A qualitative investigation of trainees' adjustment in Japan:

A case study of trainees from Indonesia[*]

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Abstract: In Japan, there is a residence status known as "the trainee". This is the status for residents who undertake "activities to learn and acquire the technology, skills, or knowledge at public or private organizations in Japan". With the introduction of the Industrial Training Program in 1993, trainees have been permitted to extend their stay in Japan for education and employment purposes up to a maximum of three years. This study aims to investigate the adjustment styles of trainees and to consider the changes in their attitudes toward Japan in the course of this adjustment. Six male Indonesian trainees (mean age=23.83) were invited to a semi-structured interview. They were employed at the same factory, involved in the manufacture of car components, and were trainees in their first-, second-, and third-years. The interview mainly focused on the trainees' Japanese language skills, the changes in their images of Japan or Japanese people, the communication between them and their Japanese colleagues, and the difficulties they encountered during their stay in Japan. The results revealed that there were clear differences between the first, second, and third trainees. As the trainees' Japanese language skills improved, their communication with the Japanese colleagues increased. Subsequently, they developed more positive images of Japan and Japanese people and hoped to have more informal communication with Japanese people.

Key words: adjustment; trainee; workplace; Indonesia; Japan

1. Introduction

This study focuses on intercultural communication in the Japanese workplace, especially on communication between Japanese workers and foreign workers. For the last two decades, the Japanese workplace has been dramatically changed, due to the declining birth rate, shrinking labor forces, and the younger generation's avoidance of physical labor. In 2005, there were over 700,000 foreign workers legally employed in Japan. More precisely, around 180,000 professionals and technical workers, 90,000 workers with special activities (technical internship, working holiday, etc.), 100,000 workers for part-time jobs, and 240,000 ethnic Japanese remigrants (Ito, 2008).

Especially after the revision of the immigration law in 1993, some companies, especially those engaged in textiles, mechanics, and foods accept temporary foreign workers for a period of several years. The workers are

called "trainees" and "technical interns". This is the status for temporary residents engaged in "activities to learn and acquire technology, skills, or knowledge at public or private organizations in Japan" (JITCO, 2007).

1.1 Overview of Industrial Training Program and Technical Internship Program in Japan

Since the introduction of the Industrial Training Program in 1993, trainees have been permitted to extend their stay in Japan longer than before. More specifically, the program is divided into two sections: the Industrial Training Program (ITP), and the Technical Internship Program (TIP). The former is the first stage of training (maximum one year), which status is called "trainee". The latter is the second stage (maximum two years), which status is called "technical intern". All participants at least, should finish ITP before they change status to "technical intern". Thus, it is possible for them to stay in Japan for education and employment purposes up to a maximum of three years. In the following sections, we uniformly refer to "trainee" and "technical intern" as "trainee".

