

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. Levine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Japanese Cultural Psychology and Empathic Understanding

Implications for Academic and Cultural Psychology

Hidetada Shimizu

Recent research in cultural psychology has given renewed attention to the problem of understanding Japanese behavior, experience, and development (Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Stigler, Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, Levine, Markus, & Miller, 1998; Shweder, & Herdt, 1990). In terms of the cultural psychology of the Japanese, the studies by Markus and Kitayama (1991) and Wierzbicka (1996) are at the forefront. Markus and Kitayama suggest, for example, that the Japanese, along with their East Asian cohorts, have a culturally distinct “construal of self,” which “insists on the fundamental relatedness of individual to each other” (1991, p. 224). Wierzbicka (1996), by contrast, suggests that the “cultural scripts” guiding Japanese social behaviors, such as “apologies,” are semantically distinct from their English counterparts. Therefore, to “apologize” has culturally distinct meanings in Japanese and in English.

In this Introduction, I shall argue that Markus and Kitayama’s and Wierzbicka’s approaches are steps in the right direction toward minimizing ethnocentrism in academic psychology. Both approaches, however, are too methodologically limited to capture the complexity of subjective experience in individual lives. Using hypothetical problems to elicit a restricted range of meanings of Japanese cultural norms for individuals, these three scholars do not consider the contradictory and multidimensional motives behind the interaction of culture and person. Without an empathic understanding

Reprinted by permission of the American Anthropological Association from *Ethos* 28(2): 224–47. Not for sale or further reproduction. The writing of this article was supported by National Academy of Education Spencer Post-Doctoral Fellowship. I am deeply indebted to Professor Robert Levine for his encouragement, insights, and suggestions, which enabled me to write this Introduction.

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of personal experience in the varied settings of individual lives, the evidence from formal assessment procedures is thin, and its validity questionable. Because investigators cannot know in advance the variability and complexity of indigenous experience, bypassing the individual experience, as Markus and Kitayama and Wierzbicka do, risks imposing the classification system of the investigators rather than that of the “natives.”

First, I shall argue that the meaning of personal experience is often equivocal (i.e., open to two or more interpretations) and multidimensional (located in more than one level of experience). I shall use the concept of *omoiyari* (sensitivity to others) to illustrate that semantic and pragmatic definitions of the concept, such as those provided by Lebra (1976), alone cannot predict or fully capture the variety and depth of individual experience. The content of such personal experience cannot be captured by these static descriptors, because individual experiences are variable and multiplex and because they are influenced by motives that underlie observable behaviors.

Second, I shall argue that the empathic understanding of the lived experience of the Japanese (or any cultural or national group) cannot be achieved through the *experimental* approach (of Markus and Kitayama), which uses hypothetical situations to highlight intergroup (that is, Japanese versus American) differences; or the *cultural grammar* approach (of Wierzbicka), which attempts to translate culture-specific meaning into a “natural semantic metalanguage.”

Finally, I shall consider the strengths and the limitations of Markus and Kitayama’s and Wierzbicka’s approaches in light of the psychologist Donald Campbell’s (1988) previous attempt to combat naïve ethnocentrism (i.e., “phenomenal absolutism”) of academic psychology.

EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO OMOIYARI

Before discussing the equivocal and multiplex natures of real-life experience concerning *omoiyari*, it is necessary to discuss first how this concept has been conceptualized in the anthropological literature on Japan. As Spiro (1993) points out, few anthropological studies have looked into the private experiences of people. Most of them attempted to translate cultural norms, particularly the meanings of culturally indigenous concepts and normative behaviors. Of these approaches, two types of analyses are most common: semantic and pragmatic definitions of the culture-specific concepts. The semantic translation gives formal, dictionary-like definitions of cultural concepts, whereas the pragmatic translation gives examples of normative contexts in which these concepts derive their culture-specific meanings.

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Lebra's (1976) chapter on *omoiyari* in her book, *The Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, contains perhaps the most comprehensive and widely cited examples of semantic and pragmatic definitions of *omoiyari*. In terms of semantics, she defines *omoiyari* as "the ability and willingness to feel what others are feeling, to vicariously experience the pleasure and pain that they are undergoing, and to help them satisfy their wishes" (Lebra, 1976, p. 38).

