

Friendships in the Japanese Language: Intersubjectivity through Mothering

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Introduction

My closest and most lasting friendships in the Japanese language have been with other mothers. The dramatic life event of raising a newborn in a different culture catapulted me into friendships that would have otherwise been unlikely. The intersubjectivity I shared with other mothers—of responding to a baby’s needs—transcended the enormous cross-cultural differences in childrearing. It provided me with an opportunity of interacting with people whom I would not otherwise have met. As an expatriate in Japan, I naturally gravitated to the company of other English-speaking expatriates, but the shared experience of mothering enabled me to form friendships with Japanese mothers too. My use of Japanese in these friendships concentrated on topics related to childrearing and was therefore distinct from friendships formed in the workplace. The friendships formed with Japanese mothers during the early years of mothering have outlasted many other friendships in Japanese, and they have permitted me to understand the lives of people in the wider society outside the confines of the university. Over twenty years later, I no longer need their advice about childrearing in Japan, but our friendship has lived on.

I begin with a discussion of the assumptions behind the English word “friend” and contrast it with the many equivalent words for “friend” in Japanese. The meaning of a “friend” in English is not identical in other languages, even in other European languages. I discuss how my Anglo notion of friendship intersected with my Japanese friends’ notions of friendship and how overlapping features in our respective notions of friendship helped us develop bonds that have transcended the narrower definitions of friendship in each culture. I came to learn what it means to be a friend in Japanese culture, and my Japanese friends might have come to understand what a friend is for an English speaker.

Next, I discuss the role of intersubjectivity in friendship. Jerome Bruner explains intersubjectivity to be “how humans developed the capacity to read the thoughts, intentions, beliefs, and mental states of their conspecifics in a culture” (174). Clearly, these qualities characterize the expectations of friendship. My Japanese friends shared their childrearing practices with me, and I came to understand their beliefs about mothering and to adjust my beliefs so that I could participate as a mother in their culture. I also discuss the importance of speaking a foreign language, Japanese, with other mothers, how Anglophones may be positioned as non-Japanese speakers in Japanese society, and how friendships with Japanese mothers enabled me to participate in the society in the local language.

Finally I provide an autobiographic narrative of the trajectory of my friendships with Japanese mothers mediated through the Japanese language. In the field of second language acquisition, Andrea Simon-Maeda argues that narrative inquiry can reveal the “unquantifiable, personal and socially interactive aspects of language experiences” (22). This observation could be generalized to include not just language experiences but also the topics of this discussion: friendship and motherhood.

Narratives of immigrants feature in Mary Besemeres and Anna Wierzbicka’s edited volume, in which they introduce the narratives of twelve immigrants to Australia. Explaining the rationale of these autobiographies, they explain: “Until recently, it was widely assumed in both scholarly literature and popular wisdom that valid knowledge can come only from objective study of external reality. Because of this assumption, some subjects of profound human interest and of great social importance could not be explored in depth and discussed in

wide-reaching societal conversation” (xv). Narrative is a means of exploring experiences that remain closed to the tools of scientific analysis—whether it be immigrant experiences or how the shared experience of motherhood fosters intercultural friendships. Aneta Pavlenko explains the strengths of autobiographic narratives in terms of the object of the study becoming the subject and the subject being granted agency. She warns that such narratives are not the sole property of the protagonist but are co-constructed according to the subject’s interlocutors, the time and the place, as well as the language choices of the narrator. Accordingly, in the following narrative, I, the subject, reflect on the object: my friendships with Japanese mothers.

What Is Friendship in English?

The linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1997) argues that the English word “friendship” is an Anglo cultural construct and not a language universal: “This reliance on the word *friendship*, as if it were a label for a pre-existing fact, betrays an absolutization of this Anglo concept” (34). She warns that other languages may not have the lexical equivalents of “friend” and “friendship.” Even the lexical equivalents of “friend” in European languages are not identical to the English word. Furthermore, the meaning of “friendship” has varied across the history of its usage in the English language. According to Wierzbicka, the classical meaning of a “friend ship” in English referred to a slowly developing and lasting relationship, and collocations with the word “friend” included “faithful friend,” “steadfast friend,” and “old friend” (38). In the former usage, a friend was someone who was considered beloved, for whom one performed good deeds; other collocations included “sweet friends,” “loving friends,” and “dearest friends.” In contrast, in modern English, friends expect to be liked rather than loved, and they are companions when doing fun activities (39).

