

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 is part of a larger study aimed at understanding 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 culture contact. Here I shall only discuss the first point.

I am using a concept of communication whose perceptible patterns are not fixed by 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 socialized – 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 precious time, work, and don't talk!" includes both the option to suppress communication, as well as to encourage communication specifically as a counter-reaction.

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 concept of communicating? What do I remember about when and how I learnt to shape and structure my communication? What have I observed? 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 realize cause and effect, i.e. 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 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 stress-laden in-group structures.

The narrative reflected in bookstores

To gain insight into the present-day narratives about parent–young adult communication in Japan I first turned to general, non-academic bookstores which contain large stocks of materials for guidance in day-to-day matters. 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 in the context of intergenerational communication and conflict solution.

2) The absence of Japanese materials on intergenerational communication involving young adults was particularly conspicuous as it contrasted with an abundance of materials on communication involving pre- and elementary school children. (Incidentally, I was made to recall that *juku* teachers had often told me: "Young adults in Japan have no lobby.") Expressing surprise at the absence of a narrative on young

adults to the sales persons, I was invariably led to the shelves for books on *shakai byōri* (pathological problems in society). Are young adults in Japan defined as "pathological cases", criminal or deviant? It thus remains an open question where, when and how coping with "normal" intergenerational conflict is learnt, what narratives have in the past shaped the frames in which young adults acquired their notions about intergenerational communication, and what has happened to these frames.

The narrative as a call to cultivate dialogue

One narrative that for a long time 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 arguments, but interested in 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 directly address a recipient and is thus not geared to a response. That way, language becomes a tool of ritual and does not function as a tool for communication. This, so Nakajima's argument, leads to an erosion of language, and thus to disbelief in the face value of words. Young persons being socialized into this type of language culture learn *hyōgo* (mottos, slogans), *kanyōku* (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 deplores this blurring of individual stances, and contrasts it to the precise formulation of "truths" expressed by equal and autonomous individuals. 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 ubiquitous call for *yasashisa* (gentleness) and *omoyari* (concern for others) in Japan, which in fact he sees as a principal cause for violence. This is because *yasashisa* and *omoyari* are precisely directed against the spelling-out of positions through words used for exactly what they mean, and by speakers oriented towards "truth". *Yasashisa* and *omoyari* thus rob the usage of meaningful words of legitimacy, i.e. of a status as an acceptable communicative strategy.

The Japanese narrative on the absence of dialogue is very much older than Nakajima's

discussion. Over 20 years ago Itō Tomonori (*Katei no naka no taiwa* – Dialogue in the family, 1985) had dealt with what he saw as the Japanese inability to communicate in the form of dialogues. Itō pointed especially to the family as a context where inequality was learnt and role defined behaviour trained. The father's frame of orientation Itō calls "*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"). 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. Itō 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.

Although Itō 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.

Itō's image of the father is that of a family head, with everything revolving around him to suit his interests. The father's legal wife (*uchi no onna*) was there to use the money father brought home to organize 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.

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

Reflecting upon the arguments of Nakajima and Itō, 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 still having a firm 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 very academic 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", democratic society, debating, arguing, and bridging conflict in dialogue was unthinkable as a communicative norm in the times I was socialized in. If there is an East-West dichotomy, then on quite a different level: As I will discuss later in more detail, communicative processes in Japan did not have the underpinning of legitimacy if they sought to orientate themselves on the ideal of a sovereign people claiming the right to solve their conflicts on a level of autonomous citizen to autonomous citizen. Obviously, in present-day Japan the narrative about communication contains positions claiming just this legitimacy, but the frame 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 in which young adults are more caught up 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 of communication in Japan reflect memories of sweeping change, and it is not rare that they single out the post-war requirement to suddenly adapt to new mottos such as *jiyū-byōdō-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.

How ever we may look at the change of values after the war, the fact remains that in post-war Japan successive generations could not socialize their children the way they themselves had learnt to cope with life. Moreover, Japan did not come to rest in the decades that followed, and we only need to think of the breakdown of the idealized "Japan-style modern society" of the 1970s and 1980s in favour of non-nation specific economic and organizational structures during the 1990s to realize that once again Japanese parents are unable to pass on the values they themselves were socialized into. The awareness of the loss of fixed values easily links up with a centuries-old narrative

about the fixed order of nature and the duty always to restore it, in turn giving the concept of *kanri* an extremely high degree of legitimacy. 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.

