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The Japanese social concept of *amae* goes global

Bruce Bower

In private conversations, native Japanese people often regale one another with tales of tactless, even tasteless, encounters that fall under the heading of the Japanese term *amae* (pronounced "a-mah-yeh"). *Amae* also encompasses sweet moments between parents and children or between lovers. In Japan, people know when interactions move into the realm of *amae*, even though they'd be hard pressed to define it. Psychologists are, however, beginning to scrutinize such interactions. They roughly define *amae* as a person's expectation that another person will indulge him or her and the obligation of the second person to do so, whether or not he or she wants to. Both the researchers and people who grew up in Japan recognize that *amae* is double-edged: It can serve important and beneficial social roles, but it also can go sour.

Consider a woman, born and raised in Japan but now employed at a San Francisco company, recalling the story of a male acquaintance's philandering wife. The acquaintance and his spouse were also native Japanese living in the San Francisco area.

It seemed innocent enough when the wife called the other woman on the phone and asked for help in translating a tax form from English to Japanese, which she reluctantly agreed to do. A few weeks later, the wife phoned again and requested assistance in translating a letter into English. The first round of translation had been done through the mail, but this time, the wife insisted on bringing over the letter in person.

"Well, it turned out that the letter she wrote was a love letter for someone whom she's having an affair with," the woman told an interviewer. "It was definitely *amae* because somehow, even though she knew that I knew her husband, she expected that I wouldn't tell him

about her affair." And the cheating wife was right?spilling the beans about her dalliance would have been an unacceptable affront to social harmony.

The interviewer who chronicled this instance of *amae*, developmental psychology graduate student Kazuko Behrens of the University of California, Berkeley, had listened sympathetically. Having grown up in Japan and previously worked as a banker for New York City-based subsidiaries of Japanese financial firms, she knows what it's like to get backed into a corner by the power of *amae*.

During Behrens' banking days, for example, a male Japanese supervisor once asked her to drop her own tasks to serve tea to a group of visiting Japanese businessmen. The supervisor expected her to comply because, as he explained, it would be better if a Japanese woman, rather than a man, waited on men accustomed to such treatment. Behrens grimly acquiesced, but the degrading episode still burns in her memory.

Now, Behrens has served up a wide-ranging analysis of *amae* that may offer a new framework for studying relationships throughout the world. In the Jan.-Feb. *Human Development*, she described different forms of *amae* that arise during infancy, childhood, and adulthood. *Amae* can foster warmth and affection, broker mutually beneficial deals, or leverage intentions to manipulate or abuse others?it all depends on the situation and the partners' ages and motives.

Despite its origin in the Japanese language, *amae* refers to a category of social interactions that probably occur everywhere to some extent, says Behrens. In many countries, for example, a young girl might coyly ask a boy she likes to carry her books.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS. Mothers and their children engage in both feel-good and manipulative interactions that the Japanese classify as *amae*. PhotoDisc

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"I believe amae-like phenomena exist in non-Japanese cultures, although there is perhaps no other single word [in those languages] that covers amae's multiple meanings and functions," Behrens says.

This idea contrasts with a popular view among Western researchers that amae is a uniquely Japanese way to cement social bonds. What's more, if amae occurs universally, questions would arise about a theory, now promoted by some cultural psychologists, that Asians and Westerners think in fundamentally different ways.

Dynamic duos

Amae's previous reputation as strictly a feel-good interaction owes much to Japanese psychiatrist Takeo Doi, whose 1971 book on amae was translated into English in 1973 and titled *The Anatomy of Dependence* (Kodansha). Doi argued that babies are born craving love and closeness. In Japan, he noted, babies and young children seek "a sense of oneness" with their mothers through amae behaviors, such as acting helpless in a playful way to encourage holding and cuddling.

Amae also colors adult relationships, such as when a woman or man playfully acts childlike with a romantic partner to invite intimacy.

