

# Cultural barriers in educational evaluation: A comparative study on school report cards in Japan and Germany<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper discusses cultural barriers in educational assessment by comparing Japanese and German school report cards. The discussions on assessment fluctuate between two intellectual extremes: objectified selection or educational diagnosis. In Japan, many teachers make written comments on school report cards with ambiguous expressions to avoid negatively motivating their students. German school report cards, on the other hand, are objective, but may cause pressure through their focus on marks. An analysis of examples of German and Japanese report cards reveals that Japanese report cards give priority to educational diagnosis while German report cards focus on objective selection. It depends on the culture and, in particular, cultural barriers as to which dimension is given priority. A cultural barrier is unique to people of the same cultural group. Japanese cultural barriers are characterised by concern for others' emotions and as such they prefer to use indirect communication. German cultural barriers, in contrast, are characterised by honesty which makes it difficult to report anything but the truth. Therefore, it can be difficult for Germans to flatter by distorting the truth.*

Japan, Germany, cultural barrier, evaluation, assessment, school report card, objectified selection; educational diagnosis

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to consider cultural barriers in Japan and Germany in educational assessment by comparing Japanese and German school report cards.

Traditionally, the discussions on assessment of the students have moved between between two intellectual extremes: objectified selection or educational diagnosis (Jürgens and Sacher, 2000; Scheckenhofer, 1975). Objectified selection is a dimension of assessment requested by a given society; while in educational assessment, the education system is required to select the students for the future division of labour, especially as the labour market needs excellent workers. Therefore, a clear distinction in the achievements between students is needed if this dimension has priority. Educational diagnosis is another dimension of assessment that students need in order to monitor their own progress. Without assessment, students are unable to identify their performance and make progress. If this dimension has priority, more detailed information about the students

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should be provided. I am sure that these two dimensions may be well-balanced, but the priority given to a particular dimension differs between countries and it is significantly influenced by culture. Therefore, I must assume that cultures – particularly cultural barriers – are reflected in the students' attitude toward assessment at school.

By Nakayama's (2004) definition, a cultural barrier in this context is a framework that unconsciously influences our ways of thinking and feeling since people's ways of thinking generally depend on their own culture. The Japanese are restricted by their own language and culture. Nakayama calls these cultural restrictions the 'barriers of Japanese people'. This situation can be similarly recognised not only in Japan but also in many other countries in the world, including Germany. In fact, the German people are also restricted by their own language and culture. The significance of this study is to try to identify some of the invisible cultural barriers that exist in Japan and Germany.

These cultural barriers are reflected in various assessments at school, and the essence of those assessments is normally summarised on the school report card. Ideally, the school report card should visibly identify all of the most important parameters of educational assessment at school. Through the school report card, all the participants in the education process – teachers, parents and students – communicate aspects with each other about the assessment process at school. This communication plays an extremely important role in the education of children, and also has definitive meaning in the larger societal context. In this paper, therefore, Japanese and German cultural barriers are examined by comparing the school report cards as modes of communication in these two countries.

This paper focuses only on school report cards used for third to ninth graders, because school report cards for first and second graders have different formats and forms. The school report cards beyond tenth grade are also disregarded because students are no longer under compulsory education.

## OUTLINE OF THE SCHOOL REPORT CARDS IN JAPAN AND GERMANY

### Comparison of the Systems

In Japan, there are three documents used to record the achievements of students: the cumulative guidance record (*Shidoyoroku*), the confidential report (*Chosasho/Naishinsho*), and the school report card (*Tsushinbo*). The cumulative guidance record is an official document whose contents are regulated by the *MECSST* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and each regional board of education. It is the official record of all the school documents. The confidential report is also an official document that contains a candidate's records for admission from lower school to high school (for example, from junior high school or high school), and for new students' selection to higher education, that is, to high school or university. On the other hand, the school report card is a private document that each school voluntarily composes just for the families of students (Kajita, 1999).

The Japanese school report card is an unofficial document. It is used to communicate between the school and the family (Tanaka, 2004). Through the school report card, the school reports the academic achievements of students to their parents at the end of each school term. In this way the school asks students to reflect on their present situation in order to motivate themselves towards academic improvement (Kajita, 1999).

