

**Passing on values through time -
The family as context for learning communicative strategies
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Outlining the problem: What narratives make up the frame of communication?

This paper aims to better understand

- a) how ideas about communication are developed, reflected and passed on, especially within the family, and
- b) the mechanisms by which these ideas shape expectations and strategies in contact.

I am using a concept of communication whose perceptible patterns are not rigidly fixed by what we like to call "culture." Rather, I hold communication to be a fluid phenomenon, taking and changing shape within a frame of reference based on narratives, passed down through time, that provide a range of options for individuals. These options, based usually on one frame of reference – namely that into which one was socialised – can lead to quite contrary surface structures of communication. For instance, a frame of reference characterized by a religiously underpinned notion of "Don't waste your precious time in the world, work, and don't talk!" includes both the option to suppress communication, as well as to encourage communication specifically as a counter-reaction which seeks to create more social cohesion.

My investigation thus aims at drawing into question the notion of cultural patterns of communication, while making out and trying to describe the frames of reference underlying many, but not random, options for shaping interaction.

In this context a consideration of the dimensions of time and memory is fundamental. What narratives surround the idea of communicating? What do I remember about when and how I learnt to shape and structure my communication? What have I observed in my life and what image of communication has carved itself into my memory?

In particular, I wish to look at the notions about communication that take shape within the family during the period when children turn into grown-ups. During this period intergenerational conflict reaches a peak, as the young generation, having acquired full physical strength, becomes capable of using threat or even force in the process of marking its own positions. I maintain that at this age communicative strategies become

linked to strategies for dealing with conflict, while a whole scale of positions within a given frame of reference are tested and selected as elements of a person's identity.

To give an example for a contextual frame for communication: I assume that the narrative about responsibility plays an important role and bears heavily on young adults, as being adult is coupled to the notion of carrying responsibility. In Japan, a consistent definition of responsibility implies the capacity to realise cause and effect, i.e. to realise that my own action affects others. Thus as an adult I should accept being observed and checked by those who might be affected by my action. A good way for us to register this concept of responsibility in Japan is to take note of the warnings and reprimands that support it: *wakarikitte iru koto* (it was obvious that that would be the outcome), *mirubeki datta* (you should have foreseen that), *kangaerubeki datta* (you should have thought about that), all implying: "Why did you not pay attention to the fact that all you do affects others?" Not surprisingly, responsible communicative behaviour is by definition subject to checking by others, including one's friends and spouse. I will return to this question later on with reference to the concept of *kanri* (control, supervision).

However, keeping to the notion that one and the same reference frame can produce a wide range of reactions it is not surprising that the notion of adult responsibility just discussed can just as well lead to intricate strategies to prevent being checked by others. As I will show later on, Japanese scholars argue that precisely such strategies produce complicated and frequently stressful in-group structures.

The narrative reflected in bookstores

To gain insight into present-day narratives about communication between parents and young adults in Japan I first turned to general, non-academic bookstores. These as a rule offer numerous materials for counselling and guidance in day-to-day matters. Here, however, I made a striking discovery. These bookstores contained no materials whatsoever dealing with intergenerational communication involving the younger generation once it approached the category of "young adult." This fact was driven home by two comparisons:

- 1) In contrast to Japanese bookstores, German ones almost always had materials dealing with puberty and adolescence in the context of intergenerational communication and conflict solution.

2) The absence of Japanese materials specifically on intergenerational communication involving young adults was particularly conspicuous since it contrasted with an abundance of materials on communication involving pre- and elementary school children. (Incidentally, this reminded me of what *juku* – private after-hours tutoring school - teachers had often told me: "Young adults in Japan have no lobby.")

When expressing surprise at the absence of a narrative on young adults, the book vendors invariably took me to shelves for materials on *shakai byôri* (pathological problems in society). Must we conclude that young adults in Japan are defined as "pathological cases," criminal or deviant? It remained obscure where, when and how coping with "normal" intergenerational conflict is learnt, what narratives have shaped the frames in which young adults acquired their notions about intergenerational communication in the past, and what has now happened to these frames.

The narrative about cultivating dialogue

One narrative that has consistently made its way into academic presentations in Japan is the one about the *taiwa* (dialogue) – or rather about its absence. Here I am not concerned about the correctness of the corresponding arguments, but rather about the fact that such a narrative altogether exists.