Wierzbicka continues to contrast the lexical semantics of “friend” in classical and modern English, and she suggests that the classical meaning implied that one could confide in the friend, as is expressed in the collocation in older English “bosom friend.” In modern usage, one may have fifty friends, but it would be unlikely that one would share confidences with fifty people. Wierzbicka explains that the older concept of friend implied an exclusive relationship. In contemporary usage, the

expression “circle of friends” implies that one is in the centre of a circle of people with whom one shares unilateral relations in “a multiplicity of people related in an analogous way to a central figure” (45). Furthermore, Wierzbicka identifies the expression “to make friends,” which refers to the practice of actively seeking multiple such relationships. This expression only emerged in modern English and reflects human relationships in the contemporary Anglosphere. Formerly the collocations “finding a friend” and “choosing a friend” were common and implied a selective and discriminating process, whereas the current collocation “making friends: implies less exclusivity and a focus on having many friends. Wierzbicka explains that the older usage of “friends: is still present for those who are familiar with English literature and the culture of times past.

A recent volume by Deborah Tannen provides a nuanced view of women’s friendships, and begins with the following opening sentence: “Best friend, good friend, close friend, good strong friend, bestie bestie, to-to core friend, close close friend, very very very very close friend, bff, my sweet angel from heaven” (ix). Tannen interviewed over eighty women for her study and indicates that the range of words they used to describe the friends they cherish to be without limit. She describes one of the benefits of friendship as to be given entrance into a different world, when the family backgrounds of the friends differ. This is especially the case with intercultural friendship; my Japanese friends have been my gateway to Japanese culture.

What Is Friendship in Japanese?

Next, I explore the understanding of friendship in Japanese, and compare and contrast it with its modern English equivalent. Wierzbicka explains the range of words for “friend” in Japanese: *shinyu* approximates “close friends”; *tomodachi* is close to “friend”; *yujin* is a formal equivalent of *tomodachi*; *nakama* refers to the crowd one hangs out with; *nominakama* are the friends one drinks with; *asobinakama* are those one plays with; and *shigotonakama* are those one works with (35). Wierzbicka argues that “each such word reflects assumptions and values characteristic of Japanese culture and absent from the less differentiated English concept of friend” (35).

A recent addition to this list is the word *mamatomo*. This is a special

word describing the phenomenon of women who become friends through the shared experience of mothering. The first part of the word *mama* means “mother,” and the second, *tomo*, means “friend.” There is no English equivalent of *mamatomo*, although the phenomenon will be familiar to English-speaking mothers too. The fact that this experience has a label is indicative of its salience in Japanese. The bonding through the shared experience of mothering can be so powerful that I argue it can be extended to intercultural friendships between mothers. The word *mamatomo* came to my attention in an authentic setting as I was writing this chapter. I was introducing an American friend to a Japanese professor and explaining that she had been my first friend in this city. I told her that despite our age differences our children were the same ages: twenty and twenty-three. The Japanese professor summed this up in one word: *mamatomo*. *Mamatomo* can transcend age differences because different women have children at different ages and develop bonds with one another when their children are in the same class. Similarly, *Japan Today* explains the word *Mamatomo* as referring to groups of women who bond when their preschoolers are in the same class. It describes the pressures of conformity these groups may impose on their members, such as purchasing the same handbag or ordering a drink at a restaurant. Clearly, the pressure of conformity is not confined to Japan and has also been identified in the U.S.: “Decisions about what to wear, like decisions about what to say, are reflections of who you are, so sameness with another can be deeply reassuring” (Tannen 82). Nevertheless, the degree of the pressure to conform is greater for *mamatomo* than for English-speaking friends; the latter does not extend to the pressure to conform in such detailed ways, such as the choice of handbags or drink.

In the following narrative, I cannot pretend to have participated as a Japanese member of a *mamatomo* group. I have always been well aware of my position as an outsider, a foreigner. One of the benefits of being perceived as foreign is that sometimes (but not always) one is exempt from the expectation of conforming to group norms, and this is known as the “*gaijin card*” (Simon-Maeda). It was a novel experience to participate in a group of *mamatomo* and attend the round of organized gatherings at restaurants, the homes of the members, or different excursions, but my foreigner status generally exempted me from an unwelcome pressure to conform, as I explain.