According to JITCO (Japan International Training Cooperation Organization, 2006), the main purposes of ITP and TIP are to foster the development of industrial human resources, to facilitate the transfer of skills through industrial training and internship in the Japanese private sector, and to reintegrate skills acquired over the course of these programs into the industries of the countries of the program participants.
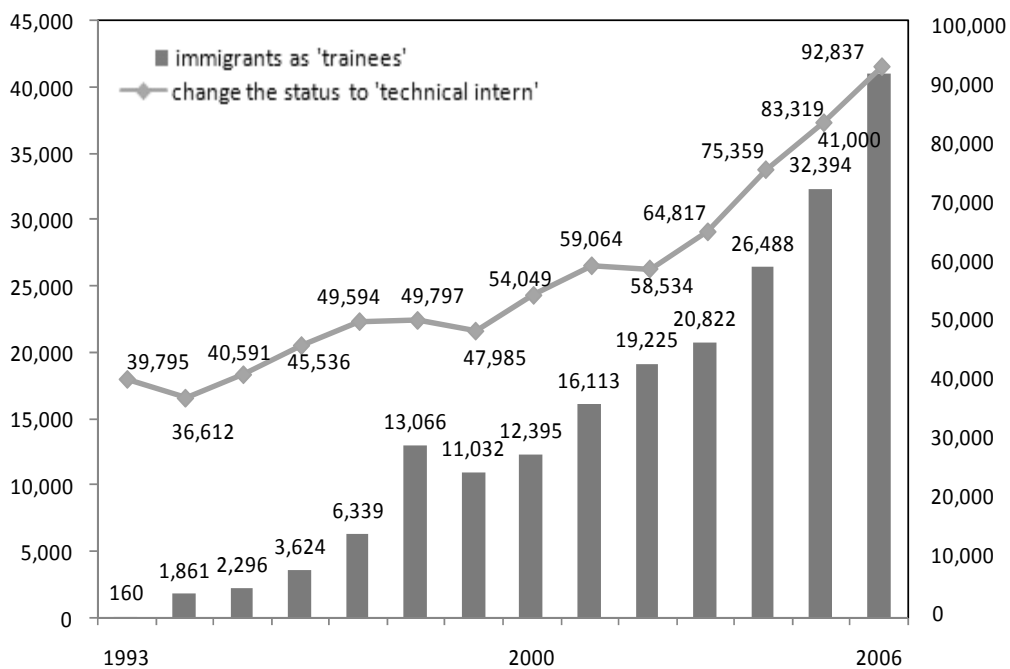

Figure 1   Transition in the number of trainees and technical interns
Note: It made from the data of the Ministry of Justice.

Under this program, the number of foreigners has been obviously increased (see Figure 1). The Ministry of Justice reported that there were 88,086 trainees registered in 2007, and 99.3% of them come from Asian countries in 2007 (National Statistics Center, 2008). The largest group is the Chinese trainees (75.6%). Other Southeast Asian countries are as follows: the Vietnamese (7.6%), the Indonesian (5.8%), the Philippines (5.6%), and the Thailander (2.9%). As for the kind of occupation, the textile industry, food companies, and the mechanical industry are the most prominent. For some areas or some specific industries, trainees might be an

indispensable labor force (Ito, 2008). However, the system has faced some serious issues. For example, some companies exploit trainees, too much work is demanded of trainees with little pay, and some trainees disappeared to illegal jobs. Recently, these issues have been discussed in mass media, but so far only little empirical and theoretical research had been conducted. There are some previous studies which focused on the foreign trainees from a legal point of view, from their human rights' point of view, investigations into actual situations by public organizations, and so on, but there is very little from a psychological approach. It would be significant to focus on perception of the Japanese workplace and the Japanese community, and investigate what they need and what we could do for them.

1.2 Psychological approach to "cultural travelers"

Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) listed the main groups which feature in the empirical and theoretical literature of sojourners. These "cultural travelers" included tourists, international students, international business people, immigrants, and refugees. Previous studies have concentrated especially on the internal students and the international business people. For example, Furnham and Bochner (1986) pointed out the problems which oversea students faced, such as insufficient linguistics, cultural skills, prejudice, homesickness, and loneliness. Chataway and Berry (1989) indicated that international students experienced more problems in communication and prejudice than did local students in Canada. In Japan, Tanaka and Fujihara (1992) clarified the difficulties the international students experienced, like social manners and indirect expressions, and proposed social skills for adjustment. As for the business people in intercultural situations, Aycan (1997) proposed a conceptual model of expatriates' adjustment. In the model, the characteristics of expatriates and their organizations were divided. Positive adjustment would be associated with sojourners' characteristics such as technical competence, previous cross-cultural experience, cultural flexibility, and so on. Stening and Hammer (1992) studied the adaptation of Japanese managers in the United States and Thailand, and found that the Japanese were worse adjusted than the Americans in all the measures they used.