For a child, the absence of amae or a mother's inappropriate behavior regarding it can be damaging. Doi theorized that a child's inability to express amae, or a mother's refusal to respond to amae-type overtures, leads to psychological problems as an adult.

Other Japanese researchers have observed that mothers sometimes initiate amae encounters with their children to renew intimacy or to fight off insecure feelings that their children might not love them. This behavior turns harmful if a mother tries to keep her child perpetually immature and dependent on her.

Behrens has incorporated such observations into research to yield the first picture of how amae changes and expands throughout life. This effort relied heavily on her interviews about amae experiences with members of three groups: 40 mothers of preschool children in a Japanese city, half from working-class families and half from middle- and upper-class families; 13 men and women native to Japan who continue to live there; and 10 men and women born and raised in Japan who now reside in the San Francisco Bay area.

In the Berkeley researcher's framework, Doi's upbeat version of amae? in which someone lightheartedly triggers another's emotional warmth and acceptance? occurs at all ages. Infants and their parents, older children and their parents, and romantic partners, including elderly ones, all seek love through playful and childish behaviors.

Children and adults also practice a second form of amae, Behrens contends. She classifies it as manipulative. Many Japanese preschoolers, for example, act clingy and helpless with their mothers to obtain special favors or attention when fatigue sets in shortly before bedtime or when their mother directs attention to a sibling.

In the same calculating vein, Japanese husbands often expect their wives to mother them. A man will act clueless when he wants his needs met, such as having his dinner cooked by his spouse even when she's harried. His wife may then respond with her own sharp-edged amae, perhaps by privately arranging a social outing and putting hubby in a position of having to come along even if he doesn't want to.

A type of barter characterizes a third category of amae practiced by children and adults. At school, for instance, good friends expect to share favorite toys, borrow and lend class notes, take each other's side in fights, and otherwise do favors for one another. In adulthood, pairs of close friends and coworkers operate on similar expectations. They assume that each can borrow personal items, money, or a car from the other or that each can arrange occasional dates with prospective boyfriends or girlfriends for the other.

Two other types of amae transpire only among adults, Behrens asserts. The first occurs in encounters between individuals with unequal power or status, such as a boss and a subordinate or a businessperson and a client. In such pairings, the individual in the stronger position may expect the other to accept unreasonable demands. The tea-serving episode that Behrens recounted illustrates amae of this sort.

On fewer occasions, the subordinate tries to obtain the same type of acquiescence from the superior. For example, a Japanese college professor told Behrens that visits from some of his students include special offerings to block commercial overtures with the student

worried allusions to bleak summer-job prospects, with the clear but unspoken expectation that he will assist them in finding employment. According to the professor, this ploy often works.

The second adults-only kind of amae consists of encounters, often between acquaintances or people who barely know each other, in which one person expects the other to meet demands that would otherwise be made only of a close friend. The previously mentioned case of the wayward wife's translation requests falls under this category.

Security concerns

Western researchers have long regarded relationships as grounded in what they call attachment, a concept that bears an ambiguous relationship to amae.

Attachment refers to an innate tendency for babies and children to stay close to their caregivers. Using an experimental protocol that temporarily separates and reunites a child and his or her mother, scientists find that some kids explore their surroundings after the mother leaves and happily greet her when she returns. Such behavior signifies secure attachment, the researchers say.

Other children get upset or anxious when the mother leaves or appear inexpressive when left alone. When the mother returns, some avoid contact with her, while others act helpless. These behaviors reflect insecure attachment.

Some research indicates that attachment styles formed during childhood may structure later adult relationships.

"There's an undeniable but still poorly understood link between attachment and amae," Behrens says.

Both types of behavior emerge during infancy and primarily tighten the bond between mothers and their children, she notes. Yet attachment behaviors often come to the fore when a child feels threatened or distressed, while amae appears when there's a desire to feel close to someone or to have that person fulfill a need.

