

The Family, Individuality, and Group Identity: A Comparison between the Far East and the West

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The human race is made up of individuals, but each individual is born into a family, and for the most part lives his life in a group context. Between various societies there can be great differences in the emphasis placed on the individual and the group. East Asians tend to place emphasis on the group/family somewhat at the expense of the individual, while Westerners tend to place emphasis on the individual somewhat at the expense of the group/family (Kurokawa; 1980, Reischauer; 1977, Zander; 1983, Hirayama & Hirayama, 1998). This paper will explore and describe some of the major differences in interpersonal relationships and group/family life between East Asia and Western societies from the perspectives of value differences in individual orientation and group – identity orientation. I also will explore the effects of these differences on people, and their implications for social work practice. However, because of my limited knowledge about each of the East Asian countries, including Korea, I will attempt to confine my argument to two of the most familiar societies, Japan and the United States, as I have lived in both societies for many years.

My observation is that people in the West, in general, are more preoccupied with individual rights than with group solidarity. Thus, the individual psycho-social issues, such as the development of ego autonomy, individual responsibility, self-identify, and individual achievement become important goals for members of the societies. A saying, “The Lord helps those who help themselves” is a well-accepted theme in the West. On the other hand, people in East Asian societies cultivate a sense of group-identity and solidarity, and try to derive their life satisfaction and security from their group. Their sense of self-esteem and self-identity are more closely tied to the status and prestige of the groups they belong to, and their self-identity is more enmeshed with the group/family than is the westerners’. A saying, “Nails which stick out must be hammered in” becomes a major theme in most East Asian life. Both individual – oriented and group-oriented societies have advantages and disadvantages for people who live in the societies. Let me use my own experience to illustrate the above point.

Episode.

Several years ago I had a chance to conduct a workshop on casework for a group of public assistance workers in Japan. In that meeting one participant, who introduced himself as an inexperienced beginning worker, asked a question about the extent of responsibility of American public assistance workers. First I could not comprehend the nature of his question, but more explanation from him, it became clear that he was asking whether American public assistance workers would feel responsible or liable, if their clients commit some kind of criminal offense. The worker explained that as some of his clients have serious alcoholic problems, he is afraid that they might commit serious offenses to the public. He said that his job description stated that his responsibility is to “protect, guide, and rehabilitate people on welfare roll,” and he felt that he would be responsible for his clients’ conduct in twenty-four hours a day. So he wanted to know how his American counterparts perceive their responsibilities toward their clients.

This episode tells something about the relationship of two individuals in a hierarchical situation. In Japan or other East Asian countries, group structure or interpersonal relationship is arranged according to a hierarchical order of firmly established respective positions, roles and status within the group. A Japanese sociologist, Nakane Chie, calls Japanese society “vertical” in contrast to

the “horizontally arranged society” of the U.S. or other Western countries. A hierarchical relationship exists in most of the interpersonal relationship in most East Asian societies: parent-child, teacher-student, employer –employee, and old-young, etc. Respective roles and functions of each position and status are generally well defined and prescribed.

The above episode indicates an example of the public assistance worker who perceives to be responsible for the total life situation of his clientele. Once this worker-client relationship is formulated, the boundary of individuals in the relationship becomes less conspicuous. In any hierarchical relationship, a form of shared responsibility develops and the idea of public and private domain diminishes. The laws specify individual accountability, not a dyad of parent-child or employer-employee. But in reality the person who occupies a superior position is expected to share moral responsibility with the person in a subordinate position who breaches social rules, such as committing a crime or other forms of public offense. Some form of public apology by the superior is expected. In an extreme case, though becoming extremely rare, the parents whose child has committed a serious offense might commit suicide as an apology to the public. When an employee commits a crime such as embezzlement, it is customary for his superior to resign or to be dismissed from the organization, as they are considered negligent of supervision of their subordinates. It is, therefore, not out of place for the inexperienced public assistance worker to question the boundary of his responsibility in relation to his clientele. In contrast, western societies where individuals are solely responsible for their actions and behaviors a clear boundary of responsibility exists between two individuals, even in the relationship of parent and child, as both are considered to have their rights as independent and autonomous self. Thus it is unthinkable for a Western public assistance worker to even feel responsible –legally, ethically or morally for the misconduct of his clients in their private lives. Furthermore, in general the Western worker perceives his relationship with his clients as a contractual one, defined by law and determined by the client’s personal desire and interest. The underlying value is the “equality” of two individuals in reciprocal relationships, each assuming different roles and functions.

