



The developmental–ecological approach of Japanese child welfare professionals to supporting children's social and emotional well-being: The practice of mimamori[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates a cultural–developmental approach to the study of child welfare. It describes in cultural context everyday socialization beliefs and practices through which Japanese child welfare workers attempt to support the well-being of maltreated children. Through repeated individual and focus group interviews, naturalistic observations, and an intervention, three interrelated concepts emerged: *Ibashi* (a place necessary to psychological well-being where one feels peace, security, acceptance and belonging), *anshin-kan* (a sense of security), and *mimamori* (the practice of watching over others carefully as a protective figure) as significant to adults in their practice with maltreated children. Adults emphasized the importance of children's feeling of anshin in creating their *Ibashi* within the institution. Adults' *mimamori* of children was commonly described by participants and documented during participant observation. *Mimamori* as an everyday socialization practice is fundamentally developmental and ecological. It creates a socially and emotionally supportive context which provides children with developmental opportunities including to find their *Ibashi*. Deep emotional commitment to children and accepting relationships were viewed as necessary to successful *mimamori*, and were prioritized over direct interventions to support children's well-being. Implications for U.S. child welfare research and practice are discussed including the opportunity to step outside of that which we take for granted to strengthen developmental and ecological considerations in child welfare within our own pluralistic society.

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1. Introduction

This paper describes in cultural context some everyday socialization beliefs and practices through which Japanese child welfare workers attempt to support the well-being of maltreated children. Promoting the well-being of maltreated children is a primary goal of child welfare services in the U.S. (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1999) and Japan (e.g., Yamagata, 2005), but the ways in which this goal is understood and implemented through policies and services may vary in relation to many factors including policy makers' and child welfare professionals' informal, taken-for-granted and unexamined “folk” psychological beliefs about children and their development. (For discussions of folk theories see, e.g., Bruner, 1990; Harkness & Super, 1996; Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992). These deeply embedded and shared cultural beliefs, including that which is regarded by adults as mature or desirable, vary considerably according to the distinct traditions and circumstances of Japan and the U.S.

We approach the complex topic of Japanese socialization beliefs and practices pertaining to maltreated children through the theoretical lens of cultural–developmental psychology (e.g., Rogoff, 2003; Shweder et al., 2006). We consider human development as an outgrowth of cultural life focusing both on concrete patterns of everyday socialization practices, and the local beliefs that support these practices within the changing sociocultural–historical contexts of contemporary Japanese society. The case of Japan is instructive because an extensive Japanese literature in developmental studies identifies socialization practices distinct from those in Western societies (e.g., see Azuma, 2005, Levine, 2001, Shimizu & LeVine, 2001; Shwalb, Nakazawa, & Shwalb, 2005). These socialization practices are fundamentally developmental and ecological, aspects of practice which U.S. child welfare has been criticized as inadequately attentive (e.g., see Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Jonson-Reid, 1998; Haight et al., 2005). Our focus is on how responsible child welfare workers think about and routinely organize children's everyday experiences within their particular cultural communities. We integrate in-depth analysis of the actual beliefs and everyday practices of Japanese child welfare workers with broader analysis of the social and cultural context in which these beliefs and practices are embedded. This cultural perspective allows us to step outside of that which we take for granted in the U.S. to strengthen child welfare services within our own pluralistic society (Bamba & Haight, 2007; Cameron & Freymond, 2006).

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Understanding Japanese socialization practices and their potential impact on children's development and well-being first requires attention to adults' goals for children; that is, the culturally embedded developmental outcomes valued, prioritized and supported by adults. According to Japanese folk psychology, finding or creating one's *Ibasho*¹ is necessary to healthy functioning throughout the lifespan. *Ibasho* literally means whereabouts, but connotes a place where a person feels peace, security, acceptance and belonging. The absence of *Ibasho* is viewed as contributing to a variety of psychological and social problems in children including social withdrawal (Ochitani, 2003; Tada & Honma, 2006), juvenile delinquency (Hiroi, 2005), and even suicide (Hagiwara, 2001; Takatsuka, 2001). In our previous research (Bamba & Haight, 2007), Japanese child welfare professionals and educators spontaneously identified *Ibasho* creation both as necessary for children's well-being, and as sometimes problematic for children who have experienced maltreatment. They also identified everyday socialization beliefs and practices supportive of children's *Ibasho* creation. In this paper, we focus on one such culturally valued practice, *mimamori*, roughly translated as "watching over carefully as a protective figure." *Mimamori* is regarded as a way of caring for others and facilitating children's development (e.g., Hagiwara, 2001). It often is discussed in contrast with a typically negatively valued socialization practice of supervision or surveillance (*kanshi*), that is, critically watching over as an authority figure to suppress inappropriate behavior. When adults *mimamoru* (verb form of *mimamori*) children, they carefully observe them and identify their needs. Rather than teaching them directly, adults arrange the social and physical ecology in ways that children can learn "naturally."