Cultural values play a crucial role in distinguishing amae from attachment, says psychologist Fred Rothbaum of Tufts University in Medford, Mass. In his view, amae highlights the Japanese focus on maintaining harmonious relationships in families and other social groups while striving for unconditional trust between partners in intimate relationships. As a result, many Western researchers misinterpret Japanese children's helpless and clingy amae behaviors as signs of insecure attachment, when those behaviors are simply culturally appropriate ways of securing maternal closeness, Rothbaum says.

In contrast, in the West, attachment behaviors serve as a means for achieving autonomy. Children use their attachment styles as they strike off on their own to forge relationships with new people.

"Amae and attachment are both universal," Rothbaum says, noting that "there's a different prevalence and texture to these phenomena in different cultures."

Positive forms of amae go hand-in-hand with secure attachment, according to psychologist Susumu Yamaguchi of the University of Tokyo. In several sets of interviews investigating the two types of social interaction, Japanese adults told Yamaguchi and his colleagues that children who exhibit typical features of secure attachment frequently also employ amae behaviors, usually in a socially appropriate manner. Kids who display insecure attachment resort to amae on fewer occasions and do so in clumsy and ill-advised ways.

East meets West

It's not hard to discern amae-like behaviors among Westerners, such as mothers and their children or husbands and wives, Behrens says. Even so, she contends, investigations of these interactions won't kick into gear until researchers abandon the simplistic notion that Asian cultures are dominated by a collective, group-oriented thinking style that stands in opposition to a primary focus on independent thought and self-regard in Western cultures (SN: 1/22/00, p. 56: Available to subscribers at <http://www.sciencenews.org/articles/20000122/bob9.asp>).

Emerging evidence suggests that all societies groom people to adopt both collective and individualistic values. From this perspective, cultures differ primarily in the number and types of opportunities provided for expressing each tendency.

provided for expressing each tendency.

Consider a group of 64 Japanese mothers of 3- to 6-year-olds interviewed by Berkeley's Hiroyuki Yamada. In raising their children, these women report combining efforts to ensure discipline and conformity with attempts to encourage independent thinking, Yamada reports in the Jan./Feb. *Child Development*. The mothers say that they often grant their children autonomy in choosing their friends, clothes, and recreational activities, for example.

Psychologist Daphna Oyserman of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor regards this as a more nuanced view than the traditional assumption that Easterners and Westerners interact in fundamentally different ways. In a 2002 research review, she and her coworkers concluded that the collectivistic leanings of European Americans—such as feeling a sense of duty to family and to country—equal those of Japanese and Koreans. Among Asians, only the Chinese place collectivistic values far above individualistic ones, Oyserman and her colleagues found.

In the past 2 years, Oyserman has examined how simple experimental manipulations of a person's focus on self or on others inspire so-called Western or Eastern varieties of thought. For example, to foster a collectivistic outlook, U.S. participants were instructed to read a paragraph and circle all first-person plural pronouns (we, us, our); to foster self-regard, the same volunteers were told to circle all first-person singular pronouns (I, me, mine).

In one study using this approach, people who had circled collective pronouns were far more inclined to take turns in a conversation and paid closer attention to common ground. German participants exhibited this response just as strongly as Chinese participants did, Oyserman notes.

In her view, *amae* offers a new avenue to explore two basic elements of collectivistic thinking in any culture: the duties and sacrifices entailed in belonging to a family and other social groups and the extent to which people identify with those to whom they feel particularly close.

Amae behaviors also provide insight into the extent to which people accept their positions in power hierarchies and buy into cultural ideas about how each sex is supposed to act, Oyserman notes.

Japanese assumptions about power and sex certainly fueled Behrens' temporary demotion from banker to tea-server. "It wasn't the particular act itself that bothered me, because I'd be happy to serve tea for my friends at my place," she says. "It was the Japanese men's assumption that I'd accept their request, and they would get away with it?because they always got away with it."

If Behrens gets her way, psychologists will soon explore many more social permutations of *amae*. She would welcome their indulgence.

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