Generally speaking, international students and international business people have both similarities and differences in the cross-cultural studies. Both are usually well-educated and highly motivated, but differ in terms of their direction when moving through two cultures. As Ward, et al., described, in the most cases, international students are originally from less developed counties and study abroad in industrialized courtiers. International business people, on the other hand, generally travel in the opposite directions.

As for the trainees, on the other hand, they are similar to international students in that they are both "temporary residents" in the host country and come to "learn" something. However, trainees differ in that they have come mainly for financial reasons, the period of their stay has been strictly limited, and most of them are from developing countries. The trainees have very different backgrounds than the international business people we mentioned above. Most studies about international business people are studies about people like highly skilled technicians, professionals and managers who come from industrialized countries. There have been few investigations about trainees, who are the people like guest worker, coming from less developed courtiers to learn the technical skills available in the industrialized country. Furthermore, the trainees in Japan are temporary residents, so they are not normally considered "immigrants" either. Therefore, the trainees are somewhat unique, as if they represent a new type of cultural traveler. It is important to investigate what kinds of strategies and process of adjustment to the host society they develop.

1.3 The present investigation

The purpose of this study is to investigate the adjustment styles of trainees, and the changes in the course of

this adjustment, and to consider the factors which predict the trainees' adjustment. Ward and Kennedy (1999) summarized factors which predict sociocultural adaptation, based on more than 20 sojourners. These were cultural-specific knowledge, language fluency, contact with host nationals, cultural similarity, and the length of the period of residence in the host culture. We compared the factors from the study to those of Ward, et al's. Specifically, we address the following research questions. First, we will explore the difficulties which trainees experienced in the Japanese workplace. Second, we will investigate what kinds of communication trainees have with Japanese colleagues, other Japanese people living in the same community, and among themselves. Third, we will investigate the trainees' cognitive interpretation of Japan and their home country. Fourth, we will investigate their cognitive image of Japanese people.

What's more, in the last part, we will discuss what type of acculturation we can see in the field, using Berry's (2001) model. The concepts behind the model were originally from Berry, Kim, Power, Young, and Bujaki (1989), who tried to illustrate what kinds of cultural adaptation take place in the interaction between immigrants and the host country. There are four strategies—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—in the model and each involved two dimensions. The first dimension is the relative preference for maintaining ones' heritage culture and identity, and the second as the relative preference for having contact with and participating in the host society along with other ethnocultural groups (Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 2002). According to Berry, et al (2002, p. 354), when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures, the assimilation strategy is defined. In contrast, when individual place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, then the separation alternative is defined. When there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture, while having daily interaction with other groups, integration is the option…. Finally, when there is little possibility or is interest in cultural maintenance, and little interest in having relations with others, then marginalization is defined.

2. Methods

One Japanese company (company A) was chosen as the field for this study. The company is in Shiga prefecture, western Japan, and manufactures car components. The number of employees is around 400 (in 2007) and it has been accepting Indonesian trainees for over eight years. Eight percent of the employees are foreign workers. We conducted semi-structured interviews with six Indonesian trainees. Two interviewers, an interpreter, and two interviewees partook in each interview. About two hours were needed for each interview and they were taken in a coffee shop near the company.

2.1 Participants

Six Indonesian employees (all males, mean age=23.83, and *SD*=0.98), who worked at company A, took part. They were trainees in their first, second, and third years and lived together in an apartment near the company. Before they came to Japan, all of them had learned basic Japanese and Japanese customs, and had some physical training in the same boarding school for four months. Interviewees' family, educational background and Japanese language skills (self-estimation) are listed below (see Table 1).

Table 1   Interviewees' background

Participants	Age	Years	Academic background	In Indonesia, living with	Comes from	Japanese language skill
A	24	1	high school	younger sister, and grand mother (parents live elsewhere)	Central Java	basic Japanese
B	24	1	high school	parents, younger sister, and two younger brothers	Central Java	only job-language
C	24	2	junior college	parents, and an older brother	Central Java	only job-language
D	25	2	high school	parents, and four younger brothers	West Java	basic Japanese
E	22	3	technical college	parents, and three younger sistersparents, and t	South East Sulawesi	basic Japanese
F	24	3	high school	parents, and seven brothers and sister	South East Sulawesi	basic Japanese

2.2 Research questions

The following qualitative questions were given for each interviewee:

(1) Have the trainees experienced difficulties in their Japanese workplace? If so, what kinds of difficulties did they have?

