Cultural Aspects of Conflict Handling by Australian and Japanese Students

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Summary: This paper reports some results of a research aiming at finding the cultural aspects in conflict handling by Australian and Japanese students. The research is based on some established differences between the Australian and the Japanese cultures. On this background the problem of ways of dealing with conflict has been explored through a survey held in both countries.
Key wards: conflict, low context culture, high context culture.

Introduction

This world is getting highly globalized today and international communication becomes an extremely important issue. When people from different countries communicate, a lot of problems both linguistic and cultural are likely to arise. Even within a homogeneous culture there might be groups of different customs, beliefs, perceptions and values, which occasionally lead to conflict. Do the ways Japanese young people understand and handle conflict differently from those in other countries? How do they differ? An attempt has been made to find answers to these questions through a comparison of how university students from Australia and Japan face conflict.

Research theoretical background

What is the definition of conflict? John Burton (1991) argues that conflicts exist when two or more parties' perspective, their values or needs are incompatible. Conflicts are produced by two or more parties' interactions, and a result of different values, related to deep human needs, wants and perspectives. More importantly, conflict is inevitable. All communities have potential for conflict. It can be said that without communication or contact, there can be no conflict.

According to Robinson (1972), people tend to view only the negative side of conflict as a force operating against successful completion of group or community goals. It provokes anger, anxiety, distress, fear and aggression, also often breaks down relationships, hinders communication, and obstructs problem solving. But

most researchers agree, that conflict may have potentially positive outcomes too. As long as conflict is properly managed, the creative and constructive effects arise, including prevention of stagnation, stimulation of interest and curiosity, encouragement of the examination of problems, motivation towards solving them, building group cohesion, development of quality of relationships and releasing tensions. The question is not conflict itself, but if it is not well managed. Unmanaged conflict is a threat to the survival of a group. To resolve conflict, skill and knowledge are essential. John Burton (1991) suggests, that constructive conflict resolution is the permanent one, leading to conflict termination.

Any communication has its specific cultural background. In his works Hall (1976, 1978) discusses the idea that cultures differ in the amount of context they involve in the process of communication. Context can be understood looking at the amount of words by which a person can comfortably convey the desired meaning. From the perspective of this feature he introduced the terms "high context" and "low context" cultures.

High contexted communication
↑
↑
  Found?
  Found it?
  You found it?
  Have you found the book
↓
↓
Low contexted communication
	The sentences in this diagram have the same meaning; however, the higher the sentence goes up, the amount of words is less. This style of communication is termed "high contexted" communication.
	    On the other hand, the lower the sentence goes, the amount of words are increasing. This style of communication is known as "low contexted" communication

Walsh (1991) suggests, that Australian culture could be defined as a low-context one. In 1976 Hall argues that Japan belongs to the high context cultural groups.

Since conflict dealing involves basically communication, it is much likely that the way of handling it is heavily influenced by the context type of the respective culture.

Rusbelt & Zembrodt (1983) clarify, that generally there are four categories of responses in case of conflict between friends: exit, voice, loyalty and neglect. Fig. 1 represents a "Conflict-outcome" model, showing how individuals respond to conflict within a relationship.
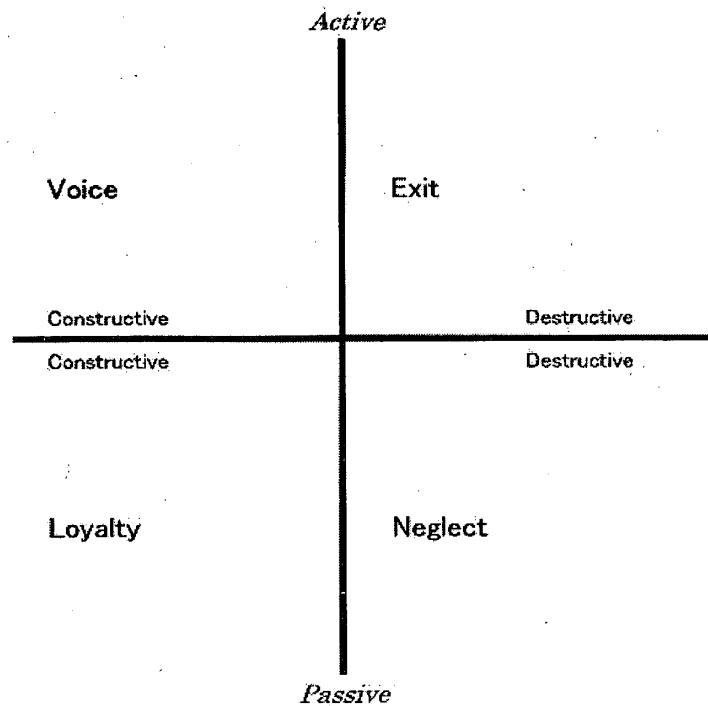
The first dimension is constructive-destructive. It discriminates between:
1. "Voice" and "Loyalty" responses, which are intended to repair the relationship.
2. On the opposite side are the responses of "Exit" and "Neglect" which threaten the relationship and are more destructive to its wel-being.