1.1. *Ibasho* creation

The concept of *Ibasho* is fundamentally developmental and ecological in its focus on person–environment interactions throughout the lifespan. It is closely connected to the Japanese understanding of the self, and the value of relatedness. In Japan, a society that is often described as placing a high value relative to western societies on interdependence, the self is understood primarily as relational and contextual (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Hamaguchi (1985), referring to Kimura (1972), explains that "for Euro-Americans, the self, even though it develops from relations with others, is, in the final analysis, one's uniqueness or one's substance. On the other hand, *jibun*, the word for self in Japanese, originally meant "one's share" of something beyond oneself.... *Jibun* as the Japanese consciousness of the self is...a reality which is discovered from time to time...between oneself and another" (p. 302).

According to Kitayama (1992), concepts of self provide a framework for values, thoughts, emotions and behaviors. This framework supports and extends to everyday socialization practices. For example, preschools in Japan emphasize teaching young children to develop strong relationships with age mates and to think of themselves as members of age-based group structures (Tobin, 2000). Among Japanese educators, discourse about children's selves is framed broadly in terms of culturally valued qualities such as *omoiyari* (Hoffman 2000), that is, one's ability and willingness to show sensitive and kind consideration for others (see Lebra, 1976). *Omoi-yari* reflects Japanese cultural norms regarding the social embeddedness or interdependency of selves and the consequent need to achieve high levels of emotional sensitivity to others in the conduct of daily life. The emphasis is not so much on verbally asserting one's own emotional experiences, as on attending to, or sensing, others' feelings. The

cultivation of *omoiyari* in the lives of children at school forms the basis for successful socialization of the self to group life—which means, for the Japanese, emotional enrichment and joy in a sense of belonging (Hoffman, 2000).

Like *jibun*, *Ibasho* emerges within a social context, changing form as relationships between the self and the outside world change (Hagiwara, 2001). One's *Ibasho* is created through empathetic and mutually accepting interpersonal relationships, and the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of others through using one's natural gifts and abilities, and performance of clear roles within the group (Hujitake, 2000; Tominaga & Kitayama, 2003). Within their *Ibasho*, people experience a peace of mind, reassurance, security, calm and comfort. *Ibasho* allows free expression of the self and confirms a person's identity and participation within society (Hujitake, 2000; Kawasaki shi Kodomo no Jinken linkai [Kawasaki City Children's Rights Committee], 2005). Thus, one's attainment of *Ibasho* is viewed as critically important in Japanese society. Hujitake (2000) describes *Ibasho* as necessary for life: without *Ibasho*, one may be living biologically, but dead socially.

The creation of *Ibasho* is a complex developmental process. In childhood, having friends with whom to play, time to play, a rich stimulating environment, and autonomy to choose and use these conditions to engage in creative activities and exploration is viewed as necessary for *Ibasho* creation (Minatsuki, Baba, & Minami, 2003). By early adolescence, a sense of solidarity is particularly important for children in achieving *Ibasho* among close friends (Tominaga & Kitayama, 2003). For adults, *Ibasho* creation is supported at work when colleagues value one another's work contribution (Hujitake, 2000; Shibano, 2002), at home when they have close family relationships (Kubota, 2000) and are satisfied with their own as well as each other's roles as husband, wife, parent, etc. (Maeno, 2000; Zanma, 2000), and in the community when they have mutually supportive relationships with friends for child rearing (Matsuda, 2005).

Among many positive socio-emotional experiences, a sense of *anshin* may be a necessary component for *Ibasho* creation throughout the lifespan (e.g., Kubota, 2000; Sumida, 2003; Honma, 2006). *Anshin* may be translated as "peace of mind," "freedom from care/worry," "without anxiety," "in peace," "relieved," "reassured," etc. Although *anshin* describes emotions, these emotions are not entirely internal, but often are associated with relationships. A sense of *anshin*, or *anshin-kan*, usually is translated as "a sense of security" and typically is achieved through trusting relationships. When the term *anshin* is attached to a person (*hito*), "*anshin-dekiru* (be capable)-*hito* (person)," it means a person on whom one can trust and rely, a person with whom one can feel safe. If there are many *anshin-dekiru-hito* (trustworthy individuals) in the group or community, then people feel that the group or community is safe. People may feel *anshin* when they are physically safe and accepted by others, have clear roles to perform, feel that their presence is valued, and share values within the group, all of which are important emotional experiences for *Ibasho* creation (Tominaga & Kitayama, 2003).

1.2. Everyday socialization practices which support maltreated children's *Ibasho* creation: *Mimamori*

In Japan, most children who enter state care including for maltreatment do not live in individual foster homes, but in groups in government-regulated child care institutions (see Bamba & Haight, 2007). In our previous research, child welfare workers and educators viewed children's creation of *Ibasho* within the institution as necessary to their well-being. Maltreatment from parents, as well as the poor social skills, withdrawn or fearful behaviors, aggressive behaviors and superficial interpersonal relationships which may result, were viewed as impediments to a child's *Ibasho* creation. Thus, one professional goal articulated by some child care workers was to support children's *Ibasho* creation in child care institutions (Bamba & Haight, 2007).

¹ Note that in our research program, we have chosen to retain some Japanese words used by our participants themselves because their meanings, as well as people's associated experiences, are deeply embedded in Japanese culture. These words are difficult to translate because they encompass a range of meanings entangled in Japanese scripts for appropriate interpersonal behavior and desirable caregiver–child relationships (Levine, 2001).

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