

DIFFERENCES IN ETHICAL JUDGMENT BASED ON THE PRESENCE OR ABSENCE OF BUDDHIST ALTARS: AN APPLICATION OF THE BENNETT METHOD

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Abstract. *This research analyses ethical judgement processes in Japanese organisations, in relation with the presence or the absence of Buddhist altars within the premises of the firm. While seeking to illustrate the impact of collectivism on organizational behaviour, this research sheds light on culture and the concept of shame in Japanese society, connecting this to the collective nature of people working in Japanese companies and how this specific behaviour evolved into competitive advantage over the years. Nevertheless, in regard to the focal points of employee interest, this research indicated that there was no evidence of collectivism, as it is usually described by Japanese business managers. The findings highlight important and intriguing issues for future research and scientific consideration.*

Keywords: *culture, ethics, values, strategy, business, leadership, japan*

1. Introduction

In discussions of Japanese society, it is commonly asserted that decision-making processes and corporate behaviours exhibit a collectivist tendency. However, the justification for this claim is often questionable. Many existing studies either lack thorough investigation or uncritically cite these assertions without substantial evidence.

Nisbet (2001, p. 96) discusses the Oriental perspective, noting that while Westerners prioritize individuality and strive to enhance their self-image, Eastern cultures place a strong emphasis on harmonizing with their surroundings and ensuring personal actions align with social norms. He suggests that this approach is beneficial, yet questions arise regarding the oversimplification of these cultural dynamics.

In a separate analysis, Inoue (2018), an architectural researcher, offers a critical view of Japan's urban landscape. He contrasts the controlled urban planning of Western

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Europe, where building height, color, and materials are regulated despite private ownership, with the lack of cohesion in Japanese cityscapes. Inoue argues that this disarray reflects a departure from collectivism, as individuals pursue personal desires without restraint.

Furthermore, studies in social psychology reveal that, contrary to the cultural narrative of collectivism, Japanese individuals often exhibit individualistic behaviours.

2. Location of the problem

2.1 Definition of Collectivism

Individualism is characterized by the maximization of individual interests, whereas collectivism is defined as a behavioural principle that prioritizes the interests of the group over those of the individual, presenting itself as an opposing concept.

In common discourse, "collectivism" is often interpreted to mean that individuals cooperate extensively due to their subordination to the group, yet they may lack individuality because they have not fully established a personal identity. In the context of psychological research, "collectivism" is frequently described as "prioritizing the goals of the group over the daily goals of the individual" (Triandis, 1990).

2.2 Ruth's Argument

According to Benedict (1946), Japan is characterized as a culture of shame, where individuals are guided by a sense of being observed by "Seken," which translates to self-regulation to avoid shame or criticism. This raises the question: is it the world rather than society that exerts this influence?

In Japanese, there is a nuanced distinction between "world" and "society." "Society" refers to a network of interest-based connections formed through education, whereas "world" implies a physical space experienced through daily life (Inoue, 1981, p. 17). This distinction is illustrated by a Japanese proverb, "they say you leave your sense of shame at home when travelling to new places," which suggests that ethical restraints are easily loosened when one is outside their usual environment.

2.3 Advocates of Japanese Management

Abegglen (1958) focused on manufacturing companies, particularly factories, and sought to explore the relationship between social structures, such as blood and geographical ties, and productivity (efficiency) within these settings. Initially, such organizational structures were perceived as inefficient.

However, in subsequent work (Abegglen, 1985, p. 18), the emphasis shifted to "collective achievement" rather than "individual achievement," highlighting concepts such as "collective belonging," "self-identification with the company," and dedication "for the company." This perspective is also echoed by Dore (1973).

Japan's economic growth was notably significant during the bubble economy that emerged in the late 1980s. It is believed that this growth contributed to the perception that the collective nature of Japanese companies evolved into a competitive advantage.

2.4 Japanese Management Scholars

Ito (1969, p. 3), Hazama (1964), Tuda (1971), Odaka (1984), and others, initiated discussions premised on the notion that Japanese companies inherently exhibit collectivist characteristics. Similarly, Iwata (1984, p. 131) adopts the premise of collectivism as an axiomatic principle. Consequently, a significant portion of the

discourse on Japanese-style management uncritically builds upon prior research that characterizes Japan as fundamentally collectivist, often culminating in accolades for Japanese corporations.