Fig.1

The second dimension is active-passive. It distinguishes between: 1. "Exit" and "Voice", responses, which involve active actions that directly impact on the problem causing conflict; 2. "Loyalty" and "Neglect responses", which do not directly help the problem and are relatively more passive with respect to the dissatisfying incident. In the second case the individual' s fairly passive reaction allows the relationship to take its own course, either waiting for it to improve or allowing it to deteriorate.

Exit is actively harming the relationship, for instance, separating, actively abusing one's partner, threatening to leave, and screaming, yelling or hitting one's partner. Voice is actively and constructively attempting to improve conditions by discussing problems, seeking help from a friend or therapist, suggesting solutions. Loyalty is passive waiting, hoping the conditions to improve by supporting the partner when others criticize him/her. Neglect is passive allowing conditions to deteriorate, ignoring the partner or spending less time together, refusing to discuss problems, treating the partner badly, insulting or criticizing him/her for things unrelated to the real problem, just letting things fall apart.

Where do the typical ways of conflict management of Japanese and Australian students stand in this theoretical setting? How much their culture-context types affect their behavior in conflict situations? What are the differences in responses to conflict? What strategies are used to manage conflict? Are there differences between boys and girls in handling conflict in these two cultures? These questions have been tackled by a research held in Australia and Japan in 2002 and 2003.
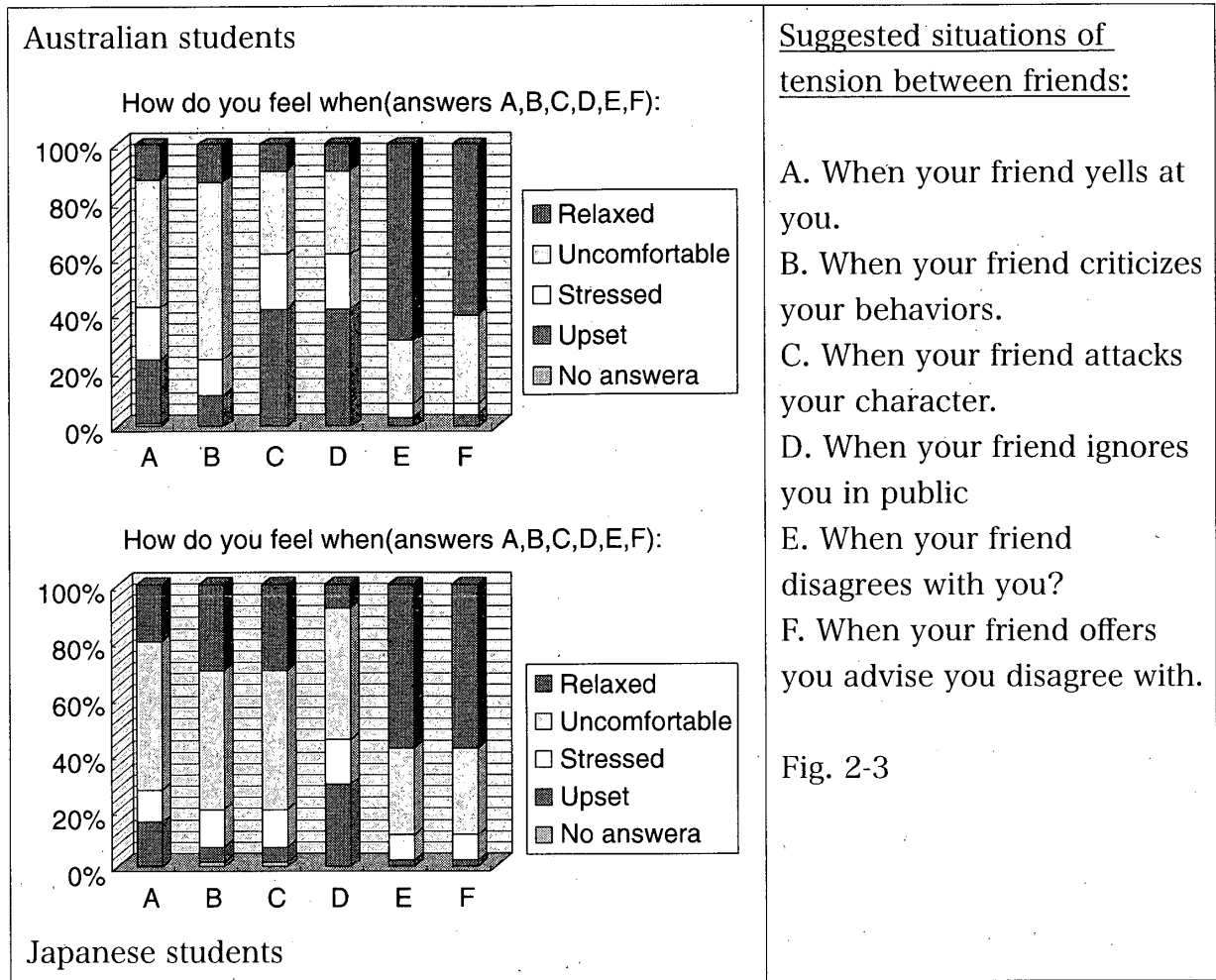
Research method and aims

