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# Hand/Arm Gesture Among Japanese and American Female College Students: A Cross- Cultural Comparison

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Oral Presentation 3.2

**HAND/ARM GESTURE AMONG JAPANESE AND AMERICAN FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON**

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This research examines the use of various forms of hand/arm gesture among American and Japanese college students for the purpose of determining which aspects of nonverbal behavior are universal. It has been noted that little research in nonverbal behavior has been conducted with a cross-cultural focus (See Kendon 1984) and this study is a step to correct this deficiency.

Eight video-taped conversations (four between Japanese female college students and four between American female college students) provided the data for this research. Five minutes of each conversation was analyzed and hand/arm movements were recorded and categorized into groups, based on their communicative purpose. The collected data was then compared for similarities and differences and the greatest differences were examined in greater detail.

The frequency of all types of hand/arm movement was found to be higher among American subjects (Americans: 6.45 per minute; Japanese: 5.55 per minute). This difference was generally attributed to a higher frequency in the category of "adaptive" movements among American subjects (Americans: 2.20 per minute; Japanese 1.54 per minute). Despite the generally higher frequency of all hand/arm movement among American subjects, the use of "emblem" gestures was actually less frequent among Americans than among Japanese (Americans: 0.30 per minute; Japanese: 0.40 per minute).

In addition to differences in the frequency of different types of gesture, the distribution of hand/arm gesture between the two subjects of each pair was found to be much more varied among Americans than among Japanese (Americans: 70.25%/29.75% average split; Japanese: 54.25%/45.75% average split). Even the most even distribution among the American pairs was less equal than the least even distribution among the Japanese pairs.

Each of the noted differences in Japanese and American use of gesture can be explained by commonly noted differences between American and Japanese societies. The more frequent use of emblematic gestures among Japanese subjects indicates a greater emphasis on shared traditions in Japanese society. The less frequent use of adaptive gestures among Japanese subjects indicates a greater emphasis on continuity and harmony within Japanese society, and particularly among Japanese women. Finally, the more evenly distributed gesture patterns among Japanese conversation partners indicates greater social equality within Japanese society.

The results of this research suggest that nonverbal behavior is not universal in its application. While certain aspects of nonverbal behavior are generally consistent among Japanese and American female college students, those aspects which vary can be attributed to the cultures in which the subjects learned to communicate. The same cultural factors which influence verbal communication can also be seen to influence nonverbal communication in a various ways.