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Shanda Brishette Pemberton

California State University, Monterey Bay

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AMERICA’S “PERPETUAL ALIENS”

By Shanda Pemberton

In this essay Pemberton explores one of the issues of equity that more prominently concern US society today. Perpetual Aliens refers to the experiences of immigrants who have strive to belong to the new society while maintaining their “self” that is, their roots in old traditions and civilization.

Researchers in the social sciences tend to think in terms of the individualism-collectivism dichotomy when contrasting European American and East Asian American cultural orientations. Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier (2002) make a good argument for rethinking this perspective on cultural frames; however, for the purposes of this work, I will compare Japanese American culture and European American culture in the context of the collectivist versus individualist model favored by modern social scientists.

There is no definition of culture on which all scholars can agree, although there are a plethora of theories regarding the meaning of the word. Here, culture will be defined as the set of learned behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideals that are characteristic of a given society or population (Ember, 2003). Researchers of culture have long assumed that culture is tacit and implicit; that is, “what culture is to humans is what water is to fish” (Kitayama, 2002, p.90).

The spread of Protestantism and the birth of civic freedom in Western societies have brought about social and civic institutions that foster confidence in the importance of individual choice, personal freedom, and self-actualization. Individualism is a focus on one’s rights before duties, self-concern and care for immediate relations, stressing self-fulfillment and autonomy, and making one’s personal accomplishments the basis for self-identity (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). As a worldview, individualism can be said to bring the personal (personal goals, uniqueness, and control) to the fore while leaving the social on the periphery. Manifestations of this worldview within European American culture include the following: the need for creating and nurturing a positive sense of self is a basic human endeavor; feeling good about oneself and one’s success and having distinguishing personal attitudes and opinions are valued; internal traits are seen as the basis for self-development. The individualist is somewhat ambivalent regarding interactions with others. Though group memberships and relationships are necessary to achieving personal goals, these are maintained for a price. It is assumed that individualists apply equity norms in order to judge a relationship’s benefits and
costs, meaning that they will leave relationships when the costs outpace the benefits and form new beneficial relationships as their goals evolve. This implies that relationships and group memberships are impermanent and undemanding (Oyserman, 2002).

At the core of collectivism is the premise that groups are binding and mutually obligating for the individual. The level and type of obligations depends upon ascribed status within the communal society. Social groupings with like fate, goals, and values are centralized. The collectivist is oriented towards in-groups, such as family, clan, colleagues, etc., and away from out-groups. The collectivist finds self-identity in group affiliations, with traits such as being self-sacrificing (for the common good) and the ability to maintain harmony being most highly valued. Satisfaction is found in carrying out one’s social roles and fulfilling social obligations successfully. Failure in these areas is considered shameful. Emotional expression is reserved as a means of assuring in-group harmony. Social context, external constraints, and social roles take the lead in swaying personal perception and fundamental reasoning. Membership in certain social groupings is fixed; this is a thing to accommodate oneself to and simply a fact of life. The rigidity of the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups is important to stability in a collectivist culture. Relationships among individuals of an in-group are based on equality and munificence (Oyserman, 2002).

While individualism and collectivism are merely general cultural frames, the ideas, values, beliefs, and behaviors covered in each are valuable for understanding the European American culture and the Japanese American culture. My own observation while living in Japan has shed some light on the roots of my Japanese American friends and why we sometimes throw our hands in the air in mutual frustration at our lack of ability to get certain concepts across to each other. We share this society and land as our home but many of our core ideas, values, and beliefs are vastly different.

The term cultural identity has more than 150 definitions but can be loosely described as the shared, learned behavior transmitted from one generation to the next for the purposes of adjustment, adaptation, and growth within one’s environment (Marsella & Kameoka, 1989). Cultural identity and related attitudes and behaviors are vital to the larger concept of self-identity formation, which typically takes place during adolescence. This identity, within the cultural context, influences one’s interactions with people from other groups, the way in which one goes about conducting one’s life, and how one views life in general.

The findings of John Kino Yamaguchi Williams et al. (2002) imply that for Japanese Americans, a strong cultural identity with an ethnic group may provide a measure of protection against anxiety.

Equity refers to “a set of norms or rules that help to ensure allocations of valued resources between individuals and/or groups” (McClintock, 1994, p.297) in ways which are perceived to be fair. These rules may decide the ultimate distribution of resources between individuals or groups, or prescribe which procedures ought to be followed in order to ensure fairness in allocation decisions and see to the proper implementation of these procedures.

In his article, “Theories of Action and Praxis”, Ira Cohen presents Anthony Giddens’ view on power relations between super-ordinates and subordinates within a society as a “dialectic of control” (Turner,
There are those dedicated to re-adjusting these relations on the basis of a new strategic direction. The aim is to enable the subordinate (in the global society) to achieve interests in