In terms of pragmatics, she conceptualizes *omoiyari* as part of the larger cultural ethos of "social relativism." *Omoiyari* is an expression of "social preoccupation," the first element of social relativism, because the objects of Japanese individuals' primary concerns are not abstract ideas and principles but people inhabiting their social world. It is also part of what she calls "interactional relativism," the other component, in that individuals make personal decisions in conjunction with what they consider other people are thinking and feeling in a given situation. For example, if someone wants to go to a movie, but he or she also knows no one else wants to, he or she may decide not to go to honor other people's preference not to go. Another example Lebra uses is *ozendate*, where a Japanese host prepares things ahead of time in anticipation of what the guest may desire. According to the Japanese cultural script, it is improper to ask guests what they want to be served (for example, coffee or tea). Rather, it is appropriate to do a little research on the guest's taste ahead of time and serve them something based on an educated guess. Such intention, or *magokoro* – "sincere heart," as the Japanese put it – to serve others in the spirit of *omoiyari* is valued more highly than correctly guessing guests' preferences.

Many of Lebra's examples are culturally normative patterns of behaviors derived from her own knowledge as an expert interpreter of Japanese culture, a Japanese native, and a trained anthropologist. Few of them are descriptions of the lived experience of real-life individuals. Thus, the individual motives that exist behind these culturally normative scripts are left out. In other words, once a certain pattern of behavior is institutionalized as a cultural (i.e., shared) norm, individuals can always choose to act behind it, much the way a puppet master animates a scripted puppet play with his own emotions and interpretations. Such private motives are not revealed in the semantic and pragmatic definitions of the normative script alone, but through detailed descriptions of individual lives and circumstances from which the script derives more specific and deeper personal meaning. The variations and depths of such motives behind the *omoiyari* script will be discussed next.

The evidence is drawn from long-term, repeated interviews with adolescents in a Japanese high school – a private academic school. The interviewees

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

reflect on the issues of achievement, moral conflict, and interpersonal behavior (Shimizu, 1993a).¹ From these interviews, I wrote case studies of four adolescents, three of whom will appear in this chapter: they are: Yasuhiko, a fifteen-year-old boy with a history of being bullied; Yumi, a seventeen-year-old girl who questions her own sincerity because she acts differently in different social situations; and Takeshi, an eighteen-year-old boy who plays soccer and volunteers his services fixing school bathroom switches broken by delinquents. I also draw on data from an open-ended questionnaire administered to students in this school, personal experience as a native of Japan and as an anthropological researcher there, and published works describing the real-life experiences and social behavior of Japanese people.

There are at least three heuristically distinguishable, if not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, ways in which the *omoiyari* script can be experienced and acted out by individual Japanese: to fulfill cultural common sense, to sabotage, and to experience conflict and ambivalence.

Cultural Common Sense

When individuals think, feel, or behave in a certain way, and believe that their actions are so perfectly “good” and “normal” that they are not aware of or would not approve of any alternatives, they are conforming to scripts that are part of “cultural common sense” (Geertz, 1983, pp. 73–93). *Omoiyari*, as Lebra notes, is one such prevalent and idealized cultural common sense. To be more precise, one can further divide the personal motives to fulfill the *omoiyari* scripts as cultural common sense into subcategories: coerced and willing conformity (see LeVine, 1982) and complacent conformity.

In coerced conformity, someone of a subordinate social position unilaterally adapts and performs the script for fear of punishment or concern for survival (e.g., being fired from a job or ostracized from a community). People who succumb to coerced conformity are generally those in servant roles

¹ The interview and questionnaire data were collected in a private Protestant junior and senior high school outside of Tokyo. Two male and two female students were chosen haphazardly from each grade from the seventh to the twelfth. During our first interview session (one to one-and-one-half hours long), we talked about general aspects of their lives: the past year, self-descriptions, school and home life, and so on. Some students agreed to more interviews, and to these, I sent a letter asking them to remember experiences in which they (a) worked very hard at something (achievement); and (b) had to make decision about right versus wrong (morality). Follow-up interviews were conducted three, six, and nine months later. During these interviews, the informants reflected on the meaning and implications of their own experiences. I visited their homes to interview their parents. I also gave several written, open-ended questionnaires to 198 high school students (118 girls and 80 boys).

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and citizens under repressive dictatorships (LeVine, 1982). The notion, however, can be applied to people at large when they submit to normative pressures of given sociocultural roles that forbid or constrict expressions of private motives.

For example, Japanese society (and presumably many others, including the United States) offers many occupation- and social-status-related role behaviors that are so rigidly prescribed by linguistic scripts that individual speakers deviate little from them. One example is a merchant uttering a set phrase to attract customers, such as “*irrashai mase*” (come in and let us serve you). Also at a train station, people are reminded to step behind the white line (“*hakusen no ushiro made sagatte kudasai*”) to keep a safe distance from the incoming train. When passengers are about to get off the train, they are reminded again not to leave their belongings behind (“*owasure mono nai you otashi kame kudasai*”). One hears these set phrases over and over again in Japan as institutionalized expressions of *omoiyari*.

