

UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE AND RESISTANCE TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN JAPANESE HIGHER EDUCATION

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This work in progress ethnographic study highlights the insidious defense of privilege and self-interest among a collective of English native speakers employed as tenured faculty within Japanese higher education from a professional development perspective.

Introduction

- Faculty holding knowledge-relevant positions are expected to improve the education of students through development of their own professional skills, knowledge and conceptions whilst engaging with “questions of content and pedagogy that educators are asking—or should be asking—about the consequences of their instructional practices on real students as well as in general questions about effective teaching practice” (Elmore, 2002, p. 7).
- Competence-based trust between faculty can be developed through “an individual’s capability to do what they have been asked to do and includes experience, institutional validation, and the ability to manage knowledge by integrating skills, personal values, and attitudes” (Di Battista et al., 2021, p. 2).
- Professional development initiatives, expectations and demands are often met with insidious forms of resistance, especially among faculty who demonstrate a lack of competence alongside a lack of self-awareness as to their own professional deficiencies.

Research Focus and Methodology

- Research within organizational structures is often “difficult to fully understand without taking into account interaction and actions emerging in the flux of organizational activities” (Rouleau et al., 2014, p. 4). Within the context of day-to-day workplace interactions “fine grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced” (Falzon, 2009, p. 1).
- Since 2018 the named authors have individually collected fieldnotes and official faculty emails relating to instances of perceived incompetence in the execution of faculty work and the rationalizations given by colleagues in explanation. In this study we use these fieldnotes and emails to examine rationalizations given in service of the concealment of incompetence.
- We draw context from the conscious competence theory (Broadwell, 1969) which examines psychological states and self-efficacy beliefs relative to professional competence (Figure 1). We then use Ashforth and Lee’s (1990) framework of defensive behaviours in organizations as our analytical framework to highlight how colleagues act defensively to avoid action, avoid blame and avoid change (i.e., conceal incompetence) (Figure 2).