The question arises: why did Japanese business scholars of the era readily accept this premise? Initially, the term "collectivism" bore negative connotations; however, this perception did not persist in Japan. Furthermore, in the post-World War II period, these studies may have signified a sense of emancipation from the complex sentiments associated with Japan's wartime defeat, coinciding with a period of rapid economic growth.

Additionally, the concept of "No ie," which will be elaborated upon later, further contributes to understanding this perspective. "The distinction between collectivism and familialism is not significantly pronounced" (Iwata, 1984, p. 138).

In this context, Mito (1991) contends that the collectivism observed in Japanese companies was a deliberately constructed phenomenon in the early 1900s, functioning primarily as a slogan.

Nevertheless, many Japanese business leaders assert that the strength of Japanese companies lies in their collectivist nature.

2.5 The Theory of Desire for Approval

However, Lu, Jin, and English (2021) suggest that Japanese individuals exhibit less collectivism compared to Italians. Although this study focuses on students and is thus restricted to a demographic that has not fully undergone socialization, limiting its generalizability to the broader Japanese population, it nonetheless prompts a reevaluation of the assumption that Japanese society is inherently collectivist.

In this context, Yamagishi (1998, 1999), Takano (2008), and Ota (2011, 2019) have unequivocally refuted the notion that Japanese individuals are inherently collectivist, attributing this misconception to the cultural practices of "hon" (genuine feelings) and "tatemae" (public facade). Specifically, when actions or behaviors are perceived as "for the group," Japanese individuals typically strive to avoid being labeled as selfish or incurring resentment from others. This behavior is largely driven by a desire for social approval and the aspiration to be perceived as virtuous within an organizational setting.

2.6 Purpose

Consequently, it is imperative to critically evaluate whether Japanese companies genuinely embody collectivist principles. As previously mentioned, Christianity and other monotheistic traditions assert that moral judgments of good and evil are made independently through a covenant with God, a claim that remains open to skepticism. Therefore, the objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to investigate whether there is a significant divergence between the religious beliefs genuinely held in Japan and those of other cultures, and (2) to explore whether such religious differences influence ethical disparities.

As an initial phase, a preliminary experiment was conducted using Japanese students as participants.

3. Ethical Testing Methods

3.1 Religious Views

The Japanese perspective on religion markedly differs from that of monotheistic traditions. Shinto, a native folk religion, features myths yet lacks strict taboos. However, it recognizes concepts such as Amatsu Tsumi (Heavenly Sins) and Kunitsu Tsumi

(Earthly Sins), which are not commandments like the Ten Commandments of Moses but rather guidelines to avoid ominous actions. This perspective may appear incongruent to those from monotheistic cultures, yet many Japanese also adhere to Buddhism.

Approximately a millennium ago, the fusion of polytheistic religions began, resulting in a syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism. Original Buddhism, known as Hinayana Buddhism, emphasizes personal spiritual salvation through discipline. However, in Japan, there is a strong inclination towards Mahayana Buddhism, culminating in Jodo-shiso (Pure Land thought). Consequently, Japanese Buddhism is perceived as being adapted to the local context, distinctly differing from its origins in India as well as from the practices in neighboring China and the Korean Peninsula. This syncretism persists in contemporary Japan. Sekimon Shingaku, a traditional Japanese philosophical system, is more influenced by Buddhist ethics than by pure Shinto ethics, frequently incorporating Buddhist terminology. In many modern Japanese homes, it is common to find both Buddhist altars and Shinto kamidana, unless the household belongs to a Shinto priest (guji) or a Buddhist monk.

Furthermore, there is a notable distinction in the perception of objects of worship. Monotheism, rooted in the concept of original sin, necessitates a constant awareness of God to avoid transgressions. In contrast, Shinto deities, as described by Norinaga Motoori in "Kojikiden" (The Records of Ancient Matters), are characterized by extraordinary virtues and awe-inspiring phenomena beyond human comprehension. Shinto scholars, including Okubo (1996), have extensively commented on this notion, emphasizing the experiential aspect of feeling the divine presence. In Buddhism, the Buddha represents an individual who has attained liberation from all worldly troubles, and thus becomes an object of veneration as an ideal state of being, and thus becomes an object of veneration as an ideal state of being.

