JAPANESE DEVELOPMENT TO HARMONY

Japanese Intellectual Development Theory:
A Modest Quest to Maintain Harmony

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In order to create a theory of intellectual development for Japanese individuals, one must have a general understand of collectivist culture. In Japan, each person is a part of the larger whole, and the primary goal for productive members of society is to maintain harmony. This concept of harmony requires a level of modesty and skills in moderation that frame Japanese individuals in a very different light from the individualistic American. In a culture where the highest level of intellectual and ethical development is not to become recognized as a creator of knowledge, but to be an expert listener and moderator, the stages of development look different than they do for the average American.

The Rationale behind Creation of a New Theory

William Perry (1999) researched young white males at Harvard and Radcliffe in order to create his Scheme of Intellectual Development. His theory is very applicable to the population of students in which he studied. However, applying the positions of his scheme to a Japanese student from a collectivist society simply does not make sense. In order for his scheme to explain the process of development in Japanese individuals, numerous changes need to be made. With Perry’s Scheme of Intellectual Development as a foundation, I seek to describe a new theory of intellectual development specific to a Japanese person.

In a group interview with four Japanese women who completed their undergraduate degrees at Western Oregon University, I was able to explain Perry’s (1999) theory and gather their responses to how the positions of development would differ for a Japanese citizen (K. Dorres, C. Nakagawa, K. Suzuki, M. Yamanaka,
personal communication, February 16, 2007). Five key themes surfaced from the beginning of the conversation where Perry’s scheme was at odds with their understanding of a Japanese person’s process of development.

1. Perry’s positions shift a person from being a receiver of knowledge toward becoming a creator and sharer of knowledge. Although it is important for a person to eventually be able to have unique ideas that they produce on their own, higher stages of development do not necessarily entail sharing that knowledge with others. To become a developed person, knowledge must be considered from a stance of modesty. Sharing knowledge with any indication of being the creator of that knowledge does not portray modesty. So, sharing an opinion on a subject in class is frowned upon since it draws attention to that student. Intentionally drawing attention to oneself is not a modest act and it may even lead to the possibility of “losing face.” As a result, students are not comfortable with stating that they have created knowledge.

2. The perception of the authority figure changes over time as the person realizes that the authority figure may not actually have all the answers. The classroom is a microcosmic hierarchical social system where the authority is the elder, and the elder is to be respected. As students develop their intellectual capacity, they may come to realize that some teachers do not have all the answers. However, society and family have taught students that even if you don’t think the elder is right, the elder is still the boss. So, any semblance of doubt should never be verbalized. As a student reaches higher levels of education, this model is maintained. Higher levels of development do not need to reflect a realization that authorities do not have all the answers, because the student is not called upon to contribute to the educator’s knowledge base and the educator’s standing demands
respect; which could be diminished by identifying gaps in professional knowledge. The highly developed student is very passive and indirect when correcting an authority in order to: (a) avoid the possibility of the student or professor losing face and (b) simultaneously maintain the student-teacher duality of deference and respect.

3. At higher levels of development, students become teachers in their own right as creators of knowledge in relation to their peers. In the Japanese classroom, the student is the student and the teacher is the teacher. Perry (1999) indicates that a student who is a creator of knowledge in the higher positions becomes a teacher of their peers. Japan has made attempts at creating collaborative learning environments, but this technique consistently fails. The cultural upbringing of students within a society that unquestionably shows respect to elders demands that the classroom have an authority figure. Japanese students have been trained to learn by observation, so creating and sharing knowledge simply is not natural for them. In addition, the Japanese school system does not provide any room for flexibility within the curriculum. So, even if collaborative teaching starts to work in the initial weeks of a course, the teacher becomes bound by the curriculum and unable to pursue possible paths that could surface as a result of student insights.

4. Consideration for the hierarchy of generational respect and automatic deference to authority is not apparent. If Perry’s model is going to work for Japanese students, there needs to be some explanation regarding this reoccurring concept of respect. In America, we are told from very early in life that we need to respect our elders. However, we do not lead by example when engaged in societal activities. We lock up our grandparents in old folks homes and have public outbursts when the bank mistakenly
charges us a fee. In Japan, many homes are multi-generational and the child watches the parents show respect for the grandparents. In public, every effort is made in an attempt not to draw attention to oneself. These cultural differences regarding modesty and respect must be considered in a theory of intellectual development for Japanese people.