(2) What kinds of communication do they have with Japanese people? And do they want it would change?

(3) What kinds of communication do they have among Indonesians?

(4) What do they feel when they are with Indonesian colleagues?

(5) What is the meaning of Indonesia for them?

(6) What is the meaning of Japan for them?

(7) Have their images of Japanese people changed after they came to Japan? If so, how?

Each question was translated from Japanese to Indonesian, and the answers of interviewees' were translated from Indonesian to Japanese. So as not to miss any conversation, all of those interviews were recorded by an IC recorder (Olympus DSS player version 7).

2.3 Procedure of analysis

For analyzing qualitative data, the KJ method was used. The KJ method was developed by Kawakita (1989) for "creative synthesis", trying to discover a new idea or concept from qualitative data by categorizing and ordering data fragments.

Following Ito, Nochi and Tanaka (2005), the data of was analyzed as follows:

(1) Breaking down the narrative in separate statements from the six interviewees;

(2) Grouping the statements in thematic categories and sub-categories;

(3) Naming categories and sub-categories;

(4) Making a diagram (see Figure 2).

3. Results

Four main categories were extracted from the answers: "communication", "difficulties", "interpretation of Japan (compared with Indonesia)" and "image of Japanese people" (see Figure 2). "Difficulties", including the sub-categories "language" and "understanding toward different religion", described the external factors which

affected the trainees' adjustment. "Communication", was interpreted as a behavioral factor of adjustment. The other two categories. "Interpretation of Japan" and "images of Japanese people" showed the degree of the trainees' adjustment at that time. "Interpretation of Japan" and "images of Japanese people" showed cognitive outcomes of adjustment. In the following sections, we focus on each category.
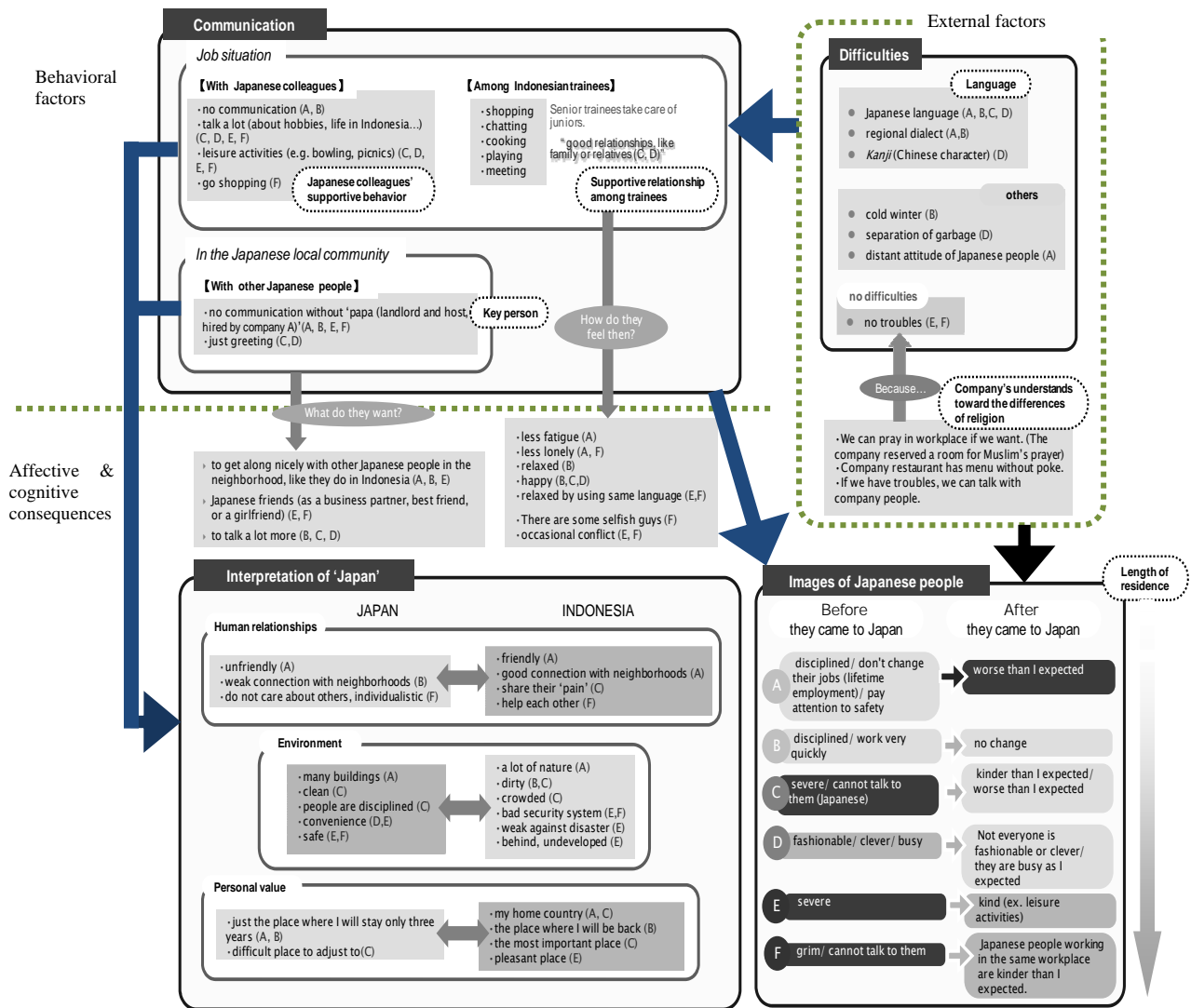

