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A THEORY OF INFORMATION SEARCH AND INTERCULTURAL INCONGRUITY IN THE JAPANESE HISTORY

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Introduction

Theory is always metaphorical. Metaphors highlight some aspects of reality, while hiding others. Still, metaphors are useful, because they give us a perspective in which we understand, interpret, and explain.

What I intend to do in this paper is (1) to introduce a theory, or a metaphor, if you like, of complex human behavior, and then, (2) to apply it to the context of intercultural experience in some of the Japanese historical developments. Streufert and Streufert (1978) provide us with a new metaphor of humans as an "information searching animal". It is quite different from traditional social psychological theories that depend on "economic" metaphors such as "exchange theory" and "cost-reward theory". As is usually the case with new theories, this one may not escape some shortcomings, but it gives us a new rhetoric by which to observe and interpret complex human behavior from a standpoint completely different from the old rhetoric. So I deal with the same old subject-matter, namely, human behavior, but attempt to do it in a new rhetoric.

General Incongruity Adaptation Level Hypothesis

Among a great many theories of social psychology, General Incongruity Adaptation Level (GIAL) Hypothesis is undoubtedly a
landmark. It attempts to resolve some contradictions and shortcomings of the previous social psychological theories of human behavior such as balance theory (Heider, 1946), ABX model (Newcomb, 1953; 1956), consistency theory (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955), and dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; 1964). In addition, GIAL hypothesis integrates these theories into a more comprehensive view of humans in interacting with the environment. Streufert and Streufert (1978) maintain:

Consistency theory in its many forms has typically proposed that people seek reliability, constancy, i.e., want to make their world highly consistent and highly predictable. In contrast, a different group of theories have proposed that people seek novelty, variety, i.e., would like to increase the complexity of their world.... We... develop a new multidimensional theory that attempts to integrate the two points of view (Streufert and Streufert, 1978, pp. 7-8).

Thus, Streufert and Streufert propose GIAL hypothesis which introduces the new concepts such as "congruity-incongruity", "general incongruity adaptation level", "simple, complex, and cloze search" in order to explain human behavior. Let us have a brief overview of this theory as we refer to the terminologies in the Figure 1 below.

(1) congruity: congruity occurs when the information received by an organism does not in any way depart from his frame of reference for that information (Streufert and Streufert, 1978, p. 169).

(2) incongruence: incongruence occurs when information received by an organism is in disagreement with one or more stored concepts of the organism and requires manipulation of the information or of the stored concepts or both before congruence can occur.
Figure 1. Streufert and Streufert’s General Incongruity Adaptation Level Hypothesis (Streufert and Streufert, 1978, p. 201).

(Streufert and Streufert, 1978 p. 169). (Horizontal line represents the degree of environmental incongruity.)

(3) consistency: the optimal relationship between the actual amount of stimuli and the expected and familiar incongruity level, i.e., GIAL. (Vertical line represents the degree of consistency seeking behavior.)

(4) inconsistency: deviation of information from the expected in either an incongruent or a congruent direction
(Streutert and Streufert, 1978, p. 171).

(5) General Incongruity Adaptation Level (GIAL): an organism's general and arranged expectations concerning the normal amount of general incongruity to expect in the environment on the basis of its prior general incongruity experience over time (Streufert and Streufert, 1978, p. 173. Paraphrased). 

(6) simple search: information search behavior that implies no directed activity at all, i. e., passiveness or boredom (Streufert and Streufert, p. 200. Paraphrasod).

(7) complex search: search originating from self-initiated behavior, resulting from the integration of many sources of information; incongruity-seeking behavior (Streufert and Streufert, 1978, p. 200).

(8) cloze search: incongruity-seeking behavior for the sake of incongruity resolution, e. g., when one makes sense out of confusion by getting more information (Streufert and Streufert, 1978, p. 192 paraphrasod).