Similarly to Wierzbicka, the scholar of Japanese culture Jiri Neustupny highlights the informal nature of friendship in the Anglo-sphere and warns English-speakers not to extend the English language definition of friendship to the Japanese context. Neustupny identifies the casual nature of friendship for English speakers and notes that interlocutors may use first names at a party. In Japanese, even the most superficial friendship develops after more extended contact than this, and deeper friendships arise from growing up or working together over a long time. In English, people of varying ages or status can be friends but cannot qualify as *tomodachi* in Japanese. However Neustupny explains that the strict conventions of friendship may be suspended in relationships with foreigners. For example, the duration for forming a friendship may be shortened, and the age difference may be disregarded. However Neustupny cautions foreigners against being too hasty in forming a friendship if the Japanese person appears uncomfortable.

Speakers do not carry on a conversation unaware of the listener. The presence of a foreigner is an example of language contact, and speakers adjust themselves according to their perception of the listener. Lisa Fairbrother explains “many Japanese native speakers seem to expect non-native speakers to be *more* different and *more* foreign than they actually are” (130). She indicates that contact norms for communication with English speakers are more lenient than with foreigners from other countries. Some intercultural contact may involve the Japanese interlocutor approximating the English concept of a “friend” when relating to English speakers. Intercultural contact may be a two-way process in which both parties converge to form a friendship that suits their particular relationship.

Intersubjectivity and Friendship

Bruner provides a simple and elegant explanation of intersubjectivity: “how people come to know what others have in mind and how they adjust accordingly” (161). He argues that a common language and traditions foster the mutual expectations that underlie intersubjectivity. If this notion is extended to the experience of foreign mothers living in Japan, it implies that knowledge of the Japanese language and culture by the foreign mother will facilitate intersubjectivity with Japanese mothers. One important source of intersubjectivity is linguistics.

Pavlenko describes the stages involved in achieving intersubjectivity in another language: “we have to internalize new interpretive frames and to readjust the salience of already existing ones, learning, once again, what frames to use, with whom, how, and when” (227). In contrast, she explains that differing social circles, genders, generations, social hierarchies, and epistemologies (for academics) may constitute reasons for intersubjectivity not being achieved (227).

Whether intersubjectivity can be achieved without friendship is beyond the scope of this discussion, but some degree of intersubjectivity is necessary for friendship to develop. As Daniel Stern explains “in most of our modern Western conceptions of love and friendship, intersubjectivity is perhaps *the* indispensable element” (102). Stern contrasts this with other societies (which he does not specify), where intersubjectivity is achieved through belonging to the group rather than through dyadic conversations.

Intersubjectivity, Caring, and Motherhood

I suggest that the experience of motherhood can be a powerful source of intersubjectivity between mothers. Across a range of cultures, women share many common experiences through the practice of motherhood. When these experiences are shared and intersubjectivity arises, the result is often friendship, even when the mothers come from divergent cultures.

Another quality that supersedes cultural notions of friendship is caring. The act of caring is a universal instinct. Nel Noddings argues the following: “the impulse to act in behalf of the present other is itself innate. It lies latent in each of us, awaiting gradual development in a succession of caring relations” (83).

Neustupny explains that the expectation of a *tomodachi* is to help. The act of helping clearly arises out of the drive to care for another. Similarly, in old English, the notion of “friend” included the assumption of helping the other in times of adversity; one helps those whom one loves in such times. In modern usage, friends may be numerous and are liked rather than loved; it is those who love rather than those who like who will be counted on in times of adversity (Wierzbicka 40).

Why Is It hard to Speak Japanese in Japan?

Tannen advises the following: “It’s natural—for people as well as parrots—to prefer the company of those who will understand us when we talk, and whose talk we can easily understand” (76). Arguably, the practice of speaking Japanese with someone perceived to be an English speaker is a novel experience for many Japanese, and there is a perception by many that Japanese people should address those they perceive to be English speakers in English, even those of long-term residence. An American scholar working in Japan, Simon-Maeda, describes how she imagines she is perceived by Japanese speakers when she speaks Japanese to them, who “in turn go through their own discombobulating mind shift when communicating with a red-haired, fair-skinned, definitely non-Japanese individual who speaks *Nagoyaben* (Nagoya dialect)” (23). Meryl Siegal also explains the low expectations that Japanese may hold of the Japanese language ability of Westerners, and Adam Komisarof argues that many of his Western interviewees, who are long-term residents of Japan, “are stymied when Japanese behave as if there is an unbridgeable cultural distance between them, as it carries the implication that they can never be fully accepted in Japanese society” (186). Accordingly, speaking Japanese in Japan has been a considerable barrier for me because I am readily perceived as an English speaker (Stephens).