Figure 2   Diagram of "How the Indonesian trainees in company A adjust to Japanese workplace?"

3.1 Difficulties in their workplace

The results revealed some external factors which made the trainees' adjustment difficult. First and second year trainees experienced many problems with the Japanese language, for example, language they used for their work, Chinese characters, regional dialects, and so on. There were also some other difficulties besides language difficulties, such as the separation of garbage.

The third year trainees, on the other hand, did not mention any difficulties. According to them, this was because they could speak Japanese better, so and were satisfied with the communication in the workplace. Moreover, they were also quite satisfied with the company's consideration for Muslims, especially with regard to prayer and foods: The company reserved a room for Muslim prayer and had a restaurant menu without pork. The

trainees could pray in the workplace whenever they wanted and ate in the restaurant without being worried about what dishes they should choose.

3.2 Communication

In the interview question (2) to (4), we asked them to talk about three types of communication, with Japanese people in the same workplace, with other Japanese people, and among Indonesian trainees.

In the workplace, the more time the trainees spent, the more communication with Japanese colleagues they had. The second- and third- year trainees had contact with Japanese colleagues not only in the workplace but also in their private time. For example, they talked about life in Indonesia, went shopping together, and had some social events with their section members, and so on. With other Japanese people who lived in the neighborhood of their apartment, they had almost no communication, apart from one elderly Japanese man they called "papa". He is an old man, hired by the company to take care of Indonesian trainees. The word "papa" appeared a lot throughout the interview, which shows he was a very important person for all Indonesian trainees. They also hope to have more friendly communication with Japanese people in the neighborhood.

All the participants usually went to the company from the same apartment which the company offered and went back there after work. They spent a lot of time with other Indonesian trainees. In their private time, they go shopping, chatting, cooking, and playing videogames together. In addition, more senior trainees took the initiative to have a meeting once in a month. The meetings were held for sharing information, solving problems, and friendship. We also asked them how they felt when they were with the other Indonesians. There were many positive answers like "relaxing", "fatigue can be decreased", "loneliness can be decreased", and so on. Only third-year trainees mentioned both positive and negative sides.

