The Relationship between Mental Processes
and Japan's Unique Communication Style of *Aisou*

Rin ITO, Alexander NAVARRO & Jiro TAKAI

Nagoya University, Japan

Abstract: People have negative impressions of those who respond in an unfriendly manner, while those who are amiable garner positive impressions. In this study, a unique Japanese interpersonal posture of amiability was considered as a type of communication style, and an original "*Aisounoyosa* scale" (amiability scale) was developed. The relationships between amiable communication style and an individual's mental processes, including compassion, narcissism, regulatory focus and shyness were examined. Among the amiability measures, "positive verbal and non-verbal behavior" was shown to be influenced by three internal processes: compassion, passive shyness and the benefit approach, while "consideration and kindness to others" and "interest and approach to others" were influenced by compassion and passive shyness. The results of this study suggest that the internal process of compassion is deeply related to and influences amiable communication style.

Keywords: Interpersonal communication, personality, *aisou*

1. Introduction

Japanese tourists are often baffled by the unfriendly attitude and behavior of those in the service industry of foreign countries. It is a given that workers, such as those in restaurants, smile and speak cheerfully to their customers in Japan, lest they elicit an extremely negative impression. Such kind and friendly interpersonal communication which is the standard characteristic of Japanese customer service is known as "*aisou ga yoi*"(愛想が良い)*,* which translates to amiable style of communication.

Amiability in interpersonal communication does not come naturally, as the Japanese distinguish between "*honne*" and "*tatemae*"*. Honne*（本音）refers to people's true and unfiltered thoughts, while *tatemae*（建前）refers to people's actual outward behavior, which often does not reflect *honne*. Such a distinction entails self-restraint and self-sacrifice, for the sake of the other, and more broadly, for the harmonious functioning of society. A concept similar to amiable communication style is ingratiation, a type of self-presentation strategy that is used with the intention of evoking a favorable impression on other people (Arikura, 1998). In Japan, where harmony is valued in human relationships, self-presentation is important, and *tatemae* is necessary for maintaining relationships (Saito, 2006). In other words, amiability is a form of self-presentation that facilitates interpersonal relationships through impression management and is expected of Japanese people. The motivation behind the use of amiable communication can be toward the promotion of oneself as a favorable person, and simultaneously, toward the avoidance of being thought of as impolite by others.

Thus, even if the communication styles are the same, the psychological processes through which they are executed are diverse and complex. In this study, we focus on the measurement of individual differences among communicators in order to elucidate amiable communication style from multiple perspectives.

Amiability can be construed as a social skill. In particular, it can be construed as an essential communication skill that functions beyond just self-presentation. We propose that amiability, which helps to facilitate interpersonal relationships, is one of the components of social communication skills that also involve aspects of self-presentation. However, there are no previous studies, including those on the sub-aspects of self-presentation and social skills, that examine this concept.

Ito (2020) conducted a study in which she identified the components of amiability. She constructed a scale consisting of 22 items pertaining to amiability in the interpersonal communication context. A three-factor structure was determined, consisting of "positive verbal and non-verbal behavior," "consideration and kindness to others" and "interest in and closeness to others." From this, she defined *aisou* (amiability) as "a communication style based on concern and kindness towards others through actively expressed verbal and nonverbal behavior."

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between amiability, social skills, and some personality factors including self-regulatory focus, compassion, narcissism, and shyness.

First, research related to self-presentation suggests the existence of "the desire to be affirmed by others" and "the desire to not be denied," and that these desires influence the way one presents oneself. Regulatory focus has been shown to be related to both desires (Sugawara, 1986). Self-regulation refers to the process of people controlling their own judgments, feelings, and actions to achieve their goals, as well as related processes. Ozaki and Karasawa (2011) referred to the orientation to approach desirable standards as approach orientation and referred to the orientation to avoid undesirable standards as avoidance orientation (Carver & Scheier, 1982). The pleasure principle of approaching pleasure and avoiding discomfort has been considered a basic principle in conventional self-regulation research (Ozaki & Karasawa, 2011), but Higgins (1997) noted that conventional research has not mentioned what strategies people use to approach pleasure and avoid discomfort, nor the qualitative content of each strategy. He proposed self-regulatory focus theory, which distinguishes the qualitative content of each strategy.

