Psychodynamic Practice,
February 2006; 12(1): 87–97

Helplessness in an adjacent psychoanalytic culture, Japan

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Japanese culture is often invoked as an exemplary case by those concerned with the anthropology of the emotions; we can observe in that culture one striking instance of the different forms that feelings take in different language systems and how certain feelings are brought to life when they are named as such. The argument is that people in places that are so distant and different from 'us' display and experience a range of emotions that will seem to Westerners very strange, far from what we assume to be normal. Far from pathologizing another culture, though, an attention to the particularity of these feelings may also serve as a moral lesson to us about the limits of our own language.

Psychoanalysis itself would then have to take on a quite different character as a 'talking cure' if the talking is about feelings that presuppose a quite different relationship between child and parent and then, by implication, between patient and analyst. The Japanese word 'amae', for example, names a kind of emotion that the English term 'dependence' only imperfectly captures, for it cannot be pinned down so neatly by us in our language. Many studies of amae evoke aspects of a comforting nestling in the care of others in early life and the way a degree of indulgent helplessness would be anticipated, enjoyed and resisted later on when someone may go into analysis. Some Japanese psychoanalysts will indeed expect that some degree of 'amaeruing' to the analyst will take place as a necessary part of the transference, and a patient's inhibitions in showing that dependency may well be interpreted in order that the analysis will progress beyond it.

There is a danger that when we identify the characteristics of a culture and the kind of therapeutic approaches appropriate to it we thereby homogenize it, making it seem as if every member of that culture is the same and as if there is one authentic way to be part of it. This danger applies to those of us

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ISSN 1475-3634 print/ISSN 1475-3626 online © 2006 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/14753630500476266

looking in from the outside and to those insiders who want to persuade us how different they are. Then, in a process that is complementary to the moral lesson to Westerners about the particular texture of Japanese emotion, the patient may be subjected to a moral lesson about what it means to be genuinely Japanese. In this danger lies one of the stakes of cross-cultural psychoanalysis, and the oft-rehearsed suspicion on the part of Western analysts, for example, that what goes on in Japan may not really be psychoanalysis at all. For me to enquire about an emotion I do not fully understand implicates me in the difficult relationship between my own psychoanalytic culture and another one, Japanese psychoanalytic culture.

Two Japanese analysts, a husband and wife some years my elder, recounted a version of the moral tale about the importance of amae one evening in Tokyo, and it wasn't very long before I too was entangled in networks of this emotion, as the performative effects of words about it. Their generosity in treating me and my partner to a meal in an expensive restaurant was complemented by their willingness to playfully indulge us as we asked stupid questions about Japanese culture. Now we were the visitors, being told about another visitor from England many years ago who finally was able to learn how to be Japanese. One thing he learnt, perhaps the most important thing, was how to put himself in the hands of his hosts. Instead of asserting himself and pretending that he was able to cope on his own, our predecessor came to understand that his relationship with his colleagues around him in Japan was to be one of utter dependence. This helpless and trusting dependence on others is part of the interdependence that characterizes traditional Japanese culture, but I was reminded that in the context of a visitor in a strange land it was one of the aspects of experience that is referred to as 'amae'.

One example of the role of amae was then pointed out to me in an uncomfortable (for me) reflexive commentary on how we had started our meal together and embarked on this conversation (a first reflexive twist which was to be folded further around me before the evening was over). A Japanese person would never (as I had) ask his hosts in a restaurant what they would recommend, for that still presupposed an untoward element of independent wilful choice about what they would eventually decide to eat. I recalled that I had also said that I was in their hands as to what to choose from the menu, but kept quiet because I felt that to have protested at their interpretation and (as I felt) moral imputation would have only served to exemplify the independence of spirit that I was being cautioned against. Although they had actually only ordered the dishes on the menu that we had expressed an interest in, what I was already experiencing, I must admit, was more a resistance to amae than amae as such (and along the way learning more about my own Western structure of subjectivity than the intricacies of another culture).