3.3 Interpretation of Japan

The answers to interview question (5) and (6) were categorized into three groups: "human relationships", "environment", and "personal value". These three elements illustrated their attitude to both countries. As for human relationships, the trainees tended to think Japan was an unfriendly country compared with Indonesia. According to their stories, Indonesia still has strong neighborhood ties in the local community. They felt human relationships in Indonesia were better than in Japan. In the environmental elements, all comments about Japan were more positive than those about Indonesia (e.g., clean, safe, and people are disciplined). The last category, "personal value", revealed that the younger trainees regard Japan as the place where they would stay just for their work. Indonesia, on the other hand, was the precious place for them where they will surely go back. Even senior trainees did not have any idea of personal value of Japan.

By and large, the trainees had a more positive idea of Indonesia for "human relationships", and more for "environment" than Japan. Moreover, senior trainees tended to understand both positive and negative sides of the two countries. As they stayed in Japan longer, a more integrative idea was developed.

3.4 Image of Japanese people

Interview question (7) was given in order to investigate the trainees' image of Japanese people and the changing there in. Half of the trainees had had a negative image of Japanese people before they came to Japan (e.g., severe, grim, and busy). These images were mainly formed in the boarding school in Indonesia.

In the changing process, we could see differences between the first, second and third year trainees. For the first-year trainees, the image did not change or became even worse. For the second-year trainees, the negative one became softened but positive images became negative (e.g., They are kinder than I expected, simultaneously, worse than I expected). For the third-year trainees, negative images could be changed to be positive, which was

caused by the Japanese colleagues' kindness.

4. Discussion

4.1 Factors which predict Indonesian trainees' adjustment

Several factors were shown to affect trainees' adjustment to the Japanese workplace: "length of period of residence", "language ability", "supportive relationships among trainees", "Japanese colleagues' supportive behavior", "key person", and "company's understandings of the differences of religion". These factors were divided into internal (emanating from the trainees) and external (emanating from the host).

4.1.1 Internal factors (emanating from the trainees)

"Trainees' period of residence" was one of the most remarkable factors which predicted the adjustment of trainees. Senior trainees had more frequent and informal contacts with Japanese colleagues, a more positive image toward Japan and Japanese people, and a more integrative idea of Japan than younger trainees. "Trainees' language ability", correlated with the period of residence, was also a factor for adjustment. As trainees stayed in Japan longer, they usually could speak Japanese more fluently. Then they could have more informal communication with Japanese colleagues and their attitude toward Japan became more positive. Even when they encountered something difficult in the workplace, they could find a solution by talking with their Japanese boss or colleagues. Furthermore, the communication among trainees in this company was relatively close and intimate, as they said, "Like family". Such supportive relationships could reduce the stress caused by difficulties they experienced in Japan, and help trainees to adjust to the workplace.

4.1.2 External factors (emanating from the host)

It was suggested that factors related to the trainees' adjustment was not limited to the trainees. The host could provide other essential factors which predict the trainees' adjustment. In this study, "Japanese colleagues' supportive behavior" could help the trainees' adjustment. More specifically, they occasionally enjoyed leisure activities together in their holidays, which made trainees' image of Japanese people positive. Results also showed that Muslim trainees did not feel religious difficulties in the workplace. Japan does not have so many Muslims (around 120,000; Japan embassy of the USA, 2008). The company A, however, reserved a Muslim prayer room and had a restaurant menu without pork for foreign trainees. It made trainees feel more comfortable in the workplace, their attitude toward the Japanese company was more positive, and their adjustment to the Japanese workplace progressed. The company also hired a Japanese man, who has the role of taking care of the trainees. Watanabe (1991) suggested "the existence of a key person'" as one of the social factors which influences "resocialization" and "dual socialization". The "papa" was the "key person", who guided trainees Japan, and played an important role for the trainees' adjustment.