This theory suggests that by hypothesizing the general incongruity adaptation level, we can understand the psychology of human behavior in interacting with the changing environment. That is to say, if the degree of environmental incongruity is too low or high (the extreme left or right in the Figure 1), it will cause boredom or fear in human psychology, because such an environment is far too incongruous with the optimal level of environmental incongruity, i. e.,
general incongruity adaptation level. In the face of boredom, humans usually terminate passive simple search, and begin to engage in complex search to seek "new" and "novel" information, just as we need some "surprise" and "news" in our lives from time to time. At the same time, however, people engage in cloze search to make sense out of increasing "new" and "novel" information, so people can keep themselves within the range of optimal incongruity, or the GIAL. When the environmental incongruity is beyond a person's capacity to cope with, s/he will terminate both types of search, and distort reality and escape from it. Therefore, by assuming the GIAL, we are able to understand why we feel bored, seek information, organize the information, or become confused in various circumstances.

On the basis of this theory, Streufert and Streufert propose a very important postulate in relation to culture:

Cultures containing more incongruity should, on the average, produce higher GIALs in their members than cultures containing less incongruity (Streufert and Streufert, 1978, p. 202).

That is to say, social characteristic of a culture affects the communication behavior of its members. In other words, it is possible to interpret the communication behavior of the members of a given culture in terms of Streufert and Streufert's theory. For example, Americans (U.S.A.) in small towns are known to be rather closed-minded toward outsiders. Their behavior is an example of lower GIALs resulting from less incongruity in their environment. In contrast, people in large cities where there is a high degree of incongruity continuously seek new and novel information, exhibiting the higher GIALs. Thus, Streufert and Streufert's theory can be used as a theoretical framework to explain why a given culture behaves the way it does.
Intercultural Incongruity Search and Reduction in the Japanese History

In this section of the paper I would like to apply the theoretical framework established in the former section to an interpretation of some of the intercultural incidences in the Japanese history. To be more specific, I attempt to propose that the Japanese have engaged in various search behaviors in their historical intercultural contact with outside cultures in accordance with their general incongruity adaptation level. Using Streufert and Streufert's theoretical framework, we can propose the following postulates:

1. A culture's intercultural contact/experience is affected by the degree of environmental incongruity.
3. Interest, curiosity, and appreciation of foreign cultures invokes complex search, or what I call "intercultural incongruity search" (ICIS).
4. Nationalization of foreign cultures results from cloze search, or what I call "intercultural incongruity reduction" (ICIR).
5. Rejection of or isolation from foreign cultures results from excessive intercultural incongruity in the environment.

In the following discussion, I shall focus most attention upon the postulates (3), (4), and (5) as I discuss each of them by relating them to some of the historical events of Japan. However, before doing it, I would like to comment on the postulates (1) and (2) briefly.

The postulate (1) suggests an applicability of Streufert and Streufert's theory to the context of intercultural communication. Experience and contact with foreign cultures can be explained in terms of the amount of environmental incongruity a person is exposed to. "Culture shock" is an example where a person is exposed to an ex-
cessive amount of informational and environmental incongruity. Incongruity, in this sense, is equivalent to the new, strange and different sets of values, norms, and objects of foreign cultures.

The postulate (2) refers to a circumstance where there is no intercultural interaction. For example, in the ancient days when the means of transportation and communication were not yet developed, people were prevented from travelling and communicating with people of other cultures. Natural boundaries such as rivers, mountains, and oceans separated different groups of people, and they responded passively to such conditions.

**Intercultural Incongruity Search**

When a person is exposed to a lower degree of environmental incongruity, s/he begins to engage in complex search to seek more information, novelty, surprise, stimulation, etc. It can be hypothesized that the same phenomenon applies to intercultural contact and experience. The postulate (3) claims that if a culture experiences environmental incongruity lower than its GIAL, the members of the culture naturally begin to seek more incongruity, that is, new and different information from the outside world: this is what I call "Intercultural Incongruity Search" (ICIS). The developments of the Japanese society have been characterized by ICIS behaviors. I present three historical examples of ICIS behavior in the Japanese history, namely: (1) Kenzui-shi and Ken-tō-shi, (2) the Meiji Restoration, and (3) the Post-World War II Period. These are the periods when the Japanese laboriously engaged in ICIS behavior to seek new information and knowledge from advanced civilizations such as China, Western Europe, and the United States.

Let me discuss each of these three historical events by using the Streufert and Streufert's theory and the notion of ICIS behavior.
described above.

