mediators are not a single cultural group. They consist of both non-Japanese and local Japanese staff. The findings thus suggest cultural mediators’ self-perceived identification as cultural mediators is not necessarily based on nationality as reflected by language competence. In other words, their identification as cultural mediators is free from nationality and language skills.

The findings reveal all cultural mediators, with the exception of one non-Japanese cultural mediator, demonstrate flexible work attitudes. This type of work attitude involves long working hours and overtime, which is similar to the work attitudes of employees in Japan (Ericsson & Fujii 1995). The findings thus suggest cultural mediators demonstrate adaptive work attitudes towards Japanese work culture and corporate customs.

Cultural mediators declare their relations with Japanese expatriate staff are reciprocal. They are provided with more information, support, and care by Japanese expatriate staff in return for their adaptive
work attitudes and assistance as cultural mediators. Strong reciprocity exists between junior and superior staff in Japanese companies in Japan (Goldman 1994). Thus, our study illustrates that the relations between cultural mediators and Japanese expatriate staff resembles the relations between junior and superior staff in Japanese companies in Japan. Reciprocity lies in their relations, and their relations differ from the relations between other local staff and Japanese expatriate staff. This reciprocity, as well as the adaptive work attitudes of cultural mediators, is a new finding that has not been mentioned in the literature in social psychology (e.g. Bochner 1981; Taft 1981) and in international management (e.g. Chikudate 1995; Hayashi 1996).

In conclusion, our study investigates the cultural mediator in Japanese companies in Australia and explores the benefits they experience. Language competence is claimed as critical (Bochner 1981; Vaara et al. 2005). The current study however finds language competence is not a requisite to one becoming a cultural mediator. This study contributes to extending understanding about cultural mediators in international management. Establishing reciprocal relations with parent company staff via adaptive work attitudes is found to be critical. This is a new finding not mentioned in the literature on cultural mediators. Our study also contributes to the literature on cultural mediators (Bochner 1981; Chikudate 1995) by proposing a framework of their benefits and membership in intercultural organizations as reported in Table 2. We reveal the benefits of language competence are obtainable by cultural mediators, including those who do not have language competence.

The current study has a particular managerial implication. Organizations should consider the appointment of a cultural mediator as a mentor for both expatriates and local staff. Bicultural staff are able to assist expatriate staff in learning the host country culture and work environment (Chikudate 1995). In this instance, a cultural mediator should be able to assist, not only expatriate staff, but also non-Japanese local staff to learn about each other’s cultures and communication skills. Thus, mentoring systems can be organized where cultural mediators assist as a mentor for both cultural groups.

Limitations and Future Research Implications
Our study has two limitations. First, the findings of the current study are applicable for Japanese companies in one English speaking country, Australia. All Japanese informants, including expatriates and locally hired Japanese staff, are able to make themselves understood in English. It is possible to suggest the required level of a cultural mediator’s language competence is greater in a Japanese company located in non-English speaking countries. The findings may be different if the study were conducted in such countries. Second, it is uncertain if the findings of the current study are generalizable. Only nine cultural mediators were identified among 68 informants. This is a small number from which to generalize. Analysis on a greater number of cultural mediators will increase generalizability.

Future research should consider the above-mentioned limitations. Researchers should investigate cultural mediators of Japanese companies located in non-English speaking countries in areas such as Europe and Asia. Exploring cultural mediators in non-Japanese companies such as European companies located in the US is also recommended. Furthermore, a larger scale of study will allow researchers to identify a greater number of cultural mediators. This will enhance generalizability of the findings.

Researchers who investigate cultural mediators are interested in examining organizations’ benefits obtainable from their assistance. Bicultural persons have the option to choose to be a cultural mediator (Bochner 1981; McLeod 1981). Their willingness to assist as cultural mediator is indispensable (McLeod 1981). Thus, study that explores ways to increase the effectiveness of cultural mediators is crucial (Taft 1981). We thus direct our attention to exploring cultural mediators’ benefits attainable from their contribution to organizations. Our study extends understanding on cultural mediators by identifying their characteristics and benefits. The findings provide a path to nurture greater numbers of cultural mediators in organizations. Furthermore, we propose a framework of cultural mediators’ benefits and characteristics. The framework needs to be further examined. We strongly encourage researchers to use our framework as a springboard for further scrutiny of cultural mediators.
REFERENCES


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Table 1 Characteristics of Cultural Mediators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Type</th>
<th>Non-Japanese Local Managers</th>
<th>Non-Japanese Local Employees</th>
<th>Local Japanese</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CIAA Male</td>
<td>KDEI Male</td>
<td>CSTA Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Takes on Extra Tasks</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Guessing Skills</td>
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<td>(3) Japanese Language Skills</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) English Language Skills</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Visited/Lived in Japan</td>
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<td>(6) Lived Outside Japan Over 5 yrs</td>
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<td>(7) Worked with Japanese Over 5 yrs</td>
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<tr>
<td>(8) Worked with Non-Japanese Over 5 yrs</td>
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<tr>
<td>(9) Trusted by Japanese Expatriate Staff</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
√: the informant held the characteristic listed in the left column of the same row.
The presence or absence of a ‘√’ in each cell in the table indicates whether or not the informant held the characteristic listed in the left column of the same row.
Table 2 Characteristics and Benefits of Cultural Mediators in Overseas Subsidiaries of Japanese Companies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Characteristics and Benefits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction</td>
<td>• Wider Communication Network Developed:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o More communication with Japanese expatriate staff</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Empowered:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o More information received</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Obtain Support and Care</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Trusted by Japanese Expatriate Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity Construction</td>
<td>• Identification as Cultural Mediator Free From Nationality and Language Background/Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relation with Japanese Expatriate Staff:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Boundary-less</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Reciprocal relation</td>
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