5. The top stages of development do not include the importance of developing techniques for maintaining harmony. At the pillar of intellectual development for the Japanese citizen is the ability to co-exist with others in society while maintaining harmony. Harmony is achieved through the careful balancing and application of knowledge, experience, and moderation. Knowledge must be kept to oneself, only to be shared when situationally appropriate, with constant regard for modesty. Experience is realized through the process of being a lifelong listener. To listen is to learn, and through this experience a person will gain respect. Moderation is the final skill that makes a Japanese citizen a leader. The highly developed individual does not burst out with opinions but contributes by listening and analyzing. A leader skilled in moderation will surface through the gathering of ideas where recognition of innovation is not a goal but simply a side effect.

The Theory

Rather than have nine stages like Perry (1999) where the last three stages are not clearly explained, the theory of Japanese Intellectual Development only has four distinct stages: 1. Relational Respect, 2. Relational Relativism, 3. Hierarchical Integration, and 4. Sensitivity to Harmony. These four stages are linear with each stage building upon the previous. A person does not move past a stage and no longer exhibit aspects of the earlier stages, but is constantly headed toward the fulfillment of all four stages in order to
become an intellectually developed individual. If someone is in stage three, for example, then they still show signs of stage one and two, but they have not yet reached a level of development that reflects stage four.

Stage 1: Relational Respect

During the first stage of intellectual development the Japanese child learns by watching and identifying relationships. Much like in Perry’s (1999) dualistic positions, a person in the relational respect stage sees authority as the possessor of absolute truths. However, the orientation toward authority is different in Japan than it is in America. In America, we are taught to listen to our elders and respect authority figures. Through our naiveté and lack of experience, we defer to authority figures when there are answers to be found and decisions to be made. In Japan, children also defer to authority; but, where in America we are taught to respect authority, in Japan respect is an absolute in and of itself. More emphasis is placed upon teaching children to listen to and observe authority figures in order to learn respect rather than directly instructing children to respect authorities. Through the process of listening and observing, children in multigenerational households (which are commonplace in Japan) see and hear their parents showing respect to their grandparents. By modeling the behavior of the generation above them, children learn that the social hierarchy and respect for elders extends beyond just children and exists in all aspects of Japanese society, regardless of age. This creates an orientation toward authority that is more absolute and culturally ingrained than it is in American youth.

Stage 2: Relational Relativism

A Japanese person may stay in stage one for most of their childhood into their teens. However, at some point the individual will come to realize that sometimes the
authorities do not have consistent explanations for particular phenomena. Faced with this reality, the individual makes the leap to stage two. Similar to Perry’s (1999) positions of multiplicity, a Japanese student in a classroom finds some information questionable in comparison to past teachings. Suddenly a decision has to be made in the student’s mind as to which truth to accept. In the Japanese model of intellectual development, the student must make this decision relative to the relationship he has with the authority within the larger dynamic of the social hierarchy. Hence, relational relativism describes a perspective toward multiplicity that is based heavily upon the relative truth of concepts in comparison to the relationship to the authority sharing the information. For example, if the grandfather explains why the sky is blue and then the teacher gives a different explanation, a student in stage two will weigh the hierarchical social level of the two authorities in order to determine (a) whether respect is more due to one authority or the other and (b) which authority is more consistently respected within the larger community. Finally, just as in Perry’s stages of multiplicity, the student will not attempt to question or challenge the authority. However, the dichotomous nature of conflicting information passed down from separate authorities is duly noted and the initial seeds of doubt are planted in the student’s mind.

Stage 3: Hierarchical Integration

As the student reaches the conclusion of high school, a major life transition is forced upon them. All students participate in major exams, the results of which essentially determine their eventual standing within the social hierarchy. After the exams are completed and a student moves on to their assigned path in the work force or in further education, another major transition in intellectual development takes place.
Whether the individual ends up working, raising a family, in trade school, or studying at a university, it becomes crucial that the individual smoothly integrate into their position within the collectivist hierarchy or risk a form of social exile.

The finality of this transition is accompanied by a certain amount of relativistic thinking, very similar to that of a person in Perry’s (1999) positions of relativism. Authorities remain as absolute owners of knowledge and expertise. However, the stage three individual now is attuned to listening to and analyzing information from the authority in order to determine (a) legitimacy, (b) quality, and (c) societal relevance. The main difference in the Japanese person at this stage is that knowledge of discrepancies between information from authorities, as well as knowledge created on one’s own, is not openly communicated. In order to maintain modesty and save face, a Japanese person passively bides their time and waits for an opportunity to give indirect suggestions to authority figures, as well as peers. In a social situation with peers, it is possible to be more direct with younger members since age is part of the hierarchical measure; but any direct opinionated statement or challenge of authority is strictly frowned upon as a socially punishable faux pas.