First, *Ken-zui-shi* and *Ken-tō-shi* refer to the series of navigating tours to China organized by the Japanese Imperial government between seventh and tenth centuries. Hundreds of intellectuals and governmental officials visited China through these voyages in order to import technology, knowledge, and culture from China, then the most advanced nation in the world. The aggressive and adventurous voyages to the Chinese continent were the first major intercultural experience Japan initiated in its history. The Japanese made a great transition from passive to active absorption of foreign culture and civilization. That is to say, it was a dramatic transition from simple search to complex search. The Japanese made a special effort to seek the information that were different and novel. They imported incongruity with enthusiasm to stimulate and energize its culture.

Second, around the time of the Meiji Restoration Japan was in a great turmoil. Japan, which preserved isolation for two and a half centuries, finally opened itself to the rest of the world in facing American and European imperialistic powers. When gigantic American battleships arrived at a port near Tokyo in 1853 to demand trade with Japan, the sight of the battleships was a great shock to most Japanese, who now realized how far behind they remained in science and technology while they were indulged in domestic peace.

*Taihei-no Nemuri-o Samasu Jōkisen*

*Tatta Shihai-de Yoru-mo Nemurezu*

(Steamships that broke the peaceful sleep;
It took only four of them to keep the nation sleepless.)

This is a satirical poem that describes the magnitude of shock and bewilderment felt by the Japanese when the American battleships arrived near Tokyo in 1853. To many Japanese, the sight of these battle-
ships represented the maximum amount of incongruity, which created a sense of panic and fear. However, the arrival of battleships was also a positive surprise to the minds of those who had been totally bored with the static and indulging social conditions. Obviously, the nation's leaders now realized that they had to increase ICIS behavior, and terminate the congruity sustaining policy which kept their eyes shut from foreign cultures. The Japanese decided to start anew at this point to catch up with the West. They terminated the samurai leadership, and the Emperor started to take the leadership instead. The Japanese began to absorb the Western culture and civilization with exactly the same enthusiasm with which they used to learn from China many centuries ago.

Third, the post-World War II period began with a miserable defeat in the war, which left an enormous mental vacuum in the Japanese mind. The occupation by the U.S. military started. Japan's infatuation with American culture has been enormous, and absorption of American culture has always been persistent and extensive, ranging from McDonald's hamburgers to blue jeans, rock music, and many TV shows. Millions of Japanese travel to America. A report tells that "in 1976, more than 2.8 million Japanese went abroad. This figure is more than 13 times higher than the corresponding figure for a decade ago" (Nishida, 1981). The recent media report has informed us of the ultimate of Japan's zeal to absorb the American culture: "Disneyland in Tokyo." Rapid and avid absorption of the American culture in this period is an example of ICIS behavior by the Japanese who wanted to fill the mental vacuum with new information and stimulating ideas. Also, the economic growth was a reflection of complex search (ICIS) by the Japanese in when they were learning the newest American technologies and put them into application.
Intercultural Incongruity Reduction

Streufert and Streufert suggest that humans begin to engage in cloze search as they engage in complex search (See Figure 1). Cloze search is a sense-making behavior in the face of increasing incongruity in the environment. As humans continue to increase complex search, they feel the need to organize the information they have received. The postulate (4) claims that in regard to intercultural contact with outside cultures, the same rule applies: the ICIS behavior accompanies the intercultural incongruity reduction (ICIR) behavior which allows people to organize and interpret the information imported from foreign cultures. In usual terms, ICIR behavior is equivalent to the process of nationalization of foreign cultures. The Japanese history is filled with nationalization of foreign cultures. I present the three examples to illustrate Japan's ICIR behavior in its history: (1) the Heian Era, (2) The *Wakon-Yōsaig* Principle in the Meiji Era, and (3) Japan Today. These three historical cases occurred concurrently with, or immediately following the three cases of ICIS behavior discussed above. These three examples are presented to show that, as Streufert and Streufert suggest, complex search (ICIS) and cloze search (ICIR) take place almost simultaneously, and one is inseparable from the the other.

Let me provide interpretations of these three examples in terms of Streufert and Streufert's theory.