Self-regulatory focus theory distinguishes between promotion focus, which guides the approach to pleasure, and prevention focus, which guides the avoidance of discomfort, as guidelines for self-control toward a desired goal state (Sato & Igarashi, 2017). The promotion focus governs gain-focused self-control, controlling behavior to approach gains and avoid losses. As a means of goal attainment, promotion focus strives to bring about positive outcomes. On the other hand, prevention focus is responsible for loss-focused self-control, controlling behavior to avoid negative outcomes. Prevention focus pays close attention to risks that might arise in negative contexts and seeks to eliminate such risks (Ozaki, 2011). We propose that amiable communication facilitates satisfactory interpersonal relationships amongst Japanese people, and that regulatory focus is a motivation behind such communication.

Next, cross-cultural studies in social and communication skills have identified compassion as being particularly characteristic of Japanese people (Mou & Daibo, 2005). Uchida and Kitayama (2001) note that compassion includes sensing the feelings of others, thinking from their perspective, empathizing or sympathizing with their feelings and states, and motivating prosocial

behavior. The ability to decipher the feelings of others is an important component of social skills, and in communication, people who can send messages appropriately are generally better able to decipher the messages of others (Daibo, 1991). Studies examining the relationship between compassion and social skills have also shown that sub-concepts such as perspective-taking and empathic concern are positively correlated with social skills (Kikuchi, 2004). Prosocial behavior has also been shown to be positively correlated with social skills (Suzuki, 1992). Therefore, the present study examines the relationship between sociability and compassion.

Narcissism may play a negative role in amiability, having been linked to poor interpersonal relationship management (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Although social skills and narcissistic tendencies have been shown to be positively related (Nakamura, 2000), individuals with high narcissistic tendencies tend to view others as unable to accurately evaluate them, as their self-perception does not always match their reflective self-perception (Carlson et al., 2011). In other words, narcissistic people think they are socially skilled in the same way they think they are skilled in other areas (Kato et al., 2014). In fact, a negative correlation has been found between narcissistic tendencies and social skills when based on others' evaluations (Fulton, 2009). Oshio (2002) defined narcissism in the context of interpersonal relationships as not caring about others' evaluations of themselves, and that high narcissism and assertive dominance correspond to an indifferent narcissistic personality that is insensitive to the reactions of others. Narcissism, thus, should be negatively related to amiability, which functions to facilitate satisfactory interpersonal relationships.

Finally, shyness is thought to impede social skills and has been defined as interpersonal anxiety (Jones & Russell, 1982), deterred communication with others, and a tendency to avoid social interactions (Leary, 1986). The importance of social skills training in improving and treating shyness has also been discussed (Goto, 2001). There are two types of shy people: first, those who avoid interactions, and second, those who are nervous and inwardly anxious in public but behave in a cheerful manner outwardly. In other words, two tendencies have been found: a shyness-negative tendency characterized by behavioral problems that prevent people from socializing in public, and a shyness-anxious tendency expressed by those who are inwardly anxious but can behave cheerfully in front of others (Sugawara, 1998). The negative tendency, which is not frequently manifested in behavior, is negatively associated with amiability, while the anxious tendency, in which acting is utilized, is positively associated with amiability.

Customer service and interpersonal service industries are areas where the amiable communication style of *aisou* is frequently seen, for better or for worse. In the interpersonal service industry, communication between service industry workers and customers is one of the important factors that determine the caliber of service, and it has been suggested that employees' smiles convey warm feelings and consideration to customers and help facilitate smooth communication (Yamaguchi & Oguchi, 1998). On the other hand, negative interactions are said to attract more attention and have a greater impact than positive interactions (Brannon & Gawronski, 2018), making first impressions important in customer service situations. Amiable behavior is considered to be a communication style that contributes to the smoothness of service operations, increases customer satisfaction, and leads to profits for the service provider. This study is socially significant in that it may help improve the quality of service provided by service industry workers by elucidating the amiable communication style from various perspectives. Consequently, strategic approaches may be employed (developing a manual, for example) to foster individuals' amiable communication. In addition, as mentioned earlier, amiability in Japan is often used to facilitate relationships and manipulate self-impressions, but how this amiability

functions and benefits people in other cultures is a concept that needs to be compared and examined.

In sum, the following hypotheses were tested in this study.

H1a: Promotion focus is positively related to amiability.
H1b: Prevention focus is not related to amiability.
H1c: Compassion is positively related to amiability.
H1d: Narcissistic personality is negatively related to amiability.
H1e: Shyness is negatively related to amiability.

