

Differences between Japanese American and European American cultural values may influence the way Nikkei communicate.

The Bi-Cultural Values of Japanese Americans

by Ruth Okimoto, PhD

What Is Culture?

The word “culture” can mean different things to different people. We may refer to the arts as “culture.” Or we may say a corporation has a certain “culture,” or a specific way of doing things. However, the term as discussed in this article goes much deeper and penetrates further into our unconscious being. The culture embodied in the values, outlook and behavior of an ethnic group is “learned,” as artistic or occupational skills are learned, but the process begins long before we are consciously aware of it.

This type of culture, which begins early in infancy, is “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” Culture is different from “personality” – the individual set of characteristics that makes each person unique. Personality arises from both inherited and “learned” traits whereas collective cultural values are *always* learned rather than genetic, and are passed from one generation to the next.

According to the noted American anthropologist Edward Hall, it is



impossible for humans to “divest” themselves of their own cultures. Culture, Hall says, penetrates to the root of our nervous system and determines both our behavior and how we perceive the world. Unfortunately, most of our culture “lies hidden” outside our consciousness. Even “small fragments of culture,” when elevated to our awareness, are difficult to change because we are instilled with our culture so early in life on a deeply personal level.

As children, the first thing we learn is our family’s cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes; how to behave and how to speak. Social psychologist Geert

Hofstede uses a high-tech analogy to explain how cultural values are transmitted from one generation to the next. The cultural values passed to the child by parents or caregivers become part of what Hofstede calls the “mental programming” or “operating system” that determines and guides the child’s behavior. By age 10, a child’s basic value system is firmly in place. According to Hall, we cannot act or interact with others in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture.

Cultural values may be modified from one generation to the next, but the core values remain the same.

Opposite page: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." by Ruth Yoshiko Okimoto. Color and graphic pencil, acrylics on paper, 23" x 29" 1998. Photo by M. Lee Fatherree. Subjects (from top, l to r): mother Kirie Okimoto; U.S. soldier: George Mukai (with permission of G. Mukai; father: Tameichi Okimoto; face of kneeling woman: Topaz Sano.

Right: "Childhood Dreams," by Ruth Yoshiko Okimoto. Color and graphite pencil on paper, 27" x 30" 1983. Photo by M. Lee Fatherree. Mountain range, flag, and barracks adapted from Executive Order 9066, UCLA Asian American Studies Center. Owner: Mrs. Heizo Oshima, El Cerrito, CA.

Depending on our life experiences, geographic location, religion, or economic, educational and generational status, we may vary in how we express our cultural values. Nevertheless, the deeper levels of the cultural values we absorbed as children remain constant.

Whose Cultural Values?

By the time the U.S. was founded in 1776, Western European immigrants, primarily from the British Isles, had set the dominant cultural tone. Values have since evolved, but the fundamental principles of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) ideology still continue to dominate America's cultural landscape. Japanese Americans learned Japanese cultural values early at home and in church. Later, as kindergartners we were introduced to very different values through America's educational system, which promotes core values based on Western European American ideology – values such as self-determination, individual freedom, equality, justice, and allegiance to an omnipotent God.

Japanese Americans often found themselves "conflicted" as they attempted to reconcile Japanese and European American value systems. Many felt confused as they tried to develop their self-identity in America.

America's ongoing problem of race relations has compounded and exacerbated this search for self-identity. Because of space considerations, the impact of race, gender, or discrimination on self-identity and development will not be addressed. This essay will focus on how some of the differences between Japanese American and European American cultural values may influence the way *Nikkei* communicate.

Language and Communication

During the late-19th and early 20th centuries, *Issei* immigrants transported Meiji-era values to America. The Japanese language served as an important vehicle through which the *Issei* articulated core Japanese values and passed them on to their *Nisei* children. By the same token, the English language transported to America by Anglo-Saxon immigrants served as vehicle to articulate "American" values.

Language affects our perception in crucial but subliminal ways. For example, English grammar requires a subject and a verb; Japanese grammar does not always require a subject, reinforcing the Japanese concept of "selflessness." This lack of focus on the



individual self is implicit in the Japanese word for "self." *Jibun* (self) literally means "portion given to self, that is, a portion appropriately distributed to a person out of a larger whole, a piece of a pie, so to speak."² This definition "implies that the self is not an autonomous entity disconnected from society."³ In contrast, the American Heritage Dictionary defines "self" as "the total, essential, or particular being of one person; the individual," which reflects the value placed by European Americans on an individual "self," separate from others.

As a consequence, self-expression is encouraged in America through the use of explicit words and an emphasis on direct and action-oriented communication. On the other hand, the Japanese language reflects the importance of reciprocal relationships between the self and others through a more indirect communication style aimed at reaching consensus.

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Interpersonal Communication

According to sociologist Frank Miyamoto, the *Nisei's* self-perceptions were shaped by *Issei* parents to emphasize the consideration of "others" before considering "self" (one's own feelings, motives, etc). This "interpersonal sensitivity" sets the *Nisei* apart from the European American, who pays primary attention to the "self" and secondary attention to "others."

Miyamoto identified three levels of interactive communication awareness. The *Nisei* learned from their parents to emphasize them in the following order: 1) awareness of others; 2) awareness of the objective self, which imagines how the speaker might appear to another; and 3) awareness of the subjective self, which focuses on the speaker's own feelings, attitudes, motives and interests. Most European Americans are socialized in the reverse order to put primary emphasis on the subjective self without immediate thought of others. The awareness of others is secondary, followed by the objective self.

Given such differences in orientation, or "timing pattern," interpersonal communications between Japanese Americans and European Americans

may be "out of sync" with each other. Of course, this may not apply to all individuals. The table below outlines the "timing pattern" of a hypothetical conversation between a *Nisei* and a European American. Initially, the European American might speak out of personal self-interest (subjective self), while the Japanese American might focus first on others.

The interaction can happen quickly, and the parties involved may not be aware that they are functioning from different levels of awareness. However, the differences in communication pattern may contribute to the lack of spontaneity some Japanese Americans feel when interacting with European Americans. The *Nisei* is not unaware of the subjective self, but the "self" is brought forward only after due consideration of others and of what they might think of you. For example, a *Nisei* may hesitate to speak in a staff meeting for fear of imposing on others, of damaging how he/she is seen by others, or of saying something that reflects badly on another person.

The Influence of Omote and Ura

Miyamoto's ideas on the subjective/objective self overlap Doi's concepts on *omote* (front) and *ura* (rear/back)⁵. *Omote* is what is presented to the "outside" (*soto*). *Omote* is also read as "face" (*kao*) in classical Japanese. *Ura* means

"inside" or what one is feeling and thinking internally. It can also be read in Japanese as *kokoro* (mind, heart, soul). For the *Nisei*, *ura* (the subjective self) may be the very private side of self – the side shown only to family members, to intimate friends or to no one at all.

Japanese Americans may emphasize the *omote* ("outside" or objective self) in different ways than European Americans. However, many European

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Americans, especially men, also prefer not to make public their private feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. When discussing cultural values, we should not assume that ethnic groups in America are limited to one dimension of communication, e.g., either individualistic or collectivistic.

Among *Nisei* and *Sansei*, the expression of objective self (*omote*) and subjective self (*ura*) may vary. For example, a recent forum evoked different reactions to the documentary film: "Children of the Camps," in which six *Nisei* and *Sansei* shared personal feelings regarding their World War II internment camp experiences. A *Nisei*

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION STYLES:
Japanese American Nisei and European Americans

<u>JAPANESE AMERICAN NISEI</u>		<u>EUROPEAN AMERICANS</u>
Awareness of Others	←————→	Subjective Self
Objective Self	←————→	Awareness of Others
Subjective Self	←————→	Objective Self

At the first level of communication with others, many Nisei think of others, second about how they are seen by others, and third of themselves, whereas most European Americans are socialized to think first of themselves
(FRANK MIYAMOTO)

said she was appalled by the film's content and felt that the intense personal feelings expressed were inappropriate for wide distribution to mainstream America (*omote*). In her view, displaying or expressing such private feelings in a public setting was "embarrassing and humiliating." On the other hand, other *Nisei* and *Sansei* at the forum felt that consistency between the *omote* (public) and *ura* (private) self was essential. They believed that private feelings needed to be "aired" or placed "out on the table" for public discussion in order for "healing" to take place.

In America, "authenticity" demands consistency between the public and private selves, and psychologists consider hiding or suppressing one's thoughts and feelings to be unhealthy and potentially harmful. However, Doi contends that the Japanese value system does not require consistency between *omote* and *ura*. He believes that the public and private selves complement each other, and the two positions need not agree. Most Japanese Americans probably blend core Japanese (Meiji) values with European American ones in their communication style.

Conclusion

Language – its sentence structure, meaning of words, and communication behavior – is but one vehicle through which cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes are passed from one generation to the next. Cultural values are embedded not only in the language we learned as children, but in the nonverbal messages we learned from family, schools, and in the handling of material artifacts. In addition, child-rearing practices, religious beliefs and attitudes about the meaning of family all

interrelate and contribute to our cultural values. We unconsciously demonstrate these values every moment of our lives through verbal and nonverbal communication and in the manner in which we do things.

This discussion of cultural values has been limited and introductory. Numerous books and articles have been written about the subject. A few are listed below for those interested in reading more about cultural values, beliefs and attitudes. ■

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2. & 3. Maynard, Senko K. (1997). *Japanese Communication: Language and Thought in Context*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press. pp. 37-43.
4. Miyamoto, Frank (1986-87). "Problems of Interpersonal Style Among Nisei." *Amerasia*, 13(2), pp. 29-45. S. Frank Miyamoto is professor emeritus in the department of sociology, University of Washington, Seattle.
5. Doi, Takeo (1988) *The Anatomy of Self: The Individual Versus Society*. New York: Kodansha International. Paperback.

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Glossary (con't from p. 7)

are no longer heard, but the values they embody may seem very familiar even to fourth and fifth generation Japanese Americans.

What remains to be explored is: How has each generation interpreted and communicated inherited values and norms? How have conflicts or contradictions with Western values and norms been resolved? And, what is the relevance of the traditional *Nikkei* values and norms for *Nikkei* families today? Other contributors in this issue will consider these and other questions.

Core Values and Norms

Enryo: restraint, modesty, holding back, recognition of one's inconvenience to others. Acts as a form of social control that keeps one from inappropriately imposing, expecting, or demanding too much of another. Origin in Confucian proverb: "If a man takes no thought of distant things, he will unfailingly have regrets close at hand." The logic of *enryo* is that the more reflective you are about the consequences of what you are about to say or do, the more you will avoid regret and sorrow. Example: to refuse a second helping even though one might wish for more; to accept the less desirable object when offered a choice; to hesitate to ask questions or speak out in a group; not to ask for a promotion when one deserves it.

Gaman: to be patient, to persevere, to endure, to do one's best in times of frustration or adversity. To *gaman* is to refrain from aggressive or retaliatory action against one's misfortune.

Glossary (con't next pg.)