First, the Heian Era between the ninth and eleventh centuries is characterized by nationalization of imported Chinese culture. Toward the end of the *Ken-tō-shi* voyage practices, nationalization of the imported cultures occurred in the form of the establishment of the Japanese *Hiragana* and *Katakana* syllabaries developed from the simplified Chinese characters. Also, this new development of linguistic symbols brought about the development of literary activities, especially
among women in the aristocratic class. This nationalization, or cloze search (ICIR) behavior, was motivated by consistency-seeking motive that allowed the Japanese to protect their cultural identity from being overly influenced by outside cultures. In other words, the Japanese exercised self-control upon foreign cultural influence before it became too incongruous with their own GIALs which served as a base for the traditional Japanese culture.

Second, the *Wakon-Yosai* (The Japanese Spirit-the Western Technology) principle in the Meiji Era refers to the strategy Japan maintained in the process of Westernization of the nation. In the Meiji Era, Japan felt the urgent need to import Western technology and political and economic systems of Western European nations, and yet determined to protect its traditions and cultural heritage from deterioration. A good example to illustrate the predominance of this strategy is the decision not to adopt a Western language as a national language. The adoption of a foreign language was too incongruous with the Japanese frame of mind. Thus, the *Wakon-Yosai* can be considered as an ICIR behavior which results from the rapid and extensive ICIS behavior at the beginning of the Meiji Era.

Third, the Japanese in the 1980s seem to be building self-confidence as a result of economic success in international trade. Although curiosity and enthusiasm the Japanese showed in importing Western culture and technology over the past few decades are still strong, a renewed look at the Japanese culture is increasing to revitalize the traditional cultural forces. This seems to be a typical ICIR behavior to alleviate the anxiety caused by rapid absorption of foreign cultural values which took place over a few decades following World War II. Japan's ICIR behavior today seems to be a natural step that is equivalent to the nationalization in the Heian Era and the *Wakon-Yosai*
principle in an attempt to keep the level of cultural incongruity within the range of its control.

**Intercultural Distortion and Aggression**

Streufert and Streufert maintain that when the environmental incongruity is too excessive and beyond the control of a person's sense-making capacity, s/he will feel confusion, fear, and panic, and react by way of escaping from the situation, distorting reality, or becoming overly aggressive. The same pattern of behavior applies to the context of intercultural communication. The postulate (5) suggests that when a culture is exposed to foreign cultural influence far more profoundly and extensively than it can accommodate, it is likely to either become isolated by distorting reality, or become overly reactive and aggressive.

There are two historical examples to illustrate this postulate in the Japanese history. One is the *Sakoku* (Isolation) policy the Tokugawa government adopted between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. In the sixteenth century, the Europeans came all the way to Japan to introduce the two problematic things: gun and Christianity, both of which were too incongruous with the optimal level of intercultural incongruity Japan had maintained for many centuries. Thus, the Tokugawa government took the *Sakoku* policy so that Japan could escape from the uncontrollable influx of foreign weapons and ideology. At the same time, however, Japan kept one city open for the purpose of international trade, thereby maintaining the GIAL of the Japanese society. The other example is Japan's decision to fight in the Second World War. Many political critics point out that the Japan's decision to fight was not based on a rational judgment, but on distorted pictures of reality. Japan's irrational decision is an example of aggressive or distorted behavior in the face of excessive in-
congruity. Indeed, in the 1930s and 40s, Japan was in the depth of environmental incongruity as a result of excessive importation of Western civilization and rapid military expansion into the outside world. The Japanese leaders suffered information overload and then failed to make a sensible observation of international politics in that period.

**Conclusion**

Thus, we have found that Streufert and Streufert's theory of human behavior is applicable to an interpretation of intercultural communication as well as the developments of a national history. We have also discovered that the Japanese society has been well orchestrated by a combination of ICIS and ICIR behaviors with a few exceptions. This leads us to the question of how we keep our environmental incongruity at the optimal level. This is a very important question for the Japanese to consider, especially considering the fact that we are at the dawn of the information society in the midst of rapid internationalization of the world. A nation's well-being seems to be highly dependent upon effective management of the incoming information, i.e., a well-balanced operation of ICIS and ICIR behaviors, that will prevent the nation from engaging in overly aggressive as well as passive behaviors.

**References**