The East Asians origin of such hierarchical relationships in group structure and the diffused boundary of interpersonal relationship may be traced back to older days of the family or clan system. The pre-modern East Asian families might include subordinate branch families under the authority of the stem family and other members who were distant kin. It also gave absolute authority over the individual members to the father or the family council. Traces of this system linger on in modern times. A sense of shared responsibility between superior and subordinate is one of the forms that remains as remnant of this old family system which was transformed into Asian group life (Reischauer; 1977).

Social Obligation and Human Feeling

In order to make further differentiation between interpersonal relationships in East Asia (Japan) and Western (U.S.) societies, the concepts of social obligation and human feelings in Japan will be discussed next. While the hierarchy structures a vertical relationship of individuals in the group, social obligation and human feelings presume to give substance to cementing and forming the type of interpersonal relationship. Social obligation refers to one’s sense of indebtedness to other persons. For example, a person first feels indebted to his supervisor at his employment because he thinks the supervisor had been exceptionally good to him because both graduated from the same university. The employee feels obligated to return the favor to the supervisor in many more times whenever he has opportunities. Here the relationship is formed by the sense of social obligation. On the other hand, human feeling, a feeling of deep affection, is thought to occur spontaneously between parent and child. Both social obligation and human feelings exist between parent and child. But there is a possibility of losing human feelings even between parent and child if their relationship goes sour, then only social obligation remains as a binding force between them. On the other hand, the relationship between supervisor and supervised may start first as a relationship of social obligation, but later deep affection may develop between them

(Doi; 1981). Lee, Juan, and Hom (1984), in quoting Shon and Ja (1982) state, "In American society, the tendency toward reciprocity is weighted heavily toward contractual obligation agreed upon freely among group members. Within Asian cultures, obligation is important and in general incurred through ascribed roles and status or through kindness or helpfulness received from other people. At times, obligations to different individuals may conflict and become a source of great anxiety." (p. 39).

In addition to social obligation and human feelings, Doi Takeo (1981), a psychiatrist and scholar, has introduced the concept of *amae*, what Doi thinks one of the important elements in interpersonal relationships that is uniquely Japanese. The Japanese term, *amae* refers initially to the feelings that all normal infants at the breast harbor toward the mother – dependence, the desire to be passively loved, the unwillingness to be separated from the warm mother-child-circle. Although the dependence and indulgence are universally experienced by all human beings to certain degrees, Doi (1981) believes that to the Japanese these feelings are somehow prolonged into adult life and diffused throughout his life. They come to shape, to a far greater extent than in adults in the west, his whole attitude toward other people and to "reality."

Doi (1981) states:

For him, the assurance of another person's goodwill allows a certain degree of indifference to the claims of the other person as a separate individual.

Such a relationship implies a considerable blurring of the distinction between subject and object as such: it is not necessarily governed by strict rational or moral standards and may often seem selfish or childish to the outsider."(p.8).

One such example is; sometimes we hear a Japanese parent remarks that his/her adult daughter/son is still *Amaenbo de komarimasu* (she is bothersome because she always seeks my indulgence). Of course, "bothersome" should not be interpreted literally. Here the parent is not only allowing such behavior, but also to a certain extent encouraging and enjoying it. It proves to him/her and others that he/she maintains an intimate relationship with his/her daughter and assures continuation of a warm and partly inseparable relationship originated in childhood. In other words, this mutually dependent and indulgent relationship is permitted to exist into adult life. *Amae* is not only permitted to exist among family members but also in various degrees between other types of relationships such as teacher-student and employer-employee.