The school report card has two characteristics: first, it is a private, voluntary document and, second, it is the only document through which the students and their parents can learn about their children's achievements at school. The contents of the cumulative guidance record and the confidential report are not revealed to pupils and their parents and form part of the documentation about students that is kept confidential within school records (Ishida, 2002).

The German school report card (*Schulzeugnis*), on the other hand, is an official document on which the school records the academic achievements of each student in a summarised form at the end of each school term. In Germany, each of the 16 federal state governments has its own school systems, but the grading system has been unified in legislation according a resolution passed at the *KMK (Kultusministerkonferenz: a meeting of state Ministers of Education)* on October 3, 1968 (Schaub and Zenke, 1995).

The German system of school report cards has three characteristics. First, the school report card is an official document that must be completed according to government laws and official regulations. The contents of an official document can not be changed or deleted after the document is completed and signed by the principal and the classroom teacher (Schaub and Zenke, 1995). Second, the school report card is not only an official record of assessment at school but also a certificate used to enter the next grade; for recommendations about the type of school, either academic or vocational; a child should attend after primary school; or for finding a job. Parents may request the school to release all the information about the achievements of their children at school (Rebitzki, 2003). The original report card belongs to the students and the school keeps a copy of it. Finally, the contents of the school report cards should be completed before the official conference on the school report card (*Zeugniskonferenz*), which consists of the teachers and representatives of the parents and students (Rebitzki, 2003).

### Japanese Ways of Assessment

In Japan, the official record of the school report card is the cumulative guidance record. Thus, the content and form of the school report card are constructed in accordance with this document (NIER, 2003). The assessment presented on the Japanese cumulative guidance record has been conceived to be the basis for the Japanese school report cards (MECSST, 2001).

The assessment on the cumulative guidance record consists of the evaluation of the academic achievements and behaviour of the students, and notes written by the teacher (MECSST, 2001). The assessment of the academic achievements occurs in two forms: the marks on the assessment criteria for each subject and the general mark for the subjects.

These are the marks for the sub-components for each of the subjects. Achievements are evaluated in the three-tiered rank system, according to the goals stated in the national curriculum (NIER, 2003):

- 'A/3' = 'satisfactory',
- 'B/2' = 'almost satisfactory',
- 'C/1' = 'needs effort'.

For the overall mark for a subject, achievements at primary school (from the first to sixth grade) also evaluated in the three-tiered system. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

In junior high school, the achievements are assessed in a five-tiered ranking system:

- '5' = 'high level of very satisfactory achievement',
- '4' = 'very satisfactory',
- '3' = 'almost satisfactory',
- '2' = 'needs. effort',
- '1' = 'needs special effort'.

In the assessment of student behaviour, which may be unique to Japan, the personality of students is assessed according to the teachers' observations throughout school life. On the school report card, there are assessment items such as fundamental lifestyle (for example: greetings, putting one's affairs in order, personal health, independence, responsibility, creativity, cooperativeness, kindness to animals or nature, volunteer spirit, fairness, and sense of public morality) (NIER,

2003; MECSST, 2001). For the behaviours of students, a 'circle' is drawn next to each item on the school report cards as shown in Figure 1.