My Japanese Friends

I use both the old and modern definitions of friendship in English, provided by Wierzbicka, to describe my friendships, although my Japanese friends will have brought their own cultural interpretation of friendship to our relationship. My individual friends remained steadfast during times of adversity, and our friendships stood the test of time. They are firstly Mieko and Yukie, who befriended me in one of the neediest times in my life, when I found myself in a foreign country with a newborn baby. The second individual friend is Professor Kutani, who has an office opposite me in the university and who continues to support me in my professional life, even though our research interests do not intersect.

After describing my individual friends, I describe my circle of friends, who conformed to Wierzbicka’s definition of friendship in

modern English; they were a group of friends with whom it was fun to do shared activities, but we gradually lost contact with each other due to geographical mobility, distance, and time. We achieved intersubjectivity as members of a *mamatomo* group, and our bond may be explained in terms of Stern's comment of how intersubjectivity in other cultures may be achieved by being members of a group.

Mieko

I made my acquaintance with Mieko when my elder daughter Eloise was a newborn and I had newly arrived in the city of Takasago, where I had no acquaintances. Seven weeks after giving birth to Eloise, I flew to the newly opened Kansai Airport near Osaka to start my life as a first-time mother in a foreign land. After the long drive to our apartment, I discovered that we had to ascend the external staircase with no handrails. The excitement of relocation was short lived. Within days, I had adjusted to the rhythm of caring for a baby in a foreign land with no friends or relatives on hand. My husband Roland departed for work every morning, and I had no incentive to change out of my dressing-gown; I spent days in the apartment wondering what lay beyond the apartment walls. Gazing outside the window, I looked beyond the station and noticed what appeared to be a miniature town. Cars encircled the square along neat little roads from dawn till dusk. I longed to be part of a community, and wondered how to safely descend the stairs without the handrails with my baby. Finally, I decided to take the pram downstairs first and then to retrieve Eloise, and I gingerly carried her downstairs. I was free from the confines of the concrete apartment and ventured around the station to the town I have been longing to discover. Only it was not a town; it was a driving school. Japanese driving schools were designed to resemble a neat little village, and the community I had imagined did not exist.

Suddenly stripped of a car, and being reliant on walking and public transport, was daunting, especially with the additional responsibility of caring for a newborn. I pondered on my journey into this new life with no car, no permission to work, to a town where I had no family other than my spouse or friends. I was too proud to admit failure and was stoic by nature, so I resolved to put up with these deprivations as long as I could. Thankfully, I was saved by kind neighbours, who recognized my plight and anticipated my needs. Mieko was the sister-in-law of my

hairdresser. She had three primary school children and intuitively anticipated the practical difficulties I was facing. Even though she did not speak English, she lacked the reluctance to engage with foreigners that other people sometimes exhibited. This provided me with an entrance into the local community and an opportunity to gain relief from perceiving myself as the “other.”

Fairbrother explains that in Japan, foreigners from different countries of origin display different degrees of foreignness and that English speakers are perceived to be the most foreign (147). Clearly, the perception of a newcomer as the “other: is experienced by migrants all over the world. Eva Hoffmann details the trials of migration from Poland to Canada in her classic memoir *Lost in Translation*. She continues on this theme in *The New Nomads* (1999), in which she describes the trial of being positioned as the “other,” referring to “certain hazardous syndromes of the exiled stance: that this posture, if maintained too long, allows people to conceive of themselves as perpetually Other” (55). I found resonance in Hoffmann’s observations to my situation as an English speaker in Japan, but finally I had found a friend who was tolerant of my accented and slow Japanese, was patient enough to recast expressions I did not understand, and was not deterred speaking in Japanese to me despite my improbable appearance.

Citing Haru Yamada’s work, Tannen contrasts displays of friendships by American and Japanese women; Haru’s American friend showed caring by listening to Haru’s feelings, whereas her Japanese friend showed caring by her practical efforts to solve difficulties. In the beginning of our friendship, Mieko demonstrated caring when she helped me. First, she noticed that I would have trouble going shopping without a car and having a newborn baby. She would regularly pick me up in her car for shopping trips. Second, she stepped in to provide the babysitting I needed when venturing out to teach English, albeit without a work permit, to make ends meet. Furthermore, I was a fussy eater and did not wish to cook rice daily as our staple. Mieko had a bread machine and would bake loaves of bread and the send her son to our apartment to hang them on the outside door handle for us.