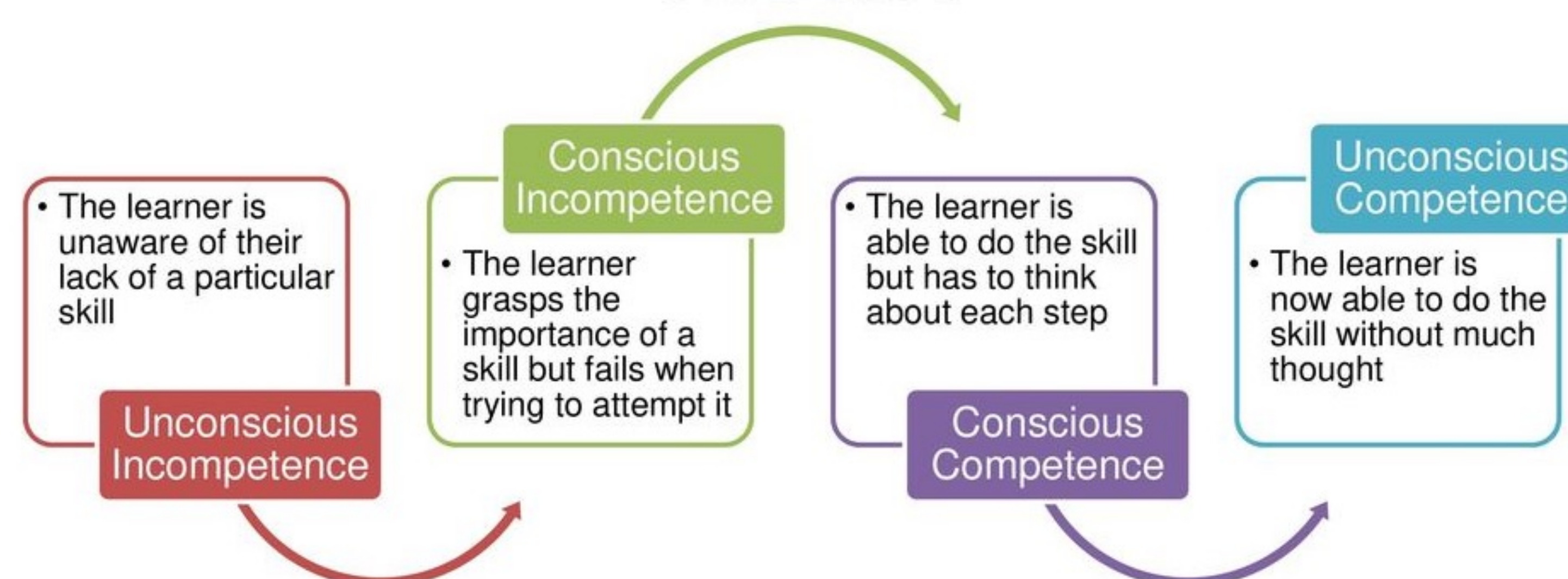


Figure 1. Conscious competence model (Adams, 2015)

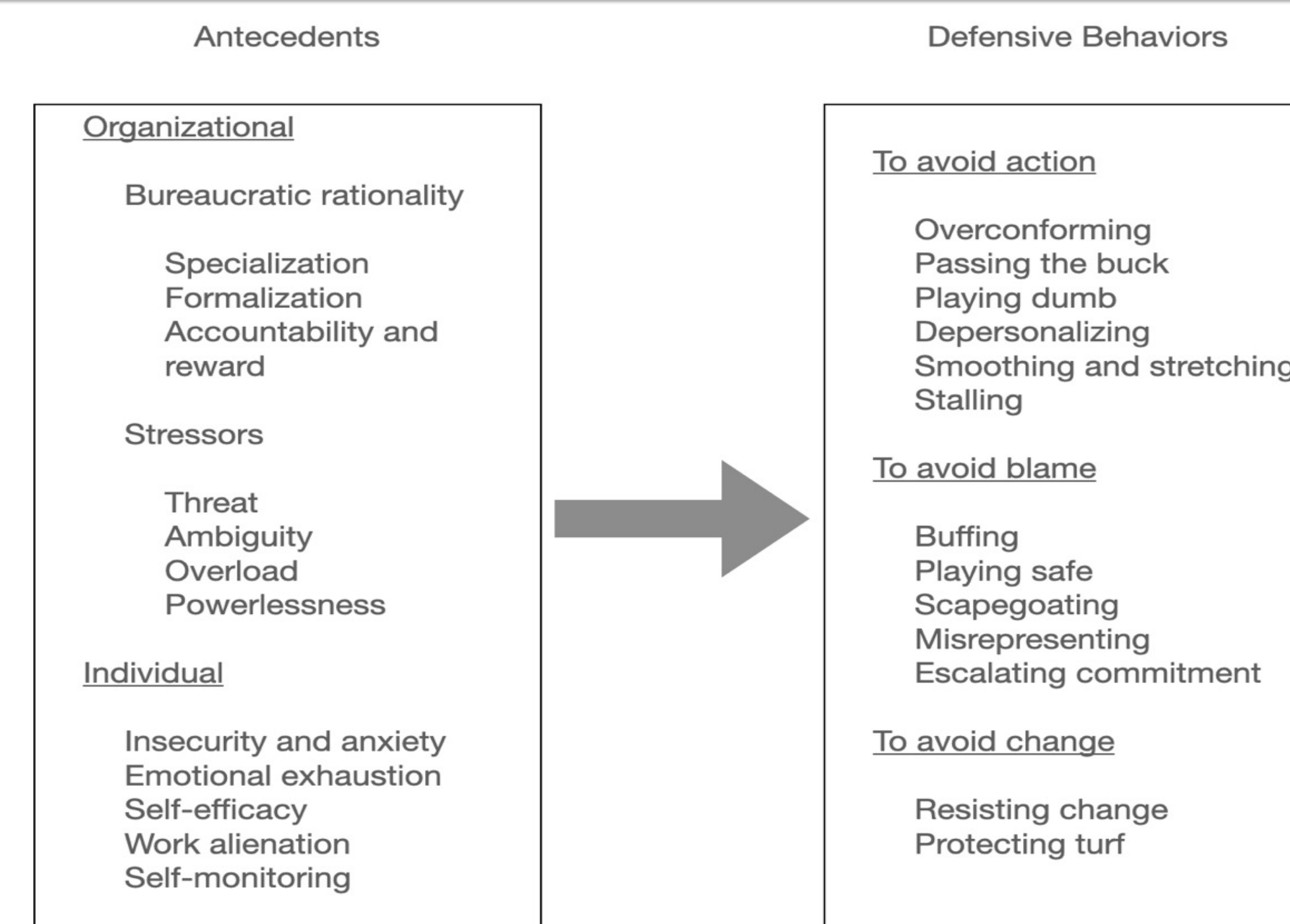


Figure 2. Typology of defensive behaviours (Ashforth & Lee, 1990)