Evaluation of Achievements						
Contents and Achievements of Learning		General Mark	satisfactory	almost satisfactory	needs effort	
Japanese	S/he is interested in Japanese language and tries to express appropriately and read many books.	2		○		
	S/he can understand and express the most important points through summarizing the story.			○		
	S/he can write fully worked-out structures of the sentences in order to be understood by others what S/he wants to say.				○	
	S/he can understand the focus of the contents and read aloud with stress.		○			
	S/he can deal well with the Kanji dictionary and understand the basis of the sentence structure or the orthography exactly.				○	
	S/he takes care of the size and arrangement of the characters and can write them orderly.					○
Social Studies	S/he is interested in the activities for health and tries to work actively.	2		○		
	S/he thinks of the relationship between the activities for health and daily life, and can also judge appropriately.			○		
	S/he can research the activities for health and present the consequence clearly.		○			
	S/he learns the means or efforts for keeping the health and understand the meaning with the life.			○		
Mathematics	S/he is interested in mathematics and tries to learn actively.	3		○		
	S/he can read and write the big numbers (e.g. million, billion) and understand the construction.			○		
	S/he can understand the characteristics of a circle or sphere and draw a circle.			○		
	S/he understands the rules of the division and can calculate easy divisions on paper.			○		
	S/he can calculate (2-figure number) * (3-figure number) : (1-figure number) on paper.			○		
	S/he can regulate and read the data from two aspects.		○			
Science	S/he is interested in nature and tries to use in life what S/he has already learned.	1		○		
	S/he understands the activities and the situations of the growth of animals and plants, which are active especially in spring and summer.		○			
	S/he understands the effect of electricity through learning the effects of a dry battery or photoelectric cell.				○	
	S/he learns the characteristics of the stars and understands the position change of them according to the time.		○			
Music	S/he is interested in music and tries to learn it actively.	2		○		
	S/he can feel the variety of phrases, stresses and tempoes and find how to express or appreciate music.			○		
	S/he can sing songs in a natural voice and play the instruments taking care of tones.			○		
	S/he takes care of the characteristics of melodies and can listen to the music feeling the variety of the concept.			○		
Art	S/he tries to enjoy sculpture actively and appreciate its pleasure.	2		○		
	S/he is creative and can design a work considering the beauty and purposes of use.			○		
	S/he can fully show his/her own talents and expressions.			○		
	S/he can appreciate artistic works with interest in good points, beauty and difference of the feeling.			○		
Sports	S/he tries to observe the rules and to enjoy exercising in cooperation with friends.	3		○		
	S/he can enjoy jumping higher with the secure form.		○			
	S/he tries to make his/her skill better and can enjoy the gymnastics.			○		
	S/he can enjoy swimming through expanding the distance or trying new forms.		○			
Notes	S/he understands growth of the body.			○		
	Your strong point is making friends. You can relay joyful topics about yourself to others. I think it is really wonderful!					

continued...

Figure 1. An example of Japanese primary school report card

Points		Points of the behavior evaluation								
		First Term			Second Term			Third Term		
		satisfactory	almost satisfactory	needs effort	satisfactory	almost satisfactory	needs effort	satisfactory	almost satisfactory	needs effort
1	S/he listens to what others say calmly.									
2	S/he forgets nothing at home which S/he should take to school.			o						
3	S/he puts his/her affairs in order and deal with everything carefully.									
4	S/he can actively express his/her own opinion.	o								
5	S/he carry out everything to completion.									
6	S/he works his/her duty for homeroom voluntary.									
7	S/he can put himself/herself in others' place.	o								
8	S/he is careful of his/her language and greets politely.									

No circle always means "almost satisfactory".

**Figure 1. Continued**

In the notes, teachers describe how students behave at school. Included are comments about their personal characteristics and abilities as well as their voluntary activities outside the school. These commendations are also written in the school report cards (NIER, 2003; MECSSST, 2001). Moreover, no student repeats a class in Japan and all students can go to the next grade automatically, because the attendance is more important for promotion than the achievement made. In fact, the academic achievements should be controlled through the competitive entrance examinations as a rite of passage.

### German Ways of Assessment

The German School Report Card, on the other hand, consists of the assessment of the academic achievements and behaviour associated with study and social rules, and the evaluations of students' behaviour. This is illustrated in Figure 2. The academic achievements are assessed on a six point scale (*Zeugnisnote*). The marks and their meaning have been decided by *KMK* as follows (Ziegenspeck, 1999):

- '1' = *Sehr gut* (very good),
- '2' = *Gut* (good),
- '3' = *Befriedigend* (satisfactory),
- '4' = *Ausreichend* (adequate),
- '5' = *Mangelhaft* (poor),
- '6' = *Ungenügend* (very poor/unsatisfactory).

The passing marks are from '1' to the '4', whereas '5' and '6' denote failure. The marks are accorded by teachers on the basis of written tests and examinations as well as oral contributions to in-class discussions (Rebitzki, 2003).

The assessment of the behaviour of the students is assessed from two perspectives, the working behaviour (*Arbeitsverhalten*) and the social behaviour (*Sozialverhalten*). For example, in the State of *Niedersachsen* (Lower Saxony), working behaviour includes students' readiness for learning and working, goal-orientation, cooperativeness, independence, attentiveness, patience, and reliability. Social behaviour includes the ability to reflect on one's learning and to discuss with others, honesty, fairness, readiness to help others, responsibility, and cooperation (Hayek, 2000). The state of Saarland has almost the same definitions of the working and social behaviours (Saarland, 2000).