You have to say, they continued, 'I don't understand' or 'I'm tired' or something else to indicate how helpless you are. What they were also inviting me into was a performance of exactly what they wanted me to understand about how to be in Japan, and what they incited in me was the very individuality and autonomy proscribed by their account. Finally, a little tired, the evening drew to a close and to arrangements to get to a meeting with one of them the following day. These were arrangements that involved travel and changes to different lines on the subway, and it was here that I revealed how little I had absorbed of my lesson in emotional etiquette. The Tokyo subway map does, it is true, look like a surreal mass of multicoloured spaghetti, but I did already know how to transfer from the Hibiya line at Akihabara to the JR Sobu line toward Shinjuku in order to get from Minowa station to Sendagaya (so you get the idea, that I wanted to feel in control). 'Yes', I said, 'It's OK, I can manage it OK'. One of the analysts said in a stage whisper to his wife, in playfully wistful tones that mingled admonition with shades of disappointment, 'he doesn't want to amaeru'.

Indignation welled up in me, and I did not know for sure whether I could make sense of what I felt either as guilt (in my culpable offence against what they had advised) or as shame (in my failure to act as they expected me to). This was compounded with embarrassment at their kindness and cultural literacy compared with my resentment and inability to navigate this new terrain. Caught somewhere between the two emotions I already knew much better than the one they had been trying to describe to me, I could not disentangle myself from that strange double-bind by commenting further on how I had been caught; for that would have been to display a degree of control over the situation that would also have confirmed once again how I did not want to amaeru. What was most powerful about the phenomenon for me was that I was positioned not only as a member of another culture (of the West, in which guilt would be the appropriate response to my infraction of a rule), and not only as if for a moment I were a member of that culture (of Japan, in which shame would perhaps be the more appropriate response to my humiliating lapse), but also somewhere between the two. That is, the emotion 'amae' had been constituted both as the topic of the conversation and as the very stuff of it, reflexively mobilized in order to make it real, and to make me feel it as something that was normal, normalizing (and something that would render those who do not conform to it as pathological in some way).

It is possible that I would not have experienced something of the shape of this very different emotion as part of the fabric of Japanese psychoanalytic culture – even if struggling against it more than tumbling into it – if I had not already been set up, set myself up, to respectfully engage with that culture from within Western psychoanalytic culture. What I did learn was that commentary upon an emotion can, given the right context, quite quickly mobilize complex responses in those who want to be inside a culture and those who are on the outside.

A footnote about gender: in the toilet together after we left the restaurant, my host said, as he stood at an adjacent urinal, that he felt very embarrassed when he first visited Britain long ago because the urinals there were too high for him to reach easily. I said that one of the things I liked about Japan was that because I was shorter than the average person in Britain it was nice to be somewhere with things on a smaller scale for a change. I understood our exchange to be one that revealed something of each of our different kinds of dependence and as an exchange that maybe itself also functioned as a performance of interdependence. After I had suffered a narcissistic insult to my own Western masculinity this was one good way of asserting a common bond between us (and you may not be surprised that my female partner's experience of the whole evening was rather different from mine). The next day at the end of the meeting he asked me if I knew the way to the subway station, and of course I replied 'no, I'm completely helpless here'.

Photographs and therapy: The quest for meaning

SALLY DESPENSER

During 2004, the National Portrait Gallery in London mounted an exhibition called *We Are The People,* showing postcards from the Collection of Tom Phillips. This is how the NPG website introduced the collection:

> *We Are The People* presents over 1000 postcards of ordinary people made exceptional by the lens of the camera. . . . What are their names? What are their stories? From every walk of life and every level of society they come: babies, bathers, scouts, soldiers, mothers, nurses, policemen, shopkeepers, tradesmen, salvationists, barmaids, fishermen; on picnics, in gardens, on bicycles, in charabancs, by aspidistras, in school rooms, round maypoles, on playing fields, at war (www.npg.org.uk).

One reviewer (Campbell 2004), sharing the urge to give identity and narrative to these unknown subjects, was left longing for a story to explain

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