There are other variants of such fixed, occupation- and social-status-related *omoiyari* role behaviors. On the busy streets of larger cities, for example, pedestrians often encounter a person giving away pocket-sized tissues with a company’s promotions printed on the back. The distributors will say something like, “How are you? Hot day, isn’t it? How about a tissue to wipe off your sweat?” as if to say, “Here’s my *omoiyari* for you. I am committed to maximizing your comfort.” It is more than likely, however, that the tissue distributors are merely conforming to the sales tactics prescribed by their employers.

In willing conformity, by contrast, there is a high degree of congruence between culturally prescribed role behavior and the individual’s desire to fulfill its requirements, so that enactment of the role behaviors creates personal satisfaction in the performer. The example of an eighteen-year-old boy named Takeshi (Shimizu, 1993a) below indicates that individuals not only conform willingly to *omoiyari* scripts, but go beyond them to generate their own, individualized *omoiyari* scripts. In Takeshi’s school, there were a number of delinquents who routinely tampered with the light switches in a school bathroom. Takeshi volunteered to fix these switches with his teacher. Asked why, he explained that he was sympathetic to the delinquents. He learned from his mother, the school nurse, that these boys came from broken homes and knew no better way of expressing their individuality. So, he said, instead of punishing them, one needs to wait patiently for them to repent by modeling good behavior.

Cross-referencing this incident with other stories told by the same informant led me to believe that he wanted to fix these switches as a voluntary

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

personal decision. For example, he decided not to tell a girl that he wanted to go out with because of his concern that, in doing so, he might bother her while she was preparing for all-important college entrance exams. He also quickly decided which college to attend in order to make his dying grandfather happy. These behaviors are all congruent with his self-professed (during the interview) personality of being kind and nice to others (*yasashii*). In his own words, there are so many starving people in the world, but he had all the food he could eat and parents to pay for his education. He said that he felt naturally obligated to repay the goodness he received from other people. Thus, it appears that he fixed the bathroom switches out of his genuine concern for the delinquents, not to submit to any external authorities (Shimizu, 1993a, p. 426).

Finally, the *omoiyari* script can be so standardized as a culturally prescribed role behavior that individuals perform the script without realizing its original meaning: attending and catering to other people's needs through empathy. Such rigid adherence to a specific script that appears empathic but permits no variation in the interests of an unanticipated call for empathic response is "complacent conformity." For example, my wife and I went to a discount store in a suburb of one of Japan's major cities to buy household items. We saw a little hut in which vendors were cooking and selling *takoyaki* (a grilled ball of flour mixed with a tiny piece of octopus, or *tako*, placed in the center), with the lively calling of, "*Irasshai mase irasshai mase*" ("Come in! Come in, please! We are ready to serve you!"). The person who was shouting this was a teenaged girl, who seemed to be hired to do this on a part-time basis. She seemed to epitomize her role as a *takoyaki* sales clerk: energetic, upbeat, and ready to serve. At this time, we found a crying child who obviously was lost and looking for her mother. Sensing that the child needed help, my wife asked the young woman behind the *takoyaki* stand, "Excuse me, but this girl seems to be lost. Would there be a place where I can get help? Maybe someone can make an announcement." At this moment, the clerk looked as if she were caught totally off guard, and she suddenly looked away so that she did not have to respond to my wife. It was as if she refused to come out of her occupational role and help us personally. The point of the story is that individuals can become so deeply self-identified and entangled with their role that they become lost in it – almost to the point of being blinded by "role narcissism" (DeVos, 1973). Playing the role, they become complacently content and uncritical, making no effort to appreciate the original significance of the role.

Many teenagers appear to be particularly vulnerable to the complacent role narcissism. In a questionnaire I gave to teenagers in which they were

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

asked to list three words to describe themselves, along with their strengths and weakness, ideal self and nonideal self (Shimizu, 1993a), I got the impression that some of the respondents were mechanically repeating words and phrases that are suited to idealized self-presentation. Examples of such words are *akarui* (lively and amicable), *yasashii* (kind and gentle), and the most frequently mentioned, *omoiyari* (empathy). My subsequent analysis, however, revealed aspects of their self-perception that are far from being so outgoing, gregarious, and nonintrospective. In response to questions regarding difficulties they face day to day in human relationships, they indicated their lack of kindness to others, and difficulty being truly empathetic to others. They also indicated a shortage of kindness and empathy among their peers. Thus, in the complacent form of *omoiyari*, individuals mechanically recite values or behaviors that are considered ideal in their culture without considering the personal ramifications of these values.