Required Subjects			
German	3	Physics/Chemistry	2
Spelling	3	Music	-
English (Course A)	4	Art	2
Religion (Catholic)	3	Crafts	-
World and Environment Studies	3	Clothing	3
Mathematics (Course A)	3	Sports	2
Biology	2		
Elective Subjects			
Club Activity:	Soccer		
Instrument Class:	Guitar		
Working Behavior	meets the demand completely		
Social Behavior	meets the demand completely		
Notes:	promote to the next grade		

**Figure 2. An example of a German school report card**

Moreover, the assessment of academic behaviour on the school report cards occurs in three formats. The first type is to describe behaviour in sentences (for example in the state of *Bayern, Berlin*). The second type is to give marks to these behaviours (for example in the state of *Baden-Württemberg, Sachsen*). The third type shows both forms. In the lower grades behaviour is reported in sentences while in the upper grades behaviour receives a numerical mark. At higher grades, the marks for the various behaviours are given on the school report cards (for example in the state of *Hessen, Rheinland-Pfalz*). All the federal states may decide which form they intend to use on the report cards (Rebitzki, 2003). In the teacher's notes section, there is an indication as to whether the students are to be promoted to the next grade or whether they are required to repeat the class.

At secondary level, grade four students in Germany usually have some idea about what their prospective career is likely to be. Therefore, they need to choose the type of senior secondary school that they will attend. This depends on their academic ability. They can either enter a secondary school that prepares them for a more manual job or for university. The former school types are known as *Hauptschule* and *Realschule*, and the latter is called *Gymnasium*.

In addition, German schools have a repeat system. If students are not able to meet the academic demands, they repeat the grade. The demands are different in each state. Thus, when a student receives a mark of '5' or '6' in more than two principal subjects (for example. German and Mathematics), he/she is not allowed to go to the next grade in the state of *Hessen* (Amano, Yuki and Beppu, 1998). In the state of *Bayern*, they have to repeat the classes if the average of their marks is below '4.0' (Das Bayerische Staatsministerium für Unterricht und Kultus, 1998). In secondary school, students have to change schools (for example from a *Gymnasium* to a *Realschule*) if they repeat the class twice. In Germany, there are many repeaters. For example, 2.5 per cent of the second graders repeated a class in the school year 1999 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2001). In comparison, in Japan the repeat rate is almost 0 per cent because all pupils are allowed

to graduate from the compulsory education even though 0.02 percent of the pupils may have been absent from the school for more than 30 days (MECSST, 2003).

## OBJECTIFIED SELECTION OR EDUCATIONAL DIAGNOSIS?

### The 'Educational Consideration' on Japanese School Report Card

The Japanese school report card attaches greater importance to educational encouragement than to objectified selection. The educational consideration is that the reliability and objectivity of the assessment can be disregarded on the school report card if teachers would like to encourage and motivate the children to learn (Ishida, 2002). The *MESC* (the predecessor of the *MECSST*: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) also advises that to reprint what is described on the cumulative guidance record directly on to the school report card is not always appropriate, and that teachers should pay attention to the particular situations of individual students and consider the contents of the school report card carefully (MESC, 1980).

A specific example was noted of a father who complained on a TV program in 1969 that the relative assessment with five-rank system was not fair because some students would get bad marks in any case on the school report card. In the 1970s, school report cards were reformed step by step to what they are today (Yamane, 2002). The aim was to 'evaluate for education' in order to motivate children, instead of the 'evaluation for selection' approach which sounded inhumane to the Japanese. Thus, Japanese people expect 'educational consideration' at school, in case grades rank students and cause them to develop an inferiority complex, or make parents uneasy (Hirahara and Terasaki, 2002, pp.229-230). This is uniquely Japanese and is certainly an important cultural consideration.