A survey has been conducted involving 105 students (57 males, 48 females) from the University of Canberra and 134 students (69 males, 65 females) from the Yamaguchi University. The survey aims at getting information about typical choices in conflict handling by the Australian and Japanese students, with respect to their cultural types and the "conflict-response" model (fig.1). It contains 18 questions, designed to get information on student's attitude, feelings and response to conflict. Situations were described and students asked to choose their typical reaction from suggested answers, each covering one of the possible theoretical responses (Voice, Loyalty, Neglect, Exit).

Discussion

As a whole the data analysis confirm that the Australian and the Japanese people belong to two different context-type groups: the former more "talkative" and directly articulating feelings, attitudes, intents and the latter belonging to a culture of high context, i.e. using less verbal communication. The response types to questions of general character such as "Is friendship important to you", or "Who do you spend most time with", etc. tend to be similar. This can be easily explained with the fact that both sample groups belong to the same age and occupational group: university students. Differences occur in the data about details of conflict handling and we are focusing on them.

The idea, that westerners show their emotion more straightforward than the Japanese, is widely spread. However that does not tell us much how they feel at situations of tension in conflicts. Our research shows that the Australians feel more stressed than the Japanese (fig.2-3). The percentage of answers "stressed" and "upset" are markedly prevailing with the Australians for situations A-F conflict situations. But Australian students are more relaxed and constructive than the Japanese when they express their opinions, and discuss matters with friends. The Japanese students feel more uncomfortable and even stressed and upset when verbal clarification is required. This makes us believe, that using the "conflict-response" model, the behavior of Japanese students tend to occur away from the "Voice" quadrant.

In 1980 Hofstede suggested, that the Australians are individualistic and would rather center the conflict around their need of explanation, than give up for the sake of friendship. As for the Japanese, it is widely argued that they try to avoid conflict as much as they can to keep harmony, but this idea has rarely been supported by specific quantitative data. Our research based on concrete data confirms the existence of this cultural difference. But further than that, we have been interested to see if there are any trends towards change of young Japanese people in their attitudes in conflict, given the fact that they communicate with foreigners more often today.