Stage 4: Sensitivity to Harmony

Once a Japanese person finds their place within the social hierarchy and some level of expertise is achieved, the final transition in intellectual development may occur. For some, stage three will be the end of intellectual development and they will remain a contributing member of the larger society without questioning their role or lending to significant innovation within their field. However, those who become the experts, teachers, inventors, and leaders in their professional and/or personal lives must be able to
communicate their knowledge and experience while maintaining harmony. At this final stage, which bears some similarities to Perry’s (1999) stages six through nine mostly because identity is finally realized, the Japanese individual becomes a leader through the gathering of ideas from the rest of society. Unique to Japanese intellectual development is that listening to others and analyzing information is of a higher priority than publicly communicating. Therefore, in stage four, a very delicate balance must be realized in order to (a) share knowledge while practicing modesty, (b) gain respect by listening rather than talking, and (c) ascend to leadership through restraint.

Application to Student Affairs

First, and foremost, a basic understanding of a student’s cultural background is paramount to effectively assisting that student in their academic endeavors. However, understanding this theory of Japanese intellectual development can be specifically applied to working with Japanese students in a variety of functional areas. I would like to explore two examples of this theory in practice; first in Academic Advising, and second, in Residential Life.

Academic Advising

Working with a Japanese student who is facing the challenge of studying in a land where English is their second language presents a unique opportunity for advisors to assist a student in sincere need of guidance. When a Japanese student arrives for an advising appointment, be aware that the student is not accustomed to sharing personal information with others. While small talk at the beginning of an advising session is always nice to break the ice, one should not ask pointed or direct personal questions since the student will not know how to appropriately respond. Also, while advising,
understand that basic questions about academic interests may be difficult for the student to answer if framed too directly. Avoid using closed-ended, yes or no questions, because in Japanese language and society, the concept of “no” is considered too direct and can even be rude. So, students will likely respond with a “yes” even if their actual answer is “no.”

The advisor should always remember that even though the student has left Japan, a power dynamic still exists in their mind. While one might only think of themselves as an advisor, per se, the Japanese student sees the advisor as an authority and will consider information given to them to be true. Furthermore, even if the student did happen to notice a flaw in information presented to them, they will not attempt to correct the information by confronting an authority figure. Consideration of stages one through three will allow the advisor to understand how the Japanese student will define the advisor-student relationship as well as provide insight into the student’s view of self as an individual of the hierarchical social ladder of Japan.

Residential Life

Japanese students in dormitories find themselves thrust into a microcosmic social structure that is very foreign to them. They suddenly are placed in a room with a person that is a native of another culture and are expected to understand and abide by the norms of that culture without delay. Some Japanese students will thrive within this environment if they are very outgoing. However, the societal norm is for the student to shut down and internalize the difficulties being faced as part of this life-altering transition. When possible, a residential authority should attempt to make contact with Japanese students and let them know that help is available. However, if a student continues to be reclusive,
it may be necessary to request a visit with the student and attempt to identify how norms from the student’s life in Japan are conflicting with their current residential experience. An understanding of Japanese intellectual development will aid in helping the student reconcile a separate reality with the challenges of not only transitioning into college, but the move into a foreign college in an unfamiliar land.

Limitations and Recommendation for Future Research

This study was completed based upon information gathered from four Japanese women in a single group interview. Given the scope of the study, it is important not to make any generalizations about Japanese students based solely upon this theory. Although there are many useful cultural insights within this theory, it is also important to realize that Japan is globally conscious and has been heavily influenced by western cultures. Times are changing and traditional values and norms are evolving to meet the needs of an ever growing, progressive society. In addition, having a Japanese wife may have contributed to a slant toward considering what I know of her to be true of all Japanese people.

Additional research should be done with a larger group of Japanese students of both male and female genders. It may also be useful to create a measurement tool for identifying a student’s current stage and/or proximity to transition to a next stage. Truly understanding the intellectual development of Japanese people also requires research to be done in Japan on people from various age groups using Japanese language when gathering data. Using Perry (1999) as a base and the Japanese intellectual development theory as a framework should lend to the creation of a well established Japanese student development theory if future research is done on this culturally rich population.
References