Sabotage

Sabotaging may be analogous to the psychiatric concept of sociopathy: the sociopaths manipulate other people and social institutions to satisfy selfish motive. Likewise, the saboteurs manipulate officially sanctioned meanings of *omoiyari* to justify their malevolence. For example, one of my informants, the “whipping boy” whom I call Yasuhiko, decided to use his karate skills to combat the bullies – he had been preparing to do this for years. Instead of fighting back, the bullies decided to use their streetwise intelligence. In front of spectators, they accused Yasuhiko as lacking *omoiyari*. They said that Yasuhiko was “bullying” them because he was using his “expert” karate skills to attack the “novices.” The spectators could have known in their hearts that the bullies were the ones manipulating the norm of *omoiyari* to carry out their malevolent scheme. Feeling the need, however, to comply with the public ideal (*tatemae*) of *omoiyari* – that is, not taking advantage of the weak – they did not, publicly at least, point out the wrongness of the bullies’ plot.

In other cases, individuals do not intend to deceive and do harm like the bullies. Rather, their private experience is such that it cannot be captured fully by the public semantic and pragmatic definitions of a cultural concept. Therefore, the individuals revise, or appropriate, the official meanings to give them more specific and personal meanings. I committed such sabotaging myself when I tried to explain the meaning of *omoiyari* to a class largely of Anglo-American students from my own point of view, as a

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

native of Japan. I decided to use one of the scenes described in Lafcadio Hearn's essay, "At the Station" (1896). I read it some time ago, but this episode struck me as an example that best depicted the Japanese sentiment of *omoiyari*. The story goes as follows.

While fleeing a house he had just robbed, a man was accosted by a police officer, whom he killed. Later, the man was captured and returned by train to Kumamoto, where he had committed the murder. A crowd of spectators (Hearn was among them) waited for him at the station. The prisoner came out of the station escorted by a police detective. The detective called for the mother and child of the murdered policeman to step forward. The detective told the boy that his father was murdered by this man, and it was his fault the boy had no father. The detective told the boy to take a really good look at the man. Then the boy, frightened and sobbing, stared at the prisoner for a long time, almost as if he wanted to pierce the man with his stare. Then Hearn describes this sequence of events:

The crowd seemed to have stopped breathing. I saw the prisoner's features distort; I saw him suddenly dash himself down upon his knees despite his fetters, and beat his face into the dust, crying out the while in a passion of hoarse remorse that made one's heart shake:

"Pardon! Pardon! Pardon me, little one! That I did – not for hate was it done, but in mad fear only, in my desire to escape. Very, very wicked I have been; great unspeakable wrong have I done you! But now for my sin I go to die. I wish I die; I am glad to die! Therefore, O little one, be pitiful! – forgive me!"

The child still cried silently. The officer raised the shaking criminal; the dumb crowd parted left and right to let them by. Then, quite suddenly, the whole multitude began to sob. And as the bronzed guardian passed, I saw what I had never seen before – what few men ever see – what I shall probably never see again – the tears of a Japanese policeman.

The crowd ebbed, and left me musing on the strange morality of the spectacle. Here was justice unswerving yet compassionate – forcing knowledge of a crime by the pathetic witness of its simplest result. Here was desperate remorse, praying only for pardon before death. And here was a populace – perhaps the most dangerous in the Empire when angered – comprehending all, touched by all, satisfied with the condition and the shame, and filled, not with wrath, but only with the great sorrow of the sin – through simple deep experience of the difficulties of life and the weakness of human nature. (Hearn, 1896, p. 11)

The problem with using this story to illustrate *omoiyari* is that it does not seem to live up to *omoiyari*'s high ethical standards. As stated in Lebra's def-

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

initions of *omoiyari*, it – first and foremost – is an altruistic, prosocial behavior, so much so that it defines the standard of ethical behaviors for the Japanese. But the example above depicts feelings of sympathy that the spectators held for the criminal, and that the criminal begged from the spectators. How can this be *omoiyari*? As one student commented to me, “How can empathy be empathy if it has to do with forgiving someone who killed a man in front of his child?”