In western societies, persons experience dependency in childhood. But in general, prolonged dependency between parent-child is discouraged because dependent attitudes and behaviors are perceived as counter-indicative of self-sufficiency and independence.

Inner and Outer

The Japanese often refer to their own groups: i.e., schools or companies, as "Uchi no school," or "Uchino company." The term *uchi* means inside and is synonymous with i.e., family or home. Thus, a person talks in the abstract as if his school or company is at the same level of intimacy as his own family. Another example of this is when a person introduces his superior to others, even if this person is the chairman of the board or company president, it is customary for him to speak his superior's name without an honorific title, Mr. Or Miss. In a society where the use of honorific titles is important and customary in daily life, this omission reveals that his sense of identity with his company is as intimate as with his own family. This is an example of how the Japanese distinguish between the types of human relationship, or groups they refer to as outer and inner.

For the Japanese, the parent-child relationship is the ideal prototype relationship that is used as a yardstick to measure all other relationships. Any relationship between two people becomes deeper, the closer it approaches the warmth of the parent-child relationship. It is for this reason that stranger means someone who has no connection with oneself. Although employee's relationship with his company president may not be as close as the parent-child relationship, the

employer-employee relationship is certainly not the relationship of stranger, but perceived to be the relationship of an inner circle of family.

Enryo is a Japanese expression that may be translated roughly as restraint; and “en” literally reads as distance, ryo as “consideration.” This concept is used as a negative yardstick in measuring the intimacy of interpersonal relationships. In the parent-child relationship there is no restraint, since parents and their children are not strangers that the relationship is permeated with *amae*, dependency and indulgence. With other relationships outside this parent-child relationship, the greater the degree of intimacy the restraint decreases proportionately (Doi; 1981). While there is no restraint between intimate friends, one finds the greatest restraint in the relationship between strangers.

Any organization or group in Japan tends to emphasize and promote a sense of unity and group identity with its members. Once a person joins a group and is accepted a members, he is expected to become a member of the “inner circle.” He is no longer regarded as *tanin*, stranger, to the group and he himself develops an identity with the group itself. Soon he begins to refer to his group or organization as “uchi” or “family,” by making clear distinction between inner and outer.

Effects of the Group/Family on Persons

What are the effects of the group/family on persons in a society where strong emphasis is on group solidarity at the expense of individuality? There are certainly advantages as well disadvantages. Perhaps one important advantage is the sense of security a person receives from membership. As long as he is loyal to the group/family, and strives to achieve group/family goals, and acts cooperatively with the group, he can expect to receive in exchange support and security from the group. Even nonproductive members, such as disabled workers, who can make no measurable contribution to the institution, he still can retain his membership in the organization.

In contrast, the American strives for his own individual success and tries to do better than his associates. Group is a context where the individual competes, striving to raise his own self-esteem and status separately from the group’s esteem and status. For the Japanese, the group’s goal is identical to his own goals and success. If his group fails, he, too, fails. If his group achieves higher prestige and success, his own prestige and success are enhanced regardless of the specific amount of contribution he makes to the group.

In American society where the emphasis is on individuality and independence, at least in belief, persons are expected to compete with one another in an open market. This type of society appears well-suited for people with ability, drive, motivation, and competitive spirit. But it is hard for people who are less talented and less competitive. On the other hand, a group-oriented society like Japan does not seem to offer sufficient opportunities to talented individualistic persons who wish to work independent of others. It is not a completely satisfying place for those who have exceptional talents, but it is a safe haven for the “average” person.

In such a strong group-oriented society, like Japan, what happens to individuality? Do the Japanese act as apathetic robots, meekly conforming to one another and endlessly repeating the approved pattern of society? I do not think that is the case.

On the surface, for an outside observer of group interactions, the members may appear harmonious and cooperative, but it is incorrect to assume that the members have no conflicts and struggles among themselves. One must anticipate a collision of individuality and group identity. Thus the effort to satisfy individual needs such as personal achievement, ambition, aggression, and competitive urges comes in conflict with meeting the needs of collectives, such as group goals, harmony, and cooperation.