2. Method

2.1. Survey Participants

A Qualtrics survey was distributed to participants who were recruited via a crowdsourcing site (Lancers). A total of 204 participants (120 men, 83 women, 1 unknown; mean age: 39.30 (*SD*=9.67)) yielded complete and valid responses. Participants who completed the survey items were compensated 100 yen for their cooperation. Prior to the survey, a check box was provided on the face sheet to indicate that participation in the study was voluntary and that not participating or stopping midway through the survey would not be detrimental to the participants, and to request that they understand the purpose of the study and agree to participate. In addition, the handling of data, record keeping, feedback of results, and publication of results were also clearly stated on the face sheet.

The survey was approved and conducted by the Research Ethics Committee.

2.2. Survey Content

Respondents were asked to answer 14 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "1 – not at all applicable" to "5 – very applicable" based on age, gender, and an amiability scale (Table 1) that was developed for the study. The items measuring internal processes of interpersonal reactions included six items from the Gain-approach Orientation Scale, seven items from the Loss-avoidance Orientation Scale (Ozaki & Karasawa, 2011), nine items from Oshio's Narcissistic Personality Inventory-Short Form (Oshio,1999), seven items from the Compassion Scale by Uchida and Kitayama (2001), four items from the Interpersonal Negative Tendency Factor on the Shyness Scale, and five items from the Interpersonal Anxiety Tendency Scale (Sugawara,1998).

3. Results

3.1. Amiability *S*cale

Scores were calculated by dividing the total score of each scale by the number of items and used for analysis. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the amiability scale was calculated to examine the reliability. The results showed that the internal consistency of the amiability scale was confirmed

with *α*=.87 for "positive verbal and nonverbal behavior," *α*=.74 for "consideration and kindness to others," and *α*=.75 for "interest and approach to others" (see Table 1).

3.2. Subscales of Factors Related to Social Skills

Scores were calculated by dividing the total score of each scale by the number of items and used for analysis. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each scale was calculated to examine reliability. The results showed that the Gain-approach Orientation Scale had α=.88, the Loss-avoidance Orientation Scale had α=.84, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-Short Form had α=.82, the Compassion Scale had α=.82, and the Shyness Scale had α=.87. Internal consistency was confirmed.

Table 1

amiability Scale

Item

Factor 1: Positive verbal and nonverbal behavior

When I talk to people, I'm more of an overreactor.

I try to act cheerful when I talk to people.

When I talk to people, I'm more frequent with my responses.

I am the one who smiles when I talk to people.

When talking to others, I am conscious of raising my tone of voice and adding intonation

I'm one to look people in the eye when I'm talking to them.

Factor 2: Consideration and kindness to others

I try to be courteous to all people.

I don't deny people's stories and opinions as much as possible.

I'm going to treat people kindly.

I don't use a lot of positive words when talking to people.

Express your gratitude and apologies to others immediately in words.

3.3. Relationship of Each Scale to Factors Related to Social Skills

Correlation coefficients were calculated between the subscales of the amiability scale and each scale related to internal mental processes. The results are shown in Table 2. Factor 1 was significantly positively related to compassion, narcissism, and promotion focus. Prevention focus was unrelated. A negative correlation was found with the shyness scale. The higher the shyness tendency, the less non-verbal communicative expressions were used. Factor 2 was positively related to compassion and promotion focus. It was not related to narcissism, prevention focus or shyness. Factor 3 was positively related to compassion, narcissism, and prevention focus. Higher compassion tendency, assertiveness and promotion focus were associated with higher concern for others. Prevention focus was unrelated. A negative correlation was found with shyness. Higher shyness tendency was associated with lower concern for others.

Table 2

Amiability scale and mental processes variable:Correlations and Descriptive statistics

Variable	Factor1	Factor2	Factor3
compassion	.56 **	.61 **	.35 **
NPI-S	.23 **	-.01	.29 **
promotion focus	.38 **	.16 *	.31 **
prevention focus	.10	.12	-.12
shyness−negative tendency	-.40 **	-.05	-.46 **

Next, a multiple linear regression was conducted to test the hypotheses. The predictive variables were compassion, self-love, gain-approach orientation, loss-avoidance orientation, shyness-negative tendency, and shyness-anxiety tendency. Using a stepwise method, the predictive properties of the amiable and non-amiable factors were examined. The criterion for the stepwise method was defined as a probability of .050 or less for the input F and a probability of .100 or more for the removal F. First, for the amiability scale, independent variables were entered for "positive verbal and nonverbal behaviors" in three steps, with Model I showing more than 30% predictive explanatory power ($AdjR^2$=.32, p<.001; β=.56, p<.001) for "compassion" alone.