Not only did Mieko provide me with practical help, she also confided her troubles in me. Because it was easier for me to listen than to speak Japanese, I spent many hours listening to these family sagas. Finally, Mieko wrote a blog in Japanese of her extraordinary story and

attracted a range of readers in distant cities in Japan. In my experience, Japanese friends do not restrict acts of caring to practical help but include discussion of personal problems in the same way that English-speaking friends do.

Yukie

The second friend to come to my rescue was Yukie. We had caught each other's attention one day when we happened to be in the same carriage in the local train and admired each other's toddlers. One day at the end of December, she appeared on my doorstep with a citrus fruit called *yuzu* in hand and told me of the custom of adding *yuzu* to the bathwater at the time of the winter solstice. She exhibited the generosity common to many Japanese people. She would often arrive at my doorstep with clothes for Eloise that she had managed to find at bargain prices. Her son was a year older than Eloise and we would take our toddlers out to children's playgrounds in shopping centres, which provided me with some relief from the monotony of being trapped in my apartment. When I returned to Australia, she would send me boxes of clothes for Eloise and my newborn daughter Annika. After relocating to another city in Japan, she kept sending me boxes of the kinds of unique Japanese foodstuffs I showed interest in, such as spinach-flavoured potato chips, soybean chips, and individually wrapped tiny dried fish. When my great-nephews were born she would send me children's toys featuring pictures of Pokémon for them. I have been receiving such parcels from Yukie for twenty years. Yukie works hard at her night shift at the supermarket, and I did not take for granted the many boxes of delicacies that I received from her over the years.

Mothers of Kindergarteners

Stern describes how participation in joint activities can result in intersubjectivity: "the participation in rituals, artistic performances, spectacles, and communal activities like dancing and singing together all can result in transient (real or imagined) intersubjective contact" (109). In my experience as the mother of kindergartners, I regularly participated in a wide range of rituals and events for parents. The kindergarten year began with an entrance ceremony. Parents and children dressed formally and assembled with their children to pose for the group

photograph. Other annual events were excursions, children's performances, and Sports Day. Parents, usually mothers, were assigned roles during these events.

I found myself befriended by a group of mothers of girls and boys in the same class as my younger daughter, Annika. This was my entrance into a group of *mamatomo*. We went out to lunch together during the day when our children were at kindergarten, visited each other's homes, and sang karaoke some evenings. We shared the experience of being mothers of children in the same class and being taught by the same teacher. No one ever tried to address me in English or frame me as a foreign visitor. I became a member of the in-group, and it was so satisfying not to be positioned as an outsider. All of the other mothers were housewives, some of them working part time, and I was the only one teaching at a university. None of them expressed more than a passing interest in my status as a university teacher. Rather, our discussion centred on our children's lives at kindergarten. We exchanged gossip about the kindergarten staff and other mothers, reinforcing our group solidarity. In contrast to my positioning as an English-speaker in my professional life, in my friendship with other mothers of children at Annika's kindergarten, I was not excluded on the grounds of being an English speaker. We shared the experience of sending our children off to kindergarten in the mornings, preparing a daily *obento* packed lunch, and participating in school events. My role as a mother was similar to theirs, and the issue of my foreignness and speaking Japanese with an accent was inconsequential.

I did resist the pressure to conform on some occasions. There was a gathering at a local restaurant one evening, by which time our children had graduated from kindergarten and I had moved to another city. I visited other friends in the city one weekend, and on a chance meeting with one of the mothers, I was strongly advised to attend the restaurant gathering. Circumstances did not permit me to attend, but it continued to puzzle me for years later why my attendance was deemed so important. The expectations of allegiance to the group of mothers appeared to be stronger than groups that with groups of friends in my own country who had drifted apart over different life stages.

Another area where my foreign background did cause me difficulties was my struggle to provide an aesthetically pleasing *obento* each day (Stephens). One of the mothers encouraged me and suggested I make an

obento in the form of a Japanese flag—that is, a bed of rice with an *umeboshi* pickled plum in the centre. I knew that many women rose at 5:00 a.m. to make elaborate *obentos* for their family members, and I was glad to be accepted despite my resistance to conform to local norms to that degree. Despite being challenged in the culinary domain, I derived a secret pleasure that my profession as a university teacher and my foreignness were no obstacle to my becoming a group member.