In sum, I will illustrate the differences by summarizing the qualities of Japanese groups and interpersonal relationships and by presenting the qualities of the Western interpersonal relationships and groups in comparison.

Japan

West

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| 1. Unspoken mutual trust is more important than verbally agreed contract. | 1. Verbally expressed contractual agreement is more important than nonverbal trust. |
| 2. Group members work hard for the group, not for individuals. | 2. People strive for their own success, not the group's success. |
| 3. Meeting social obligations toward colleagues and superiors are most important | 3. Affirming and satisfying one's personal rights is most important. |
| 4. Members cooperate with associates and help them. | 4. Members strive to do better than their associates. |
| 5. Persons in one's social environment bear responsibility for one's acts. | 5. Individuals are solely responsible for their own behavior. |
| 6. Members should not embarrass or hurt others, even if they must conceal their feelings to do so | 6. Candid or assertion about one's situation is most important, so it does not matter if frank comments hurt another person's feelings. |
| 7. Members' self-esteem and prestige are closely related to the group's image and prestige. | 7. Members use the group as a context for realization of their own goals and achievement. |

Implications for Social Work

From the foregoing discussion, what implications can be driven for social work practice? Furthermore, what might be the major differences in approaches to work with individuals, families, and groups between the East and the West?

Thus far, in Japan most social work is centered on practice with individual clients, not with a family as a whole or group. An interesting question here is why family work (therapy) or group work (therapy) has not been extensively utilized by the Japanese social worker. Is it not more logical to offer social work to an entire family or group as unit of service in a society where stronger emphasis is on group-identify or family solidarity? While activity-centered group work or recreational type of group work is well developed and extensively used in a variety of settings, there is relatively little use of family and group therapy in which the primary mode of operation is verbal communication among participants.

There are several reasons for this phenomenon. One practical reason is that gathering an entire family, as expected by Western family therapy theories, at one place at a certain time of day presents difficult logistical problems in Japan. The often overheated, quick paced urban living style of the Japanese does not permit all family members to gather at one place, as the members are generally scattered over a wide area, each with his/her own responsibility and daily schedule. Thus, no matter how effective family therapy is, the social worker can not utilize this approach with clients under the present circumstances.

There are other reasons directly relate to structuring practice with families. The Japanese in general still view casework or any other form of counseling as an activity of advice-giving and receiving. The social worker, in general, is perceived by clients to occupy a higher status in the hierarchy of worker-client relationship. Thus the client expects the worker to give advice in order

to solve his/her problems. Furthermore, most clients expect the worker to do problem-solving for them, rather than trying to find solutions by themselves with help from the worker. The Japanese social worker frequently comments about a lack of openness or extreme hesitation in the attitudes of clients in social work relationships. Slow and cautious movement is a usual pattern in the initial phase of the social work process. In contrast to the Japanese, the American worker-client relationship is based on reciprocity or mutuality with fairly well defined roles and expectations of both workers and clients whenever they come in contact with each other with specific purposes. Clients are usually aware that they are expected to speak to the social worker about their concerns and problems as openly as possible.

In a Japanese family or group, the respective status, roles, and functions of each member are fairly well defined and prescribed. Each member is expected to behave, express, and relate to others according to his expected roles and functions in the family. Thus, at least in initial casework, it is extremely difficult for family members to speak freely or openly to others, particularly to express negative feelings and opinions toward one another in front of a social worker who does not belong to the family circle. Speaking openly and freely about family secrets may be interpreted by other members, as something of a betrayal of family loyalty and solidarity by exposing shame or the dark side of the family life to a stranger whose status and relationship to the family is unknown or undetermined. However, once the social worker is accepted and regarded as a member of the inner circle, it is quite conceivable that he/she could do many good things for the family. The worker is likely to be afforded a special position as a family ally with considerable power, authority, and influence.