Australian students

How do you feel when(answers A,B,C,D,E,F):

- Relaxed
- Uncomfortable
- Stressed
- Upset
- No answera

How do you feel when(answers A,B,C,D,E,F):

- Relaxed
- Uncomfortable
- Stressed
- Upset
- No answera

Japanese students

Suggested situations of tension between friends:

A. When your friend yells at you.
B. When your friend criticizes your behaviors.
C. When your friend attacks your character.
D. When your friend ignores you in public
E. When your friend disagrees with you?
F. When your friend offers you advise you disagree with.

Fig. 2-3

A series of conflict situations were presented, as well as possible answers, relating to the theoretical possible outcome of a conflict. Fig.4 illustrates only one such situation, but the outcome of almost all are similar.

A major difference in conflict dealing to be noted is, that more Australians would consider verbal settling of the problem (voice reaction), than Japanese - a typical feature of high-contents cultures ("Talk" option). This has already been found out through another set of questions (fig. 2-3). But most striking differences occur in the "forget and forgive" option. Twice as more Japanese are willing to adopt the "passive-loyalty/-neglect/ constructive" attitude than Australians. The Japanese also show much more consideration to the partners, not choosing "punishment" by stopping to talk to them. In terms of the model this can be interpreted as "less active approach". Though both groups are less willing to consider end of relationship, there is still significant difference between the number of Japanese and Australians ready to choose this option. As a whole, the Japanese students are more likely to use loyalty response when conflict occurs. Based on this evidence it can be concluded, that there are substantial differences between the approaches to conflict of both sample groups, suggesting that little or no cultural change has taken place with the Japanese young people towards more low-context
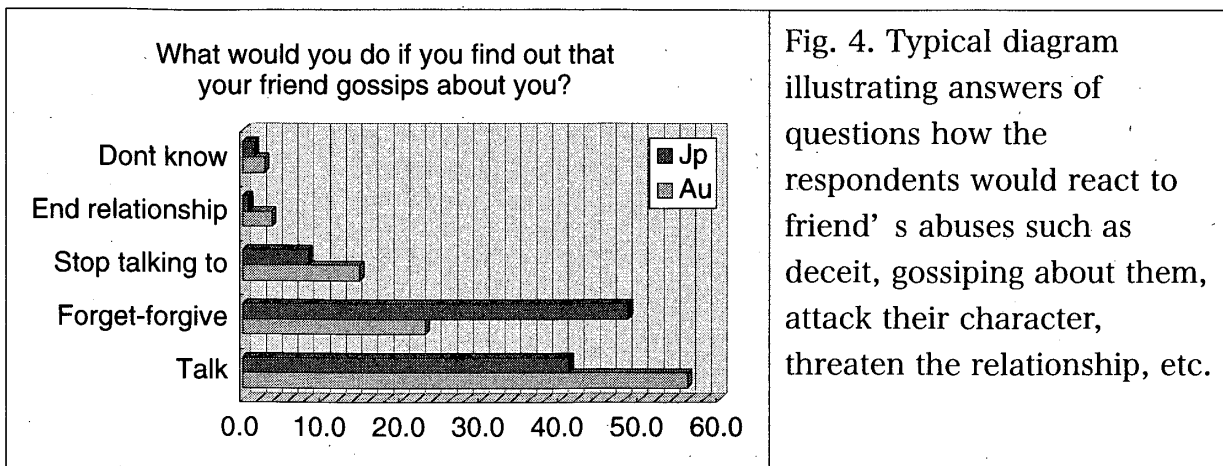
expression and active conflict resolving.

What would you do if you find out that your friend gossips about you?

Dont know	
End relationship	
Stop talking to	
Forget-forgive	
Talk	

0.0 10.0 20.0 30.0 40.0 50.0 60.0

■ Jp
■ Au

Fig. 4. Typical diagram illustrating answers of questions how the respondents would react to friend' s abuses such as deceit, gossiping about them, attack their character, threaten the relationship, etc.

Another difference discovered is that Australians are less influenced by common friends when they make up their mind (Fig. 5, Q10), but on the other hand they are much more willing to verbally discuss their problems with common friends (Q11, Q12) before taking action. The Japanese rarely look for advice and are not prepared to discuss conflict problems with others, but when advice is offered, they tend strongly to consider it. This is another proof of the high context culture of Japanese students and their passive and loyalty-constructive approach in conflict solving.