Nakajima Yoshimichi, in his *Taiwa no nai shakai* (Society without dialogue, 1997), deplores the fact that in Japan too much is said that does not address a recipient directly and is thus not geared to a response. That way, he says, language becomes a tool of ritual and does not function as a tool for communication. This leads to an erosion of language, and thus to distrust in the face value of words. Young persons being socialised into this type of language culture learn *hyôgo* (mottos, slogans), *kanyôku* (fixed expressions) or *kunji* (admonitions), which may arouse certain feelings but are not conducive to the expression of personal points of view for which individual responsibility is taken. If no responsibility is taken, a view will also not be defended, clarified, or adjusted. That way differences between two views are not spelt out (Nakajima 1997: 100-136).

Nakajima deplores this blurring of individual stances, and contrasts it to the precise formulation of "truths" expressed by equal and autonomous individuals (Nakajima 1997: 132-134). Dialogue, for Nakajima, is the opposite of creating "feeling" and consists

of matching positions in order to reach a more adequate "truth." Nakajima therefore turns sharply against the constant calls for *yasashisa* (gentleness) and *omoyari* (concern for others), which in fact he sees as a principal cause for violence. This is because *yasashisa* and *omoyari* are directed against spelling out positions through words which are used for exactly what they mean. *Yasashisa* and *omoyari* thus rob meaningful words of their function to provide effective communicative strategies (Nakajima 1997: 138-164).

The Japanese narrative about the absence of dialogue is much older than Nakajima's discussion. For instance, back in 1985 Itô Tomonori (*Katei no naka no taiwa* – Dialogue in the family) dealt with what he saw as the Japanese inability to communicate in the form of dialogues. In doing so Itô pointed especially to the family as a context where inequality was learnt and roles were fixed. The father's frame of orientation, Itô maintains, is "*katsu ka makeru ka no ronri*" (i.e. "Will I win or lose?"), while the mother's he calls "*ikashiai no ronri*" (i.e. "We have to adapt to each other") (Itô 1985: 3). No dialogue was expected between the two orientations, and boys followed father's, girls mother's pattern. Within an extended family a person was surrounded by enough others to develop an identity not by communicating, but by acting out a role. Itô cites a middle-aged woman: "I and my husband, we are totally different, but somehow we get along." This can be taken to indicate that no solution to individual problems through dialogue is seen as necessary (Itô 1985: 8-14).

Although Itô shows us relatively conflict-free interaction, he is critical of his parents' generation and does not see their values as fit to be passed on through time. He paints a somber picture of authoritarianism, which left the young generation in a vacuum when it was supposed to communicate on equal terms from individual to individual (Itô 1985: 88-89, 162-163).

Itô's image of the father is that of head of the family, with everything revolving around him to suit his interests. The father's legal wife (*uchi no onna*) (Itô 1985: 77) was there to use the money father brought home to organise and protect the family, while outside women (*soto no onna*) were there to take care of him according to his needs. As the persons revolving around the father had inferior status, they were never part of a dialogue but expected to spend their time and energy to read his thoughts and act out their role.

Itô sees this kind of role orientation as having prevented communication in the family, but at the same time acknowledges that spontaneous talking was the norm within the in-group of same-sex comrades (Itô 1985: 162-163). However, here individual stances were known and did not need to be explicitly verbalised.

Reflecting upon the arguments of Nakajima and Itô, who deplore the absence of a Japanese tradition of dialogue, some remarks should be made. First of all, we must accept that the Japanese narrative is invariably construed around an East-West dichotomy. Rather than "bash" this narrative, we should try to spell out the reasons for it, considering

- a) the problematic authority of "Western" values and their grip on Japanese narratives, and
- b) the effects of the cultural learning processes of the scholars involved: Mostly their arguments are stimulated by a lengthy period of study in the U.S., and in some cases by German philosophy.

A further critical point to make is that dialogue from equal to equal, and using words for what they mean to solve conflicts, cannot be generalized as "Western." On a personal note, although having grown up in a "Western" society, debating, arguing, and bridging conflict in dialogue seemed rare in my home town until well into the sixties. If there is an East-West dichotomy, then on quite a different level: As I will discuss later, communicative processes in Japan did not have the underpinning of legitimacy if they sought openly to orientate themselves on an ideal of a sovereign people claiming the right to solve their conflicts from autonomous citizen to autonomous citizen. In present-day Japan the narrative about communication indeed contains positions claiming just this, but frame and historical background for the narrative is Japan's own, not a "Western" one. We should pay more attention to that.

The narrative seeking "traditional" values

Japan's present-day narrative about communication is by no means a one-way argument in favour of dialogue, a fact which affects young adults more than anyone else. One major line of argument draws on the concept of order rather than dialogue and stresses *kanri* (control, supervision). This should, as pointed out earlier, not be interpreted just as blunt authoritarianism, but is indeed also linked to a specific concept of shared responsibility. Let us take a look at the argument in more detail.