In sum, one important implication is that the social worker needs to acknowledge the fact that in each culture, people develop different outlooks toward other people: the ways people relate to and treat one another, and act and behave in groups/families. Even time-honored American values such as affirmation of individuality, individual responsibility, and self-affirmation begin to take different shapes and meanings when they are applied in a different cultural context. Thus the social worker should develop and maintain open and sensitive attitudes toward the patterns of interpersonal relationships and the modes of interpersonal helping in different cultures other than those of his/her own.

The second implication is that in order to successfully work with people in different cultures, the social worker is required to develop a social work practice framework that is more suitable for a particular cultural and ethnic group. Understanding interpersonal or family/group dynamics in different cultures requires a different set of perspectives for interpretation by the social worker. For example, as mutually respected interpersonal relationships are highly regarded in Japan or in other Asian cultures, any direct or open confrontation which may lead to disagreement and loss of face for people involved should be avoided whenever possible. Much of the communication style tends to be indirect. Thus, understanding of nonverbal communication is crucial (Chue and Sue;1984).

The third implication is for international social work. As Korea, the United States and Japan are highly developed post-industrial societies, they are now facing common social and familial problems. While a heavy exchange of technological information and goods has been taking place among the three nations, there is still little exchange of knowledge and information in the field of social work. If there has been any knowledge transfer, a general flow of information is one-sided from the U.S. to Korea and Japan. In this fast changing world, it is imperative that social workers take a more active global stance for the development of knowledge and skills for problem-solving in the world.

Conclusions

Based on the assumption that the family is a prototype of the patterns of interpersonal relationship and group-identity in a given culture, the differences between the East and the West

have been discussed. Japan's group-orientation and the U.S.'s individual orientation are highlighted. The notion is that in the West people are more preoccupied with individual rights, while in the East people are preoccupation with groups. However, it is important to acknowledge that in reality there are no such clear demarcations. In any society, individuality and group identity stand on a continuum: it is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves as the society changes. For instance, because of the development of global economy and a 10-year long recession, Japan is going through revolutionary changes in all sectors of Japanese lives. The foundation of Japanese society, including the family has been shaken on account of a new government policy known as Kozokaikaku (restructuring the systems), whose aims are to restructure not only governmental institutions but also educational institutions, as schools, colleges and universities, etc., and health and welfare institutions as well. While the outcome of Kozokaikaku is unknown and unpredictable, every Japanese citizen is affected one way or another. Furthermore, in order to survive the current recession and to adapt to a more competitive global economy, large and small corporations started to layoff or dismissed the thousands of their employees. Losing the jobs in the middle of career was unknown to Japanese workers. After all, you do not throw out your family members out into the cold under any circumstances. For many Japanese workers and their family members, the shock of losing the jobs are beyond their imagination. Moreover, the emphasis is now on the development of individuality, moving away from the traditional group – identity orientation. The need to tap person's creativity and unique ability has been recognized by the government, the industry, and the educational institutions throughout Japan. In other words, the notion is to create more individual-oriented society than that of the traditional group- oriented society.

Furthermore, Japanese society is facing a new challenge of how to care for a rapidly growing aging population. This year, people at the age of 65 years and over occupy 18.5 % of Japan's population. The figure is the highest in the world only equals to Italy. This figure is expected to rise to 20% in 2006, and then by the year 2014 the figure becomes 25%. On the other hand, last year Japan's birthrates dipped to the level of 1.33 %, the lowest in the world. What will become of Japan and its families in the year 2050? No one can predict. May be Japan can survive with a massive migration from East Asian countries, including Korea. Lastly, I like to quote a statement by Edwin Reischauer (1977), a scholar and one time ambassador to Japan, who has cautioned us to avoid the danger of stereotyping a culture: He states:

The balance between group and individual is also in flux in Japan as else where, and there are signs of convergence in this regard between Japan and the West. Modern technology in the Occident clearly produced conditions in which more individuals could win economic and other forms of independence from their families or other groupings than in earlier ages. In fact, the trend in this direction has become so extreme that isolation and anomie of contemporary urban life are giving Westerners pause and are causing a sort of groping once again for close group relationships. In Japan the effects of modern technology have by no means gone far, but they have had the same general effect as in the West, de-emphasizing the group some what in favor of the individual. (p.128).

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