Envolvement of common friends

100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0^

au | jp   au | jp   au | jp
Q10   Q11   Q12
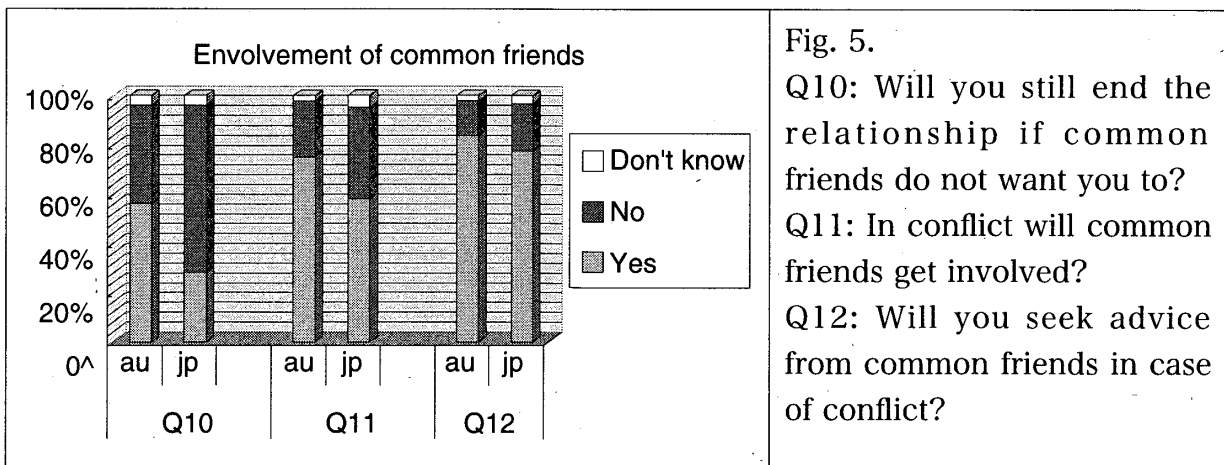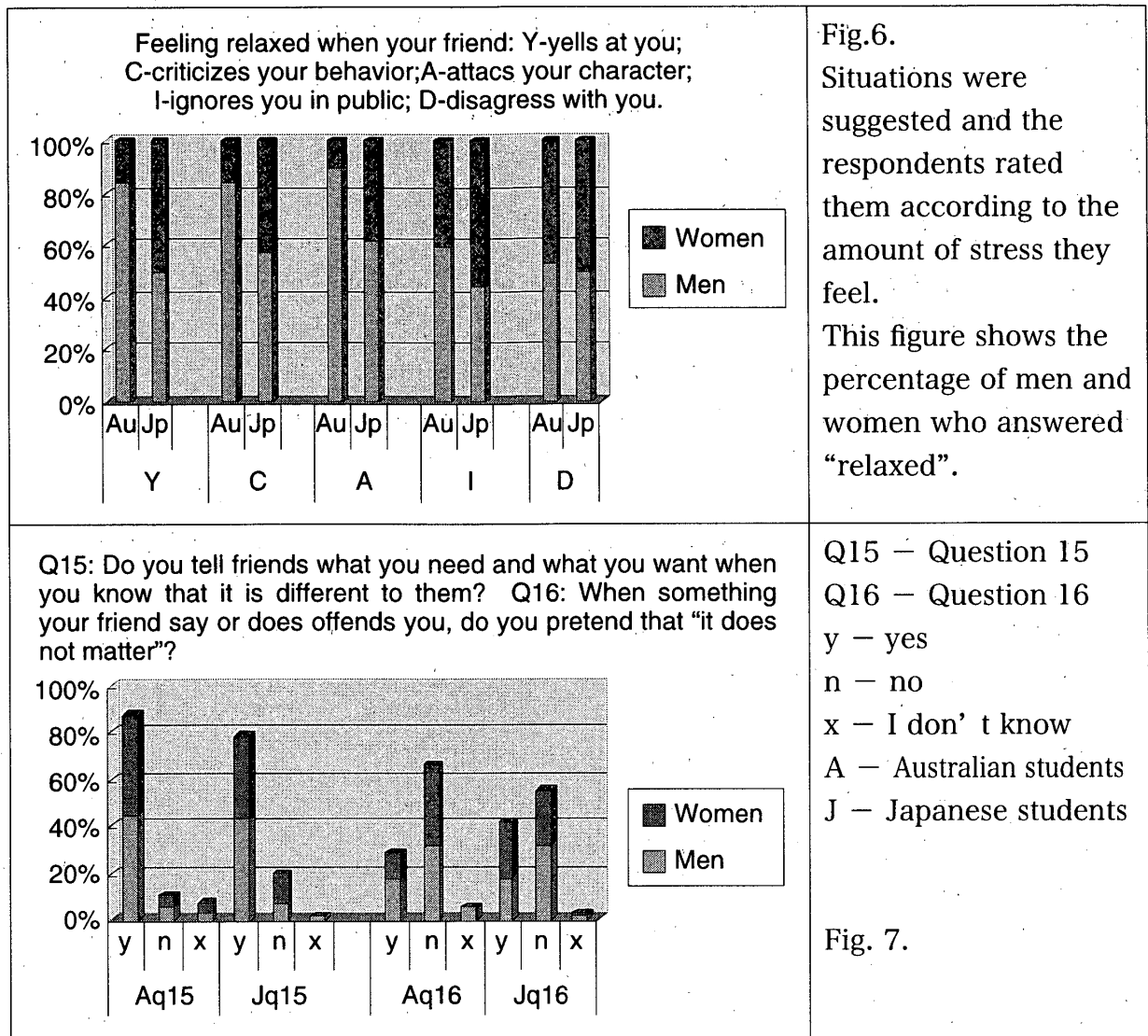
□ Don't know
■ No
■ Yes