Nearly all discussions about communication in Japan reflect memories of sweeping change, and it is not rare that they single out the post-war requirement to rapidly adapt to new keywords such as *jiyû-byôdô-minshu shugi* (freedom, equality, democracy) as a major source for confusion and disorientation. Today, this particular adjustment – now that it is a fading memory - is increasingly seen as having led to enormous psychological stress (Itô 1985: 23-30, 38-39).

No matter how we look at the change of values after the war, the fact remains that in post-war Japan successive generations could not socialise their children the way they themselves had learnt to cope with life. Moreover, Japan did not find rest in the decades that followed, and we only need to think of the breakdown of the idealised "Japan-style modern society" (and especially the Japan-style company structure) of the 1970s/80s and the efforts to replace it with non-nation specific ("globalised") economic and organisational structures during the 1990s. We are then forced to realise that once again Japanese parents were unable to pass on the framework of values they themselves were socialised into. The awareness of the loss of reliable values easily links up with a centuries-old narrative about the need continuously to restore a fixed order of things (keyword: Neo-Confucian understanding of order). This in turn gives the concept of *kanri* (control, supervision) a very high degree of legitimacy in Japan. Following the argument that being adult means bearing responsibility, and bearing responsibility means checking and being checked, disorientation calls for *kanri*, and not for dialogue (Nakajima 1997: 59, 73, 96; Itô 1985: 49-62).

The narrative about the group structure of young adults

Dialogue (*taiwa*), according to Itô, implies contrast between individual positions (*tairitsu*) (Itô 1985: 40-43, 160-163). *Tairitsu*, however, according to Doi Takayoshi (2004), is increasingly evaded by young adults. Doi, who in this context also discusses the tight-knit in-group structure of young adults for whom no dialogue with parents appears to exist (Doi 2004: 5-8), is particularly worried about the degree to which young adults emphasise *yasashisa*, i.e. the degree to which they make over-sensitive efforts not to hurt each other (Doi 2004:17, 49). This, Doi maintains, obliterates the members' "true self" in favour of a "dressed-up self" (*yosootta jibun*), producing dangerously unrealistic views of the world. Such in-groups of "dressed-up selves," in which

communication is suppressed out of fear of being excluded, foster overly affective communication, prevent conflict solution, and exactly for this reason form the breeding ground for aggression and brutality. If such in-groups play as prominent a role as Doi suggests, then we may ask ourselves what strategies of communication will be employed once their members become parents and have to confront conflict with their young adult offspring.

Let me shortly turn to the German books on young adults. In these the problems youths and young adults have to cope with from about ages 11 to 18 are very explicitly discussed. This fact reinforces the impression that by contrast Japanese parents are very much left alone when it comes to intergenerational communication and conflict. German materials revolve around the autonomy of young adults and are outspoken about the power struggles that invariably ensue, giving evidence for the belief that struggles provide opportunities to enhance communicative competence.

The struggles discussed in the German books are explicitly described as taking place between young adults and their parents, and they are not, as in the Japanese materials, based on generalised views about pathological problems in society and specifically between "children" and anonymous grown-ups. By focusing on the parent–young adult relationship, conflict becomes a matter of concrete individuals employing strategies that can be learnt and discussed. Moreover, questions of sexual desire are directly addressed in the German materials, whereas Japanese materials mostly speak of the "strong energies" that young people must somehow deal with. In a sense, therefore, the German materials substantiate the Japanese narrative about the lack of focus on contrasting positions of autonomous individuals who must seek solutions through argument. I hasten to add, though, that it would be difficult to prove that the German strategy of conflict solving through verbal communication is in all cases more effective than any other; I would merely call it a different narrative.

The narrative of sweeping change

Looking back in memory and passing on values and knowledge to the future is the aim of all education. Japan, however, shows how its young generation must make its own decisions and find its own solutions in the face of the forces of sweeping change, working to rupture both intergenerational and interpersonal ties. It is probable that the framework of the family, especially at a time where intergenerational struggles are

unavoidable, provides few opportunities for young adults to experience the "legitimacy" of opposing positions. (By "legitimacy" I mean the use of strategies that are underpinned by widespread agreement that they may be used, and a degree of certainty that support will be given if they are used.)

To understand the Japanese pattern of passing down values and knowledge, I, together with a considerable number of Japanese scholars, whether conservative or not, hold the single most important factor to be the rapid and sweeping changes that have shifted the frames of reference for communicative interaction so that the worlds of successive generations have but few points of contact. These shifts may be a global phenomenon, but they have not occurred in important parts of Europe the same way as in Japan.