In Model II, "shyness-negative tendency" (β=-.25; p<.01) was added (ΔR^2 =.055, p<.001) and the change in the determinant was significant (ΔR^2 =.055, p<.001). Finally, in Model III, "gain proximity orientation" was added as an additional input (β=.14; p<.05), and the change in the decision term was significant (ΔR^2=.014, p<.05), finally resulting in 38% predictive explanatory power ($AdjR^2$=.38, p<.001). No predictive explanatory power was found for "narcissism," "loss-avoidance orientation," and "shyness-anxious tendency" (see Table 3). Next, independent variables were entered for "consideration and kindness to others" in two steps, and in Model I, "consideration" alone showed more than 30% predictive explanatory power ($AdjR^2$=.37, p<.001; β=.61, p<.001). Model II added "shyness reluctance" (β=.16; p<.01) and the change in the determinant was significant (ΔR^2 =.023, p<.001). The final result was 39% predictive explanatory power ($AdjR^2$ =.39, p<.001). No predictive explanatory power was found for narcissism, gain-approach orientation, loss-avoidance orientation, and shyness-anxiety tendency (see Table 4).

Next, independent variables for "interest in and proximity to others" were entered in two steps, and in Model I, "shyness-negative tendency" alone showed more than 20% predictive explanatory power ($AdjR^2$=.20, p<.001; β=-.46, p<.001). Model II added "compassion" (β=.04; p<.001) and the change in the determinant was significant (ΔR^2 =.047, p<.001). The final result was 25% predictive explanatory power ($AdjR^2$ =.25, p<.001). No predictive explanatory power was found for narcissism, gain-approach orientation, loss-avoidance orientation, and shyness-anxiety tendency (Table 5).

Table 3

Multiple Liner Regression Results for Positive verbal and non-verbal behaviour

Model	Variable	B	β	t (202)
1	compassion	0.64	0.56	9.68***
2	compassion	0.56	0.49	8.20***
	shyness-negative tendency	-0.21	-0.25	-4.20***
3	compassion	0.52	0.45	7.51***
	shyness-negative tendency	-0.17	-0.20	-3.18**

Table 4

Multiple Liner Regression Results for Consideration and kindness to others

Model	Variable	B	β	t (202)	Adjḟ
I	compassion	0.42	0.61	11.03***	0.37*
II	compassion	0.45	0.66	11.53***	0.39*
	shyness-nega:	0.08	0.16	2.79**	

Table 5

Multiple Liner Regression Results for Interest in and closeness to others

Model	Variable	B	β	t (202)
I	shyness-negative tendency	-0.28	-0.46	-7.26***
II	shyness-negative tendency	-0.23	0.04	-6.00***
	compassion	0.18	0.05	3.56***

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between the communication style of amiability and mental processes. Considering the first mental process, regulatory focus, revealed that promotion focus was positively related to "positive verbal and nonverbal behavior" and "interest in and closeness to others" on the amiability scale. H1a was partially supported.

As a means to achieve a goal, promotion focus motivates actions that maximize positive results (Ozaki, 2011). It is assumed that proactively taking actions that approach said goal corresponds to proactively expressing verbal and nonverbal behaviors and to being interested in and close to others. Prevention focus was not related to the amiability scale. H1b was supported.

The second mental process, compassion, was positively related to the amiability scale, suggesting that the internal process of compassion plays a central role in an amiable communication style. H1c was supported.

The third internal process, narcissism, was positively related to "positive verbal and nonverbal behaviors" and "interest in and closeness to others" on the amiability scale. H1d was not supported. Since the NPI-S consists of items that measure assertiveness in relation to others, such as "I think I am assertive," and "I always become the center of the conversation as we are talking," it is thought that this was related to high levels of interest in others.

The fourth mental process was shyness. Shyness-negative tendency was negatively related to "positive verbal and nonverbal behavior" and "interest in and closeness to others" on the amiability scale. H1e was partially supported. The negative tendency was associated with "non-positive verbal and nonverbal behavior," which was also associated with "reluctance to relate to others." Shyness-negativity is characterized by low social skills and desire to win praise (Sugawara, 1998). If there is a negative association with "positive verbal and nonverbal behavior," then higher social skills, including micro-skills such as eye contact and smiling (Horige, 1994), may be related to the amiability scale. Shyness-anxiety tendency was positively related to "consideration and kindness to others" on the amiability scale. Shyness-anxiety tendency is characterized by a high desire to avoid rejection and a strong sense of alertness to being rejected by others (Sugawara, 1998). The alertness of not wanting to be rejected by others may lead to the emergence of behaviors of consideration and kindness toward others.