Thus educational consideration can be seen from two perspectives: the document system and the assessment methods. For the document system, it should be pointed out that the facts on the school report card may be different from the facts written on the cumulative guidance record. Therefore, the assessment data which are available to students and their parents are different from the data which are not accessible to them. This is called a 'double document structure' (Ishida, 2002; Yamane, 2002). As to the methods, it should be recognised that some teachers show leniency to students, whose general marks are not very good, by giving them an 'A' in subjective assessments or by drawing a 'circle' against assessment items concerning their non-academic behaviours. Other teachers describe them as praiseworthy in the notes on the school report cards (Hasegawa, 2004; Nagayama, 2002). For example, although a student got a mark of '2' in Japanese, he/she also got an 'A' for the 'skill for reading and listening' (Tanaka, 2002). This is an example of 'gradation' and is discussed later as a cultural barrier.

### Achievement Pressure Surrounding German School Report Cards

On the other hand, German school report cards emphasise objectified selection rather than educational diagnosis, because the German school report card shows the mark with a clear six point system and the educational considerations such as in the Japanese school report card do not exist on the German school report card. Moreover, many German students often feel pressure over the results of their achievements, and the extremely strong pressures may sometimes cause them physical and mental problems such as headaches, stomach aches or sleep disorders (Liedtke, 1991).

In Germany, the school should be accountable for students' academic achievements, not only to parents but also to society. Therefore, it is natural for teachers to evaluate students as objectively as possible. Parents have also the right to know about the achievements of their children. While the assessment in German school has been directed towards validity, objectivity and reliability, it may create extremely strong pressure in some children (Ziegenspeck, 1999).

## DISCUSSION ABOUT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

### **Cultural Barriers in Japanese Educational Assessment**

In the context of the Japanese communication system, it is more effective to tell others indirectly what they feel negatively rather than to explain to them directly and logically, if one wants to make others understand (Nakayama, 1996). Japanese people are famous for vague and indirect expressions because they feel embarrassed by emotional discord when using unambiguous remarks. Therefore, Japanese people usually express their own ideas modestly even if they have definite opinions (Nakayama, 2004).

Westerners usually assert their own opinions directly in a discussion, whereas Japanese people tend to find a common ground by mutual consideration for each other. The Japanese direct a point of agreement in the form of pre-established harmony by taking a noncommittal attitude, and thereby avoid conflict or disagreement with each other (Nakayama, 2004). Nakayama call this communicative form '*Bokashi* (gradation)' (Nakayama, 1989, p.9).

This tendency can be shown on the school report card as explained above. By assuming ambiguous attitudes, conflicts or misunderstanding between the school and the Japanese families may be avoided. Most Japanese people tend towards the pre-established harmony.

Specifically speaking, the Japanese school report card includes double structures of the ambiguity both in the system and the method. First, a Japanese school report is an unofficial document. In 'unofficial' documents, teachers do not always tell the truth about the achievements if they need to motivate their students to learn more at school (Ishida, 2002). The students are not normally allowed to access official documents. Therefore, they have no opportunity to learn about their actual results and at the same time the result of any achievements is therefore ambiguous. Second, teachers try to help the academically poor students by giving some good marks or comments on the subjective assessment items on the school report cards. If the general marks need to be negative, teachers can make the results ambiguous through remarks in terms of the subject (Hasegawa, 2004). Otherwise, they try to give some good marks for the student's attitudes or in the form of positive comments on the school report card (Nagayama, 2002).

Thus, Japanese teachers choose not to escape from the cultural barriers. This encourages teachers to provide the vague or false results about achievements on the school report card. Here we have identified some Japanese cultural barriers in evaluation and assessment in Japanese education.

### **Differences in Cultural Barriers in the German School Report Card**

In the German case, we can also approach difference from the perspective of cultural barriers. European people tend to clarify differences and discuss them openly, whereas Japanese people give way to others in order to resolve any conflicts of the interests. Germans tend to express their own opinions directly, feeling that honesty is more important than discomfort.