This study supported factors suggested by Ward and Kennedy (1999), such as "language fluency" and "a long period of residence in the host culture". Additionally, this study suggests the importance of relationships among sojourners, the host country's situation, including the host people's attitude and behavior. Ward & Kennedy also showed that socio cultural adaptation especially increased over the first 4-6 months. However, there were clear differences between the first-, second- year trainees and the third-year trainees in their cross-cultural attitude in the present study. Over two years, their Japanese language skills became at last effective for communication with Japanese colleagues, and their image of Japanese people became gradually better. This could be caused by brevity of their training period before they came to Japan. Especially for the language, longer training is needed

for their easy adjustment to Japan (Recently, there has been controversy how long is appropriate to allow trainees' work in Japan. In the close future, it might be extended to five years).

4.2 What kinds of acculturation happened to trainees

According to Berry, et al., there are four strategies of ethnocultural groups' acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (see Figure 3). Applying the model to this study, integration was common in the job situation. In the workplace, trainees adjusted to Japanese culture, but they could continue their religious customs. Simultaneously, in the apartment where they live, they still had Indonesian culture. Especially third year trainees had more objective and integrative idea of both Japanese and Indonesian society. In the Japanese local community, on the other hand, trainees and Japanese residents were definitely separated, although the trainees hoped to have a closer relationship with Japanese neighborhoods. Trainees had no relationship with Japanese people besides Japanese colleagues and "papa". Thus, it was suggested that trainees in this study experienced a dual layered structure: integration in the workplace and separation in the Japanese local community.
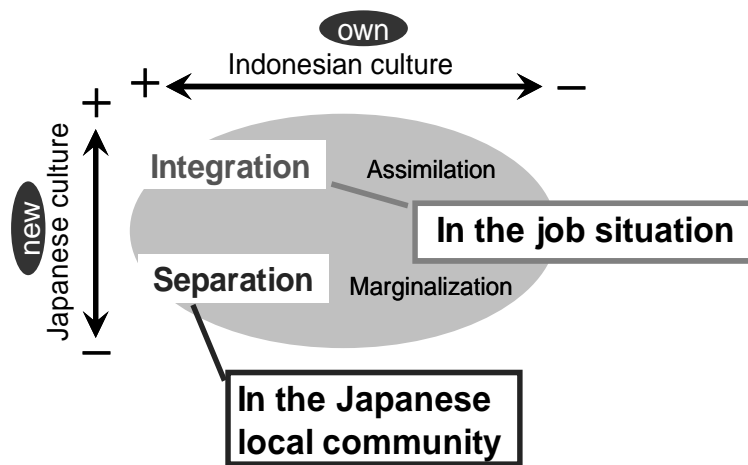

**Figure 3   Relationship between Indonesian culture and Japanese culture of
the Indonesian trainees, using Berry (2001)'s model**

5. Conclusion and future direction

5.1 The major findings of this study

(1) Two different kinds of factors which predict trainees' adjustment were extracted: the internal factor (emanating from the trainees), and the external factor (emanating from the host).

(2) Indonesian trainees encountered difficulties in language communication especially from when they had just come to Japan to two years after.

(3) As the trainees' Japanese language skills improved, their communication with the Japanese colleagues increased.

(4) Trainees' image of Japanese people and interpretation of the country (Japan) gradually became positive.

(5) Trainees were separated with other Japanese people in local community but would like to have more intimate communication with them.

5.2 Future directions

This company was one of the relatively successful cases of accepting foreign trainees. Further research should investigate how the trainees' adjustment happens in unsuccessful cases. Also, because of the low number of participants, this study could not deal with the difference which would be caused by individual factors (e.g., personality, experience, gender, and ethnicity). Furthermore, future study should investigate what will happen after the trainees go back to their home countries.

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