Examining the correlations up to this point alone does not clarify whether the mental process influences each factor or whether each factor influences the mental process. Therefore, a multiple linear regression (Tables 3, 4, 5) was conducted to identify the mental processes influencing the factors of each measure of amiability and to test the hypotheses.

The hypothesis was partially supported for promotion focus (H1a). While an effect was found for "positive verbal and nonverbal behaviors," no effect was found for the other factors. In other words, it was found that those who were willing to take approachable actions to achieve the goal of "making a good impression on others and being liked" were more likely to actively express their verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

Next, the hypothesis was fully supported for prevention focus (H1b). There was no effect of prevention focus on any of the factors. In other words, avoidant behavior, in which one tries to avoid risks and losses in order to achieve the goal of not giving a bad impression and not being disliked, does not lead to the communication style of being sociable. When considered in conjunction with the results of promotion focus, it is thought that the amiable communication style approaches the goal of making a good impression on others and being liked, but does not approach the goal of avoiding bad impressions and not being disliked.

Next, for compassion, the hypothesis was fully supported (H1c). The results of the questionnaire showed that the more considerate a person is, the more affectionate his or her communication style is. In other words, the internal process of compassion has a significant influence on the amiable communication style. When communicating amiably, it is clear that the person is concerned and considerate toward the other person. This is thought to be because of a deep-rooted image in Japan that if one is not sociable, the other person may feel uncomfortable. When communicating, we often give consideration to the other party, but it is this type of amiable communication that is especially considered to convey a strong sense of consideration for the other party.

Next, the hypothesis was not supported for narcissism (H1d). Narcissism, which is characterized by assertiveness and indifference, is not associated with the amiable communication style and does not undergo the process of amiability. To begin with, it is thought that because of the element of indifference to others, not much consideration is given to how

communication is expressed. However, since narcissism is also characterized by sensitivity to others' evaluations, further study is needed on this issue.

Finally, the hypothesis was partially supported for shyness (H1e). The negative tendency of shyness was confirmed to have a negative effect on all factors. In other words, an amiable communication style tends to be associated with higher social skills and a higher need for approval from others. A high desire to win praise means a high desire to build positive relationships with others (Sugawara, 1998). Second, there was no effect of shyness-anxiety tendency. A high prevention focus orientation means a strong wariness of being rejected by others (Sugawara, 1998). As in the case of narcissism, it is possible that individuals high in rejection-avoidance orientation do not engage in distinctive and positive communication because they are wary of being rejected by others. In other words, they do not engage in either amiable or unfriendly communication. Alternatively, they are passive and neutral with respect to communication.

In reviewing the present study, the internal processes that influence amiability include compassion and the promotion focus that seeks to gain favorable impressions from others. In other words, compassion and promotion focus' approach to be liked by others are factors that contribute to an amiable communication style. Based on the above, it can be said that we have found the existence of other-orientation and positive proactivity toward interpersonal relationships in the core theory of the amiable communication style.

A future issue is to examine the amiable communication style from the observer's point of view. We exist as conversationalists who communicate, and at the same time, as observers, we perceive the communication of our surroundings and use this information to understand the relationships among people around us (Kimura et al., 2005). In order to understand the amiable communication style from multiple perspectives, it is important to focus on the observer (i.e., the receiver) side of communication, as well as on the expressive side.

Takai and Ota (1994) found that in Japan, which is characterized by high context as opposed to Western cultures characterized by low context, the sender may use ambiguous expressions such as silence in interpersonal communication situations, and the receiver of communication may skillfully read information contained in nonverbal behavior and conversational context. By examining cultural differences in the communication style of amiability, it is thought that this study will contribute to comparative cultural studies of communication theory in general.

Finally, another problem with this study is that the scales used in the validity test and internal process were designed for college students. Although the average age of the subjects in this study was relatively young, the subjects were not limited to college students. Future studies should more closely consider the selection of subjects.

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Author Note

Rin Ito (Master, Nagoya University), is currently enrolled in the doctoral program at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, Nagoya University. The author is a Fellow of Nagoya University. Major publications: "Creation of the unsociable impression scale Japan" (*Communication Research*, Vol. 50, *1*, 5-20); "Automatic Driver's Behavioral Judgment in Situations Unable to Avoid Accidents – Choice between Passengers' and Pedestrians' Lives" (*Kinjo Gakuin University Review of Humanities and Sciences*, Vol. 20, No. 1).