

Head Nodding - The Psychosocial Glue of Japanese Society

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COLUMN ARTICLE

Donahue [1] posits that listening, specifically backchanneling and particularly head nodding, is a building block of Japanese society. Japanese backchanneling is distinct by its high frequency overall and also by that of head nodding both individually and in unison with the interlocutor. Head nodding is not synonymous with assent, for it has other functions, namely psycholinguistic and discursive ones. Psycholinguistically, head nodding appears to aid the segmenting of speech in oral reading and in social discourse. Much variability of head nodding exists, but it appears as patterned behavior allied with linguistic markers and coincident junctures by the speaker. Discursively head nodding helps align the interlocutors rhythmically, which likely encourages mutual solidarity and other psychological outcomes. Most everyday conversations likely reinforce social cooperativeness, an ideal that is at the core of Japaneseness.

The ancient name for Japan meant "land of harmony" (*Wakoku* or *Yamato*). Japanese are fond of the fact, as they should be, that from among large societies, their country had the world's longest streak of peace in history--250 years, during the later feudal period [2]. Cooperativeness or social harmony would seem the demand characteristic of the physical environment in which Japanese live: Japan has a population density that is one of the highest, if not the highest, in the world and with few natural resources (mineral, metal, and fossil fuel). Although the country can man-

age to produce upwards of 60% of its food, it has long been the largest net importer of food in the world [3]. The shortages of space and resources are likely to encourage people to harmonize together and be mutually respectful. But that is not all: The country suffers major earthquakes and other natural disasters at seemingly regular intervals, reminders of the people's dependence on each other. These relatively stressful conditions appear borne out by cross-cultural personality testing that show the Japanese score higher on neuroticism (relative level of stress or anxiety) than do Westerners [4,5].

Among the outstanding features about Japan must be its orderliness: From widespread tidiness of the streets to the timeliness of the public transport systems, within a low-crime society topped off by peerless hospitality by nearly any service provider. How can you account for the extraordinary Japanese civility even during a nation's deep crisis when the opposite happens in many other places of the world? Only by a consistent and powerful reinforcer applied continually in people's lives. The high frequency of head nodding for solidarity that fills nearly any Japanese conversation seems to fit the bill.

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