Due to these fundamental differences, making direct comparisons with monotheistic beliefs can be challenging. Consequently, we explored whether the household in which one was raised possessed either a Buddhist altar or a kamidana (Shinto altar) to better understand these traditions. This situation arises because the majority of students reside in dormitories, which do not allow for personal spaces to accommodate such items. Furthermore, the environment in which one is raised is considered vital.

3.2 Subjects

The focus of this study is on engineering students who commenced their studies in April 2024. In Japan, school admissions occur in the fourth month of the year, which is why the study was conducted shortly after their enrollment. These students have not yet studied law or ethics as specialized subjects. Consequently, they lack prior experience with scenarios similar to those depicted in the vignette below. At the age of 18 or 19, these students have typically engaged in part-time work but have not held positions with significant responsibilities. They are unmarried and without children, which constrains their ability to respond beyond the limits of their imagination.

3.3 Vignettes

The vignette method is a psychological experimental survey technique used to compare responses by presenting participants with detailed descriptions of fictional scenarios.

In this study, the following scenario was constructed: An individual has recently been appointed as the head of the accounting department. Both their family and the family of a colleague are in good condition. However, it is discovered that the individual has discreetly misappropriated a portion of their colleague's sales money for several years. Participants were asked to indicate the course of action they would take in such a situation. This method was chosen for its effectiveness in eliciting judgments about hypothetical and unfamiliar scenarios.

According to Japanese law, under the Whistleblower Protection Act, an accounting head is obliged to report such misconduct to a director. However, the participants may not be aware of this legal requirement. The complexity of the accounting operations involved makes it challenging to ascertain if there is a reporting obligation.

In the long term, we also examined questions in English in order to compare them with other countries, but in order to avoid thinking being influenced by language (Chomsky 1993), we asked Japanese people to ask questions and answer only in Japanese.

3.4 Representation

There are the following reasons why we asked for answers with free descriptions of more than 200 characters (equivalent to more than 120 words in English): The purpose of this study is to explore key keywords in the thought process that led to the subject's answer. Based on the similarity of the relationship between words and the appearance patterns of words in a sentence, we aim to visualize the connection of those words in a sentence as a co-occurrence network diagram.

Next, the intermediary centrality is obtained on the co-occurrence network created, and it is illustrated. Betweenness centrality is a valuable tool for understanding the relationships among significant words, phrases, or topics within text data, and for analyzing the flow and structure of information. Firstly, it facilitates the identification of crucial words and phrases. By employing betweenness centrality, one can pinpoint essential terms in a text that function as intermediaries, bridging connections between other words and phrases. This approach enables the recognition of words that are highly influential within a given context and identifies vocabulary that plays a central role in semantics.

Secondly, it aids in the extraction of key phrases and topics. By representing the connections between multiple words and phrases as a network and identifying nodes with high betweenness centrality, this method proves effective in isolating key phrases and significant topics within a document.

Thirdly, network analysis provides insights into the document's structure. By depicting entire sentences in graph form, where words are represented as nodes and their relationships (such as co-occurrence) as edges, one can elucidate the overall structure of a document and the interrelationships between concepts. Nodes with high betweenness centrality serve as "bridges," connecting disparate topics and contexts, thereby allowing for the extraction of pivotal elements.

4 Results

4.1 Presence or Absence of Buddhist Altars and Reporting to Superiors

In this study, the total number of valid responses was ($n = 66$). Among the respondents, 33 individuals reported having either a Buddhist altar or a kamidana in the

household where they were raised, while the remaining 33 indicated the absence of such religious artifacts in their upbringing environment.

| | | Report fraud to your boss | | Total |
|------------------------|-----|---------------------------|---------------|-------|
| | | Does it | Doesn't do it | |
| Buddhist altars | Yes | 22 | 11 | 33 |
| | No | 25 | 8 | 33 |
| | | 47 | 19 | |

In the survey, 47 percent of respondents indicated they would report misconduct to their superiors, while 19 percent stated they would not. Detailed data regarding this finding can be seen in Table 1. The statistical analysis yielded a chi-square value of $\chi^2 = 0.269$ with 1 degree of freedom and a p-value of 0.59, indicating no significant relationship between the ownership of a butsudan (Buddhist altar) and the respondents' willingness to report misconduct.