For example, Kotthoff (2003) conducted an experiment on compliments among German and American students in a seminar at the University of Constance. This experiment compared differences in response between German and American students. As an example, the following case was shown to the students:

You live in a dormitory with flat mates and one of the flatmates knits a sweater for herself. You know that she spent a lot of time and energy making the sweater through chatting with her. One day, you find she approaches you wearing the sweater, which she has completed. If you thought that the sweater is not appealing, what would you say to her? (Kotthoff, 2003, pp.298-299)

The results of the experiment show different reactions given by German and American students. German students did not compliment her on the sweater. On the contrary, they expressed their own impressions directly: 'Are you really satisfied with the sweater' or 'I do not think that the sweater is suitable for you, but you think it suitable, don't you?' On the other hand, all of the American students complimented her and only the strength of the compliments varied from person to person. Then in the seminar, all the students discussed the difference in the responses between German and American students. The American students regarded the Germans as unsociable, while these German students thought it more important to express their own opinion than to maintain the status quo. If the German students complimented her, they would only say to her 'that was nice knitting wool' (Kotthoff, 2003).

Therefore, the Germans and Americans had no consensus and it is clear that the predominant principle differs between countries. Americans tend to pay attention to social manners, while Germans thought it was polite to give their own opinions honestly regardless of the social consequences (Kotthoff, 2003). The more important the relationship between them, the more honestly they told others what they thought. Americans complimented others in the scenario which was judged to be hypocritical appearance by the Germans (Kotthoff, 2003, 1989).

According to Kotthoff, the experiment shows that Germans tend to think it more polite to speak honestly than to flatter. In other words, it is very difficult for German people to compliment others with empty words, based on Kotthoff's research. Günthner (1993, 2000) also states that Germans criticise more directly and openly than Americans and Chinese in comparison to other cultures.

Now that I have demonstrated that Germans tend to state the facts, it follows logically that 'educational considerations' are not likely to be found on the German school report card. It is difficult to find the educational considerations in Germany because teachers think it is unethical not to tell the children and their parents the results of achievements honestly.

That is why German school report cards can be not only an official record but also a certificate of progress and teachers can also show the achievements of the students clearly on the school report card. Even if some students suffer from mental or physical stress because of the pressure of achievement, it is not accepted practice in Germany to make the achievements ambiguous through vague comments on the school report card.

Using Kotthoff's studies as examples, we can identify a German cultural barrier in evaluation of education. Honesty is more important than discomfort even though some students may be hurt. Therefore, because German teachers insist on giving the achievement data to the students and their parents, this may be considered a cultural barrier by some people.

## CONCLUSIONS

This examination of cultural barriers enables us to gain some understanding of the reasons for differences between Japanese and German evaluation and assessment as evidenced by the school report cards of the two education systems. Why do Japanese school report cards prioritise the dimension of educational diagnosis while German report cards give priority to objectified selection? This may occur because it is impossible in Japan to select students fairly according to the results on the school report cards if teachers make the achievements of the students vague by using educational considerations. In fact, Japanese students should pass the objective entrance examination if they are to be promoted to higher school levels. They appear to require another document such as the confidential report, to which not even students and their parents may access as an assurance of students' actual achievement. On the other hand, German school report cards can be trusted in society as official documents. Therefore, if the achievements of the students are accurately recorded, and people can accept the system of repetition, then they can actualise the qualification system through the graduation examination such as *Abitur*.

Surely, it is very difficult to know how to cope with cultural barriers. If accountability is important for the parents, it may be said that the dimension of objectified selection should be taken into account more in Japan. For example, should the Japanese school report card be unified to one official document as is the case in Germany? In other words, should the Japanese double documentation system be reformed and the facts in the official record (the cumulative guidance record) be made available to students and their parents because the school as a public institution should be accountable for the achievements and development of the students?

However, if motivation of the students is important, the educational considerations in Japanese school report card can be effective in motivating Japanese students. The ambiguous results in the school report card may prevent the students from harm and encourage them to try harder. Therefore, it could also be said that German school report card should not forget to consider the dimension of educational diagnosis. In fact, a part of the German school report cards has changed, for example, from the *Notenzeugnis* (School report card with marks) to the *Berichtszeugnis* (School report card with verbal comments) (Ziegenspeck, 1999).

After all, we always have to optimise between two dimensions, but our own cultural barriers need to be overcome at the same time. The discussion about assessment tends to focus on the reliability, objectivity and fairness of evaluation and assessment. Without considering our cultural barriers, however, the innovation of assessment can lead to unintended consequences. Therefore, culture should be considered further in educational studies. Here the cultural barriers are examined in order that a study of the structure of the cultural barriers may provide a model for further research.

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