Let us look at the argument by Saitô Takashi (*Kodomo ni tsutaetai mitsu no chikara – ikiru chikara wo kitaeru* - Three *chikara* (energies) I want to tell children about – Forging *chikara* to live) (2001). Saitô's intention is to try to kit the gap between the generations by re-emphasising – among other things – a traditional Japanese concept of energy (*ikiru chikara* – the energy to maintain life), which is built up through absorbing flows (*nagare*) of bodily movement through training, observation and imitation (Saitô 2004: 32-34, 79); for "imitation" Saitô uses the concept *gi o nusumu* – stealing know-how without being explicitly taught (Saitô 2004: 79). In many ways this type of learning without verbal communication is reminiscent of methods employed by farmers and craftsmen in Europe; however, it is embedded in a very different narrative about the body in motion. I have elsewhere proposed that we pay more attention to a "bodily" approach to life in Japan, drawing - as in Saitô's argument - on the concept of absorbing energy to maintain life. This "bodily" approach, however, suffers particular damage when the structures of physical closeness break down as rapidly as they have done in Japan.

Hatano Miki (2003) argues that only a short time ago learning the strategies of life in Japan took place in a context where many people were both present and physically close: children, brothers and sisters, members of the extended family, all living in small houses (and not in apartments); here children had full opportunities for observation and silent learning, while fighting, give-and-take, self-defence, or scolding and being scolded, were all a natural part of life (Hatano 2003: 22-23). Thus "natural learning" is a topic that is often stressed in Japanese narrative, and with relation to intergenerational learning it is epitomized in the expression: *oya no ushirosugata o mite kodomo wa*

sodatsu - by observing the parents from behind, (and not through face-to-face discussion and argument) children learn what they need in life (Hatano 2003: 23).

A widespread misunderstanding about Japanese *amae* (spoiling children, letting children have their will; a term that is very commonly referred to since the appearance of *Amae no kôzô* by Doi Takeo in 1971 and its translation into English as *The Anatomy of Dependence* in 1973) seems to have obliterated the fact stressed by Hatano that the older generation did not invest very much time and interest in their children, and provided little help for them to learn to cope, since the social context, physical closeness, and an occasional scolding taught the necessary strategies. In Japan, the shift away from learning in a social context came very abruptly, as the number of children decreased rapidly, "salary-man" fathers spent long hours in the office and away from home, living conditions began to isolate people, and larger houses gave more space for withdrawal from social and family networks. Moreover, these processes of change took place against a background in which only few so-called middle class families had established abstract and intellectual rules and rituals for dialogues between family members as equals.

Considering change, Yamada Ta'ichi (*Kazoku no 'kokoro', miemasuka?*- Can you see the hearts/inner feelings of your family members?) reflects upon the devastating effects of *gôrika* (rationalization in industry) on Japanese family structures, often ignored in the light of Japan's "Working-place-as-family" ideology. According to Yamada, *gôrika* destroyed the fabric of local regions in which networks of communicative exchange encompassed both private and working life (Yamada 2005: 16-20).

In the same publication, Yamamoto Ichiriki from Kôchi Prefecture remembers that a large part of what we would consider "private" life took place outside the house, as many facilities had to be shared. Yamamoto is extremely outspoken where he maintains that face-to-face intergenerational communication is a grotesque idea, as he recalls how strict, scolding, awe-inspiring grown-ups left the children to care for themselves. That way, says Yamamoto proudly, he grew into a self-confident, strong person who knows how to cope with life (Yamamoto 2005: 21-23).

The narrative about "self" as part of the order of the universe

Religious concepts, i.e. concepts relating man to speculations about the super-natural,

cannot be ignored if we endeavour to understand the impact of a larger framework of narratives on communication. Carefully reading the German books shows how verbal communication there is considered the major strategy for bridging the gap between different generations, cultures, or political stances, because it is the most precise way of objectifying things. The question remains, however: Is the narrative equally pervasive in Japan that objectifying things is a good strategy to solve conflict? An answer can be gained by considering man's relationship to the larger order of the world.

For the record, it is necessary first to recall that persons socialized before 1946 were done so into a country that understood itself as the land of the *kami*, the gods. In this land of the *kami*, focused on the emperor, himself an offspring of the *kami*, relationships between humans were not open to discussion. The individual being was defined as *bunshi* (a molecule or particle) of the nation state (*kokka*). As discussed in *Nihon Dôtokuron* (Kiyohara Sadao 1926), this nation state was not there to fulfil wishes of the individual; rather, it was the individual that served to preserve the nation state from generation to generation. Thus the *bunshi* concept emphasized the function of each individual within the nation state's society, and not the solution of problems arising between *bunshi* through their own autonomous discussions. Moreover, the virtue of Japan was understood as rooted in the hierarchical order of the *bunshi*, for which there was no particular reason, the nation state not being there for any reason other than just existing per se. Therefore, Japanese were admonished to realise that their country knew no *rikutsu* (i.e. concepts put forward through logical argument), which is why its inhabitants were *mukashi kara giron o konomanu kokumin* (a people that has never liked debate). Certainly, this concept of the nation helped structure interpersonal relationships around absolute categories of fixed roles that did not tolerate dialectic solution seeking between the *bunshi* (the particles).