4.2 Differences in Expression

Subsequently, an analysis of the co-occurrence network was conducted. In this network, the size of each circle represented the frequency of occurrence, and the centrality strength indicated higher significance.

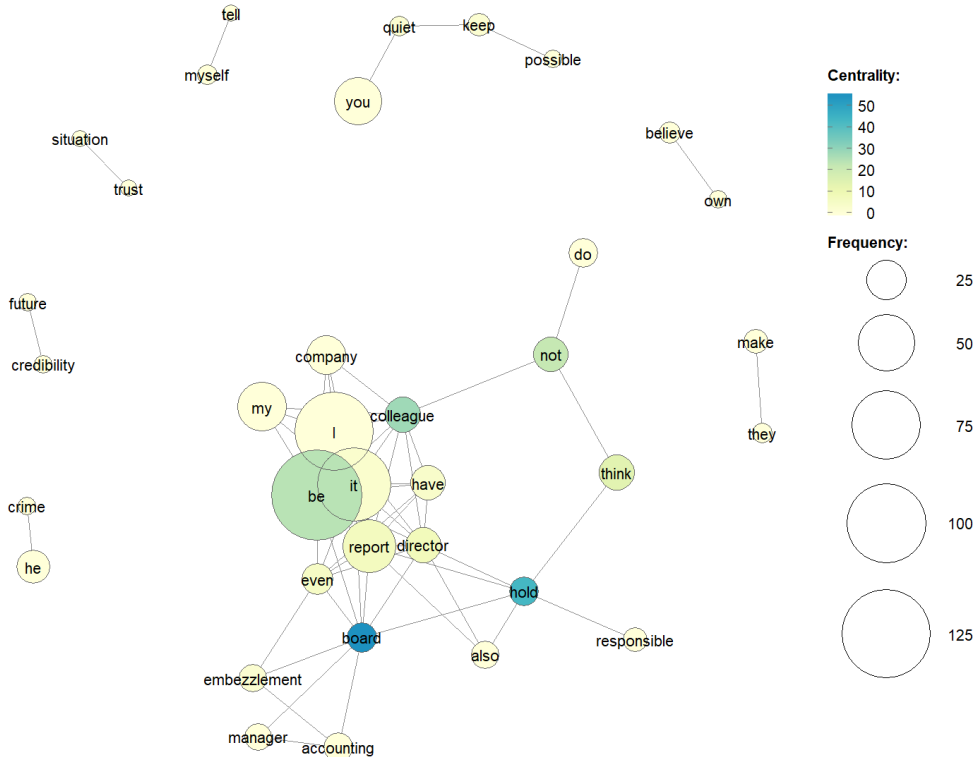


Figure 1. Presence of a Buddhist altar - Likely to report

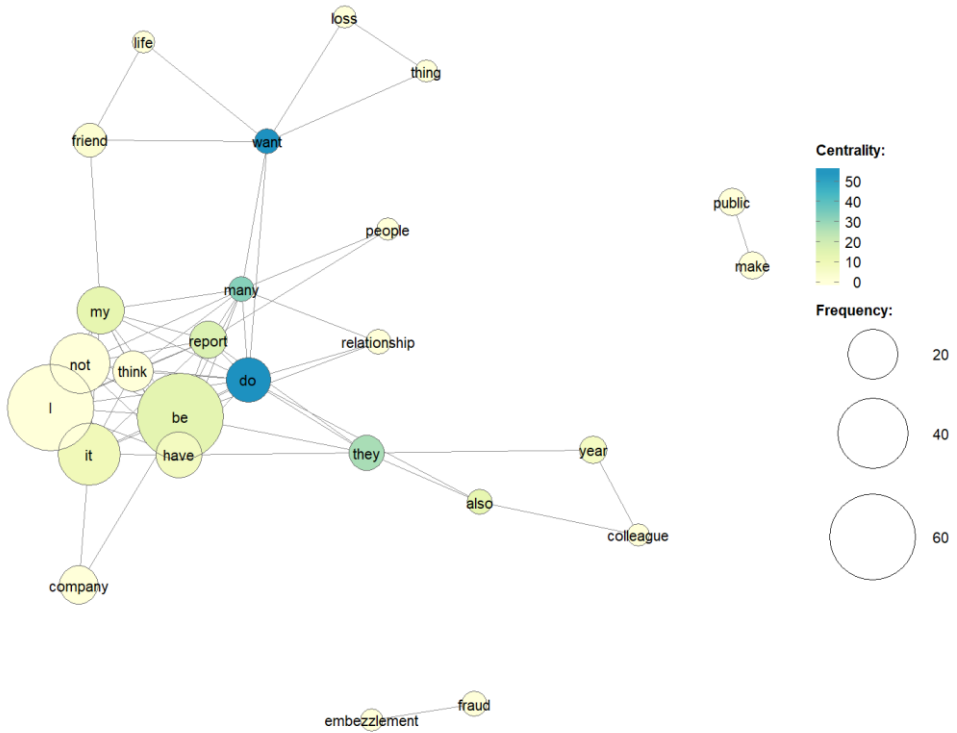


Figure 2. Presence of Buddhist altars - Unlikely to report

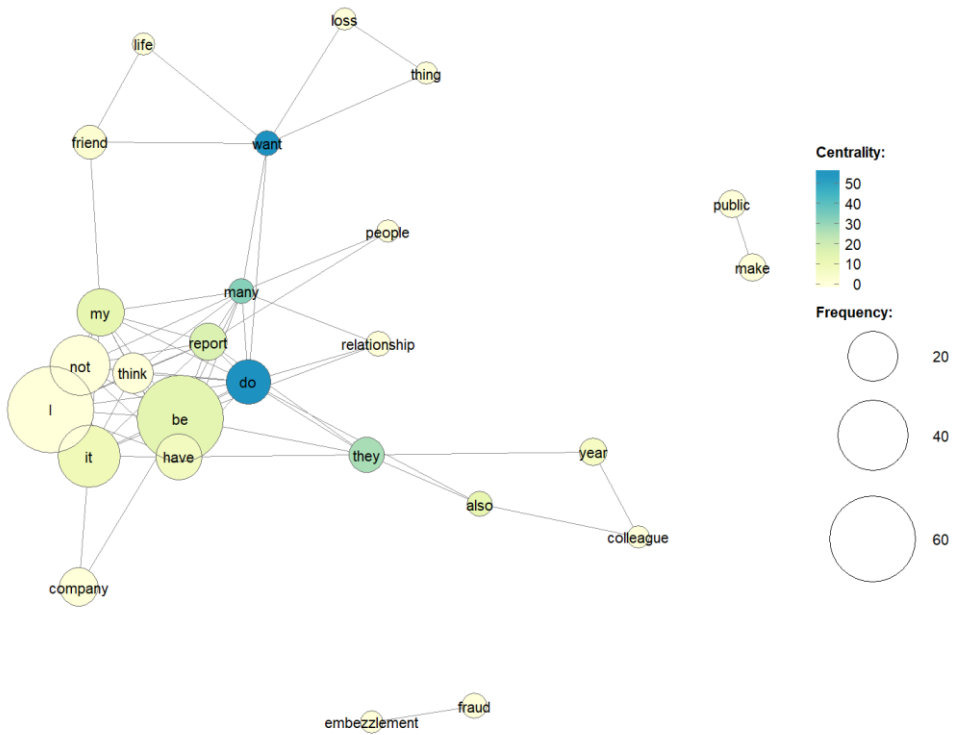


Figure 3. Absence of Butsudan - Likely to report

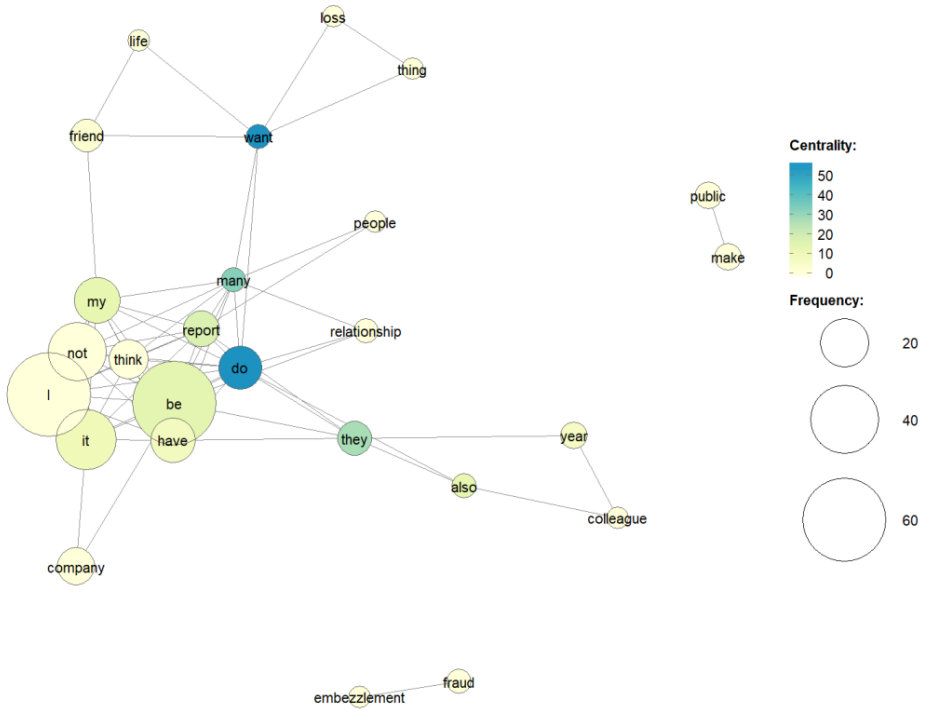


Figure 4. Absence of Buddhist altars - Unlikely to report

Table 1

| Range | Buddhist Altar present | | | | Buddhist altars not present | | | |
|-------|------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| | Report | | Doesn't report | | Report | | Doesn't report | |
| | Words | Number of times | Words | Number of times | Words | Number of times | Words | Number of times |
| 1 | be | 131 | be | 61 | be | 149 | I | 49 |
| 2 | I | 97 | I | 61 | I | 135 | be | 44 |
| 3 | it | 86 | it | 31 | it | 88 | it | 28 |
| 4 | report | 45 | not | 29 | my | 41 | report | 20 |
| 5 | my | 38 | my | 18 | report | 40 | he | 18 |
| 6 | you | 35 | have | 17 | colleague | 34 | not | 18 |
