

Research experience as a JSPS Fellow

JSPS program: Short-term Postdoctoral

Host Institution: Primate Research Institute, Kyoto University (KUPRI)

Host Researcher: Dr. Takako Miyabe-Nishiwaki

Research Fellow: Dr. Catia Correia Caeiro

Research summary:

My research focus on how animals communicate and perceive their environment, and how they compare to humans in these social behaviours. While working at KUPRI, I used a primate model, the common marmoset, to investigate how this species perceives and reacts to cues of emotion in social partners, such as facial expressions and body postures. Furthermore, I examined hormonal responses (e.g. cortisol changes) to these emotion cues to try to understand if emotion cues in marmosets are purely communicative, purely emotional or both, by combining a non-invasive and cooperative experimental and behavioural approach. Humans use a wide range of facial expressions and body postures in their daily social interactions, but there is a heated debate about their function, which centres on if these cues are expressing emotion or communicating specific information to others. Common marmosets are an ideal model for comparison to human communication and emotion mechanisms due to the similarity between both species (e.g. similar brain anatomy, wide social repertoire, cooperative breeding). Looking at another species of primate can inform us on the functionality and evolution of communication in both animals and human.

Tips for effective working methods in a Japanese research environment:

Before going to Japan, I worked in UK academia for approximately 9 years and, before that I worked for shorter periods in Portugal (where I am originally from) and Belgium. After arriving in Japan, the first difference I noticed at work was that hierarchy and respect for seniority are very important aspects and they form the basis for the working environment and relationships between people at work. Traditions and respect for culture are also highly valued and are expected to be followed promptly, particularly unspoken social rules. So, in order to succeed in a Japanese work environment, foreigners need to quickly learn these and put them in practice. I would advise new fellows to be highly observant of how other

people behave around them and try to understand the different social rules in place. It also really helps to make Japanese friends and other longer term foreign friends, in order to learn from their experience of how to behave and follow the social norms. While I was fortunate enough to be working with Japanese people that had excellent English language skills, this is not the norm in Japan. I felt at times if I had known Japanese beforehand, I could more easily interact with academics outside my lab, as not all researchers speak English in Japan.

Tips for living in Japan:

Living in Japan is definitely an experience of a lifetime! Japan is a very safe and welcoming country to all tourists, and has so much to see, experience and learn! If you enjoy travelling, Japan is one of the most diverse and interesting countries in the world to explore. If you have a longer term stay, I couldn't recommend enough learning Japanese before arrival and also while living there, particularly if you will live outside the larger cities. A mobile phone translator app is invaluable for your daily needs (e.g. grocery shopping). I would also advise to proactively initiate relationships with Japanese friends and colleagues, and seek their help for the day-to-day paperwork that you will need to deal with (e.g. city council registration, health insurance, pension, bills, etc.). Again, this might depend on the city you will be based, but most of these mundane tasks will require someone proficient in Japanese, so being comfortable with seeking help and having people helping you sort out some aspects of your personal life will be really important. I was based in a small city, but was very fortunate to have very patient and understanding friends and colleagues that helped me and guided me through every step of the way. Japanese society is based on community living, so they are amazing at helping people in whatever they need. I was also fortunate to have colleagues that were very open and patient to teach me about the Japanese food, culture and traditions. So, you might be in for much more than a simple work experience, as Japanese people can be extremely kind and welcoming to foreigners, as they seem to truly enjoy spreading the knowledge about their culture and customs.



Invited public talk at Japan Monkey Centre with Takako (my host researcher)



Exploring the local temples and shrines was one of my favourite things to do in my free time