Professor Kutani

Finally, even as our children have become independent, my friendships forged through the shared experience of motherhood remain strong. My closest friend in academia is historian Professor Kutani, mother of two sons. Professor Kutani singlehandedly relieved me of the isolation imposed at the workplace where I was positioned as an English-speaking foreigner. Not only am I foreign, I am also a long-term resident of Japan, a mother, and a writer. Being positioned as an English-speaking foreigner was oppressive because I was often cast as an outsider. Ingrid Piller explains the importance people attach to national identity, despite other aspects of identity being performed simultaneously and also at different times in our life trajectory. She critiques the practice of banal nationalism, in which national identity is deemed to be of such importance that other aspects of identity become invisible (59). The friendship with Professor Kutani enabled the otherwise invisible aspects of my identity to come to the fore.

English is considered an important and desirable ability in Japan, and being an English speaker gave me many privileges. Nevertheless, being addressed in Japanese gave me an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging to the local community. Because of my Western appearance, students and staff often addressed me in English, and it was tiring for me to constantly challenge the assumption that I was a monolingual English speaker. The one member of staff in an institution of thousands who took the trouble to include me in the Japanese speaking community by addressing me in the local language was Professor Kutani.

Because she was a senior figure in a hierarchical institution and society, I was reluctant to impose on her. Nevertheless, she would knock on my door to introduce me to the delights of Japanese culture and history, and invite me to events at the museum. She bathed me in a sea of

language, which provided a springboard for me to respond freely in Japanese. She had the generosity to share her language and culture with me as well as the belief that this was a treasure worth sharing. After indulging in this wave of Japanese, I recovered from my sense of being an English-speaking commodity and was able to summon the inner resources to be generous to others with my native English linguistic skills.

Professor Kutani's specialization is the Edo period, but this has not stopped her from supporting me in writing grant submissions to pursue research in my subject area, applied linguistics. My weakness in Japanese literacy deters me from applying for research grants. Similarly, Simon-Maeda complains of "not being able to function at a level of literacy comparable to one's professional status" (108). The most helpful and willing colleague to assist me overcome my battles with Japanese literacy is Professor Kutani. Despite applied linguistics being outside her area of specialization, she has organized a committee for me of academics from other specializations who can contribute to a common research goal. She has even provided the impetus for us to begin a research group in applied linguistics. She is confident that our application for a grant will be successful. After a recent meeting, she shared her real research interest with the research group. She produced an original manuscript from the Edo period—a story which had been written with a brush on a scroll—and informed us that her greatest excitement was the times when she was free to read these manuscripts. Although this was her real passion, she made the time to create a research group based on my interests, to enlist the support of other scholars, and to draft and submit my grant application in Japanese.

Lack of Friendship

These friends stand out in my memory because they overcame the obstacles posed by my otherness. There were other mothers I met through kindergartens and schools who suddenly excluded me from a circle of mothers after using me as an opportunity to make other friends or viewed me as an opportunity to practice their English. Even solid friendships may be characterized by ruptures. All relationships are ambivalent, and sometimes being hurt is likely in all friendships (Tannen). The friendships with Mieko, Yukie, the kindergarten moth-

ers, and Professor Kutani, sometimes suffered friction due to misunderstandings, but the reason their stories are recounted here is that they reached out to befriend me because of my plight as a mother without an extended family in a foreign country. For us, the intersubjectivity arising from the shared experience of motherhood was stronger than the lack of intersubjectivity deriving from our dissimilar cultural backgrounds.

Conclusions

These friends reached beyond the boundaries of Japanese notions of friendship. None of them was the same age or status as me; they ranged from ten years younger to five years older, and their jobs ranged from a supermarket shift worker to a university professor. There was even more variation in ages and status than in my English-language friendships. The shared experiences of bearing and raising children were powerful enough to overcome cultural differences in these matters.

Not having the knowledge of the different notions of friendship in different cultures at the time, I behaved according to my Anglo concept of friendship by initiating conversations about problems (Tannen). In the beginning of our friendship, my Japanese friends behaved according to their own concepts of friendship, which involve physical and practical acts of kindness and generosity, and I was surprised to receive so many presents even when there was no particular occasion. As we spent more time together, we began to disclose personal problems and share confidences in a similar way to English-language friendships. The shared experience of motherhood became the impetus for participating in the wider society outside of the university. This enabled me to forge close friendships with Japanese mothers who helped me in times of adversity.

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