The narrative about the group structure of young adults

Dialogue (*taiwa*) implies contrast between individual positions (*tairitsu*). *Tairitsu* however, according to Doi Takayoshi, is increasingly evaded by young adults. Doi, who, incidentally, discusses the tight-knit structure of the in-groups of young adults with no reference to dialogue with any parents, is particularly worried about the degree to which they emphasize *yasashisa*, i.e. the over-sensitive effort not to hurt each other. 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 just 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. Here, the problems youths and young adults have to cope with from about ages 11 to 18 are very explicitly dealt with, a fact that underlines 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 young adults demand, 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 referred to as taking place between young adults and their parents, and not, as in the Japanese materials on pathological problems in society, 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 argument

about the lack of focus on contrasting positions of autonomous individuals that must seek solutions through argument. I hasten to add, though, that no-one has yet proved that the German strategy of conflict solving through verbal communication is really 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 certainly the aim of all education. A closer look at Japan, however, shows how today's 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 the time where intergenerational struggles are unavoidable, provides few opportunities for young adults to experience the "legitimacy" of opposing positions. (By "legitimacy" I mean here 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 Saitō Takashi. Saitō's intention is to try to kit the gap between the generations by reemphasizing – among other things – a traditional Japanese concept of energy (*ikiru chikara* – the energy to maintain life), that is built up through absorbing flows (*nagare*) of bodily movement through training, observation and imitation; for "imitation" Saitō uses the concept *gi o nusumu* – stealing know-how without being explicitly taught. 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 reflected in Saitō'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 argues that learning the strategies of life only a short time ago 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, scolding and being scolded, were all a natural part of life. Thus "natural learning" is stressed in Japanese texts; 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.

A widespread misunderstanding about Japanese *amae* (spoiling children, letting children have their will) 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. Very suddenly, families had only few children, salary-man fathers were absent, 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 very few "bourgeois" families in Japan had established abstract and intellectual rules and rituals for dialogues between equal family members.

Considering change, Yamada Ta'ichi (in *Kazoku no kokoro, miemasuka?*, PHP no. 683) reflects upon the devastating effects of *gōrika* (rationalization in industry) on Japanese family structures, often ignored in the light of Japan's "Working-place-as-family" ideology. According to Yamada, *gōrika* destroyed the fabric of local regions in which networks of communicative exchange encompassed both private and working life.

In the same publication (PHP no. 683) Yamamoto Ichiriki from Kōchi 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 simply 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-secure, strong personality who knows how to cope with life.

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 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, political stances etc, because it is the most precise way of objectifying things. The question is, however: Is the narrative that objectifying things is a good strategy to solve conflict equally pervasive in Japan? 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 defined as *bunshi*, a molecule or particle, of the nation state (*kokka*). As discussed in *Nihon Dōtokuron* (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 as. Therefore, Japanese were admonished to realize 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, the world we live in is invariably described as a "hard place", the acceptance of which is a kind of *shugyō* (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 genjō* (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 shijō kyōsō* ([this world of] severe market competition), or *hijō 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), *tsyosa* (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

This report is part of a longer study on how ideas about communication in Japan are developed and passed on, especially in the family context. Hereby I think it essential to abandon the notion of a culturally fixed communicative style, and instead 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 in-family communication, 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 discovered 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 lives mainly within the frame of cultural comparison.

I believe that attention should be paid more than to anything else to the forces of rapid and sweeping change that have made the memories of one generation of no use for the next. Certainly, conflict never appears to have been solved on the basis of dialogue and argument; however, in the Japanese narrative this is not necessarily seen as negative, as close bodily contact for all learning processes is recalled.

Several authors point to the problem of overly emotional associations 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 directly 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 and thus by religious dimensions. In Japan, I hold Buddhist notions to pervade all techniques for structuring "self," that is taught to free itself 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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