| 7 | company | 24 | do | 16 | company | 30 | colleague | 12 |
| 8 | colleague | 20 | think | 13 | he | 30 | my | 11 |
| 9 | director | 20 | company | 12 | you | 30 | they | 11 |
| 10 | think | 20 | report | 11 | have | 29 | embezzlement | 10 |
| 11 | have | 19 | they | 10 | not | 27 | do | 8 |
| 12 | not | 19 | friend | 9 | think | 22 | have | 8 |
| 13 | he | 17 | he | 7 | director | 19 | company | 7 |
| 14 | even | 15 | make | 6 | make | 19 | you | 7 |
| 15 | board | 14 | public | 6 | accounting | 18 | even | 6 |
| 16 | discover | 14 | year | 6 | do | 17 | think | 6 |
| 17 | accounting | 13 | also | 5 | embezzlement | 16 | director | 5 |
| 18 | do | 13 | fraud | 5 | manager | 15 | reason | 5 |

Although the ranking of keywords differs slightly, terms such as "report," "company," "colleague," and "director" prominently appear among those who indicated they would report an incident. This suggests that, for individuals employed under a

company contract, their primary focus is on their professional responsibilities, which consequently leads them to report fraudulent activities.

Notably, among the group with a Buddhist altar (butsudan) who chose not to report, the term "director" is absent from the top rankings, while "colleague" emerges as "Friend." This implies that the designation of "Friend" might hold more significance than the contractual relationship of "colleague" within the company. For these individuals, the emphasis lies not on their relationship with the company but rather on regional or community ties. This phenomenon parallels the concealment of crimes in closed societies, as discussed by Inaba (2017) and Kanemitsu and Inaba (2017).

5. Conclusion

In this experiment, there was no discernible difference between the presence or absence of a Buddhist altar and the propensity to report misconduct to a superior. Consequently, it is premature to assert that "the influence of Japanese religion on ethics is not significant." This conclusion is influenced by the correlation between age and religious faith, as noted by Zushi (2019). The subjects in this experiment may not necessarily practice religion, even if they were raised in religious households.

Moreover, there was no evidence of collectivism, as typically emphasized by Japanese business managers, regarding the focal points of employees' interests. While it is challenging to draw definitive conclusions from this study, the findings highlight important issues for future research and consideration.

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