Fig. 5.
Q10: Will you still end the relationship if common friends do not want you to?
Q11: In conflict will common friends get involved?
Q12: Will you seek advice from common friends in case of conflict?

An interesting aspect of conflict dealing and culture relates to gender. Benett&Sally (1995) found out that in communication men use exclusively their right brain hemisphere, while women use both right and left. The left half of the brain controls emotion; the right one controls the sense of direction in space. Therefore, it can be predicted that women are more sensitive. Our research confirms this as far as conflict is considered. Also, men are more likely to feel relaxed than women in facing conflict (fig 6).

Feeling relaxed when your friend: Y-yells at you; C-criticizes your behavior;A-attacs your character; I-ignores you in public; D-disagress with you.

Fig.6.
Situations were suggested and the respondents rated them according to the amount of stress they feel.
This figure shows the percentage of men and women who answered "relaxed".

Q15: Do you tell friends what you need and what you want when you know that it is different to them?   Q16: When something your friend say or does offends you, do you pretend that "it does not matter"?

Q15 — Question 15
Q16 — Question 16
y — yes
n — no
x — I don' t know
A — Australian students
J — Japanese students

Fig. 7.

It can be seen on fig7., that more Australian women are likely to express their opinions than men (Q15) and are less ready to pretend, that an offence has not happened. This is opposite to the Japanese, where men are more likely to express their opinions than women, and at the same time more Japanese men would pretend, that they are not offended (Q16). It can be concluded, that in Australia, women are more individualistic than men, on the other hand, in Japan, men are more individualistic than men.

Conclusion

1. The ways of dealing with conflict are different in low context- and high context cultures. Features of high context culture tend to be persistent with the young generation in Japan and there is no evidence of significant change in the modern time of global communication.

2. In conflict dealing the Japanese young people, based on their specific culture, tend to adopt typically the lower left quadrant of the "Conflict-response" model, i.e. a passive, constructive, loyalty approach. As by itself it is a very mild, humanistic

approach. But this world is getting too globalized and more based on values of the western, low-context cultures. This means that interests and ideas should be defended through more active positions and more verbal expression, - approaches opposite to what Japanese students would be willing to choose now. There is a lot to think on this problem in the future.

3. Conflict is unavoidable, as is the trend towards more broad cultural communication. Of course all cultures have their own customs, ways of thinking and perceptions. Diversity makes this world beautiful, but often it leads to conflicts. Therefore, it is important to understand our cultural differences, tolerate them and learn how to solve conflict situations with respect for the benefit of all parties.

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