To me, and I suppose to many of my fellow Japanese, the personal meaning of *omoiyari* cannot always be articulated in terms of a single, explicit, dictionary-like definition. Rather, its emotional meaning is embraced by a family of interrelated concepts and contexts. In my mind, the meaning of *omoiyari* falls among the notions of compassion (*ninjo*), indulgence (*amae*), and sincerity (*makoto*).

Omoiyari is related to compassion (*ninjo*), because it has to do with forgiving others by mercy. In the creation myth of Kojiki and Nihongi, for example, the sun goddess Amaterasu repeatedly condones the cruel behaviors of her younger brother Susanoo (Pelzel, 1974, p. 7). Susanoo, as the myth describes, “had from birth been a selfish, cruel, and unruly god, whose very presence ‘withered mountains and dried up rivers and seas.’” As a result, his parents ordered him to “proceed to the nether world (or the sea) to be its ruler where he could not harm the things of earth” (Pelzel, 1974, p. 7). But he ignored his parents’ order and, instead, rose up to heaven where his sister reigned as the ruler. There he continued to misbehave by “breaking down the dikes around his sister’s rice fields, letting a piebald colt loose in her fields at harvest time, defecating on the floor of her palace, and so forth” (Pelzel, 1974, p. 7). But instead of punishing him, Amaterasu kept on covering up for him:

[She] did not protest these acts, however, in each case finding an excuse for them that was acceptable to her. For example, she decided that in tearing down the dikes among her fields he had been moved by a helpful intent, impractical as it was in actuality, merely to increase the area that could be planted to rice, and she imagined that what looked like excrement on her floor was really nothing but vomit that he had brought up during an otherwise forgivable bout of drunkenness. (Pelzel, 1974, p. 7)

To me, this story portrays *omoiyari* as *ninjo* (compassion and mercy). *Omoiyari* is also related to *amae* – that is, “assum[ing] that [one] has another’s good will, or take[ing] an] . . . optimistic view of a particular situation order to gratify his need to feel at one with, or indulged by, his surroundings” (Doi, 1981, p. 8). This interpretation has to do with indulging

Cambridge University Press

0521781590 - Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Edited by Hidetada Shimizu and Robert A. LeVine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

someone who makes an unrealistic and often presumptuous demands for benevolence. For example, the term *tanomu* (to ask), usually used by a person asking for a favor, has a meaning “roughly midway between the English ‘to ask’ and ‘to rely on,’ implying that one is entrusting some matter concerning oneself personally to another person in the expectation that he will handle it in a manner favorable to oneself. . . . *Tanomu*, in other words, means nothing other than ‘I hope you will permit my self-indulgence’” (Doi, 1981, p. 30). Again, it requires much *omoiyari* to permit such indulgence of others.

Finally, *omoiyari* can be understood in conjunction with the notion of sincerity that is designed to nullify the distinction between *tatema*e and *honne*. Normally, public morality is held as *tatema*e, the general consensus of a group to which one belongs, such as the law designed to punish those who break it. Individuals generally conform to *tatema*e willingly as long as they are able to conceal or contain their *honne*, that is, privately felt ideas and feelings, behind *tatema*e. But when individuals find it impossible to contain their *honne* behind *tatema*e, they can be momentarily excused for showing their *honne* by appealing to the sincerity of others. This, I believe, is functionally synonymous with the notion of *omoiyari*. Doi explains the principle as follows:

[T]he Japanese notion of sincerity is intimately intertwined with the notion of *omote* (front) and *ura* (back). In everyday, normal circumstances, individuals display *tatema*e as “face” i.e., *omote*, and conceals *honne*, their real feelings, behind it. The cultural consensus is that individuals have their individualized and idiosyncratic *honne* behind *tatema*e. Respect for this general rule helps to maintain harmony among people. Should a conflict arise within an individual or group, however, the equilibrium between *tatema*e and *honne* is disrupted. It is such a time of trouble that the Japanese most often revert to the use of the concept of sincerity. In fact, there is one scholar who stated exactly this at the end of Tokugawa period; that to be “sincere” is to temporarily set aside the distinction between *tatema*e and *honne*, and to deal with the conflict on a “man-to-man” basis. To me, the latter signifies a temporary agreement, due to the emergent nature of the situation at hand, between the two (or more) parties that *amae* can be brought to the surface – i.e., to reveal one’s naked heart, undisguised by *tatema*e. This, I believe, is at the heart of the Japanese notion of “sincerity.” (Doi, 1986, pp. 107–08)

What the spectator did for the murderer indeed required *omoiyari*, just as Lebra defined it, “the ability and willingness to feel what others are feeling, to vicariously experience the pleasure and pain that they are under-