Avoiding Action

Overconforming: “Action is often avoided by resorting to a strict interpretation of one’s responsibility (‘The rules clearly say ...’) and perhaps citing supportive precedents (‘It’s always been done this way’)” (p. 624)

Circumstance: At an educational committee meeting in front of several Japanese colleagues the president of the university recommended in English that faculty [A], [B], [C] obtain doctoral level qualifications. Reluctant to obtain doctoral level qualifications [B] referred to the precise English used by the Japanese president rather than the cultural significance of such a direct and public recommendation to rationalize avoiding the request. [A] and [C] then visited the president in private to excuse themselves from action.

Emailed Data: “I have a different recollection of [the president’s] specific message to us. It was indeed powerful and I paid close attention. In my recollection of the meeting, he never said “must now”. This sounds like he was giving an order to us. In my recollection, he gave us a strong recommendation to do a PhD. ... [A] and myself spoke with [the president] today and confirmed our recollections. He clearly stated he was not requiring or demanding that those without PhDs earn one” [B].

Conclusion

Contextualized by the conscious competence model (Broadwell, 1969), the current study utilized Ashforth and Lee’s (1990) model for defensive behaviours in organizations, highlighting the insidious defense of privilege and self-interest among a collective of English native speakers employed as tenured faculty within Japanese higher education from a professional development perspective. It has long been known that institutions are generally apathetic to dealing with incompetence as the “displaying of incompetence credibly signals one’s reliability” (Gambetta, 2009, p. 43), particularly within bureaucratic workplace cultures where its most influential organizers are often academics who produce poor research and do not try to hide their weakness on the shared understanding that it is culturally inappropriate to challenge a superior. With over two decades of direct ethnographic experience in context, it is apparent that defensive actions such as those documented are routine and uncritically accepted within the university. Over time, the uncritical acceptance of such behaviours has the potential to become chronic, compulsive or even pathological, ultimately resulting in a dysfunctional university managed by unconsciously incompetent faculty. We encourage university management and individual faculty to consider these issues from an educational standpoint.

Avoiding Blame

Misrepresenting: “avoid blame by manipulating information about his or her intentions, action, knowledge, performance” (p. 628).

Circumstance: Faculty were requested to share academic information related achievements and knowledgeable content. When it became obvious that no research had been implemented or any publication written during years of tenured employment, [C] drew attention to a 12 year old internal report, [A] promised to write a literature review (which never transpired), while [D] suggested a career change (which never transpired).

Emailed Data: “I have attached a pdf file of a Granted Research Project that was conducted in 2008” [C]. “Thank you for taking the time to suggest and describe the papers. Based on the abstracts they seem relevant for the [-] program, as well as for other [-] activities. I will consider them for my literature review for the [-] program which I am currently working on. Any changes to the [-] program resulting from this review will be included in the next iteration of the course, which starts in December 2021” [A]. “I am trying to change my career. I have nothing much to give you. Kindly use the publications available at my faculty profile” [D].

Avoiding Change

Resisting change: “a variety of behaviors including some forms of overconforming, playing safe and misrepresenting” (p. 629).

Circumstance: Coinciding with a time when professional collegiality was paramount as universities in Japan implemented online education at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement in seeking research knowledge of effective distance-based learning was met with resistance and aggressive scornfulness. As [A], [B], [C] profess expertise in e-learning and computer assisted language learning, a group request was made for links and sources where colleagues could read the research outcomes that have informed the e-learning practices within the university over the past decade.

Emailed Data: “Why would you want anyone to spend time on this in the middle of a global pandemic? Am I missing something here? ...I am sure most of our workmates have much more urgent issues to attend to” [D].