To my mind, however, Buddhism has had a far greater impact on the narratives about communication in Japan than the teachings about nation state and *kami*. This is because Buddhism has provided answers and given help in situations of distress over hundreds of years, forming as I see it the most profound reference level for dealing with pain, conflict, and clashing ideas.

Handbooks for discussing "normal" conflict between generations may indeed be rare, but we find plenty of material offering advice following Buddhist notions of life and reality. In these materials (e.g. Akane 1989, Shimamura 1998), the world we live in is

invariably described as a "hard place," the acceptance of which is a kind of *shugyô* (ascetic training). This training will carry us along not to solutions but to inner peace through detachment from our own emotions. To cite some terms used to describe this world, they include *kibishii genjô* (harsh reality), *gekihen no yo* (this world of violent changes), *tsurai genjitsu* (bitter reality), *kono yo no rifujin* (this illogical world), *shakai no zankokusa* (the brutality of society), *kibishii shijô kyôsô* ([this world of] severe market competition), or *hijô ni saki ga mienikui shakai* (this society, in which it is almost impossible to fathom where it is taking us).

Such a world does not contain problems to be solved; it requires *ikinuku koto* (that we survive in it), focusing on key terms such as *chikara* (power), *tsuyosa* (strength, fortitude), *energi*, and *gaman* (endurance, perseverance). Buddhism links the concept of the "harsh world" to the need to polish the techniques for grappling with it, which is not a matter of trying to change objective facts but of working on oneself (*jibun jishin o migakiageru*). Clearly, this is a narrative very different to one built around the idea of turning a bad world into a better one. The solution to conflict is not seen in a dialectic search for truth, which is always understood to be hard to bear whatever we do, but in introspection, through which we are able to correct and adapt our inner self so as not to perish in situations of conflict. Introspection (*wagami o hansei suru*) implies facing reality in order to detach oneself inwardly from it, and it implies *kodawari o suteru* (giving up fussing over details, abandoning one's wish to cling to what is). *Kodawari o suteru* is certainly not conducive to communication along argumentative lines.

Conclusion

How are ideas about communication in Japan developed and passed on, especially in the family context? Asking this question I think it essential to abandon the notion of a culturally fixed communicative style (though without denying the existence of communicative norms people will try to develop and adhere to in order to get along). Rather, it seems more productive to focus on historically growing and changing frames of reference which can give rise to many and often even contradicting styles.

In looking for a Japanese frame of reference shaping communication within the family, I found plenty of material for parent-child contacts, but when it came to the relationship between grown-ups and young adults at a time when generational conflicts of necessity occur, I was surprised how prominent the notion was that this is a matter of

pathological cases. More academic narratives suggest that Japan has not developed a culture of dialogue, and contrast this with "Western" ideals. The accompanying effort to change the reference frame for communication and introduce dialogue as a strategy for conflict solution accordingly comes along in the shape of an unsustainable East-West dichotomy and is linked mainly to a frame of cultural comparison.

I believe that more attention should be paid to the forces of rapid and sweeping change that have made the memories of one generation useless for the next. Certainly, conflict so often does not appear to have been solved on the basis of dialogue and argument; however, in the Japanese narrative this is not necessarily understood as negative, as we have seen in the positive comments about the importance of close bodily contact for learning processes.

Several authors point to the problem of overly emotional interpersonal ties as a possible correlation to the deficits caused by sudden change and isolation of the individual. This is seen as leading to a proliferation of closed in-groups, isolated from links to outside time and space and characterized by fear that frank and open communication might bring about exclusion. This development is understood as in the end responsible for aggression and violence.

Finally, it is essential to correlate communication with the concept of self, which in turn is shaped by concepts of the world. In Japan, I hold Buddhist notions to pervade all techniques for structuring "self," which is taught to seek peace and freedom not by rejecting a status quo but through inner strength and detachment. This certainly is the most dignified framework for "self" in Japanese communication, but it is not conducive to argumentatively seeking solutions – that may anyway be just delusions. As time and memory move on, however, so do the narratives about communication. So research must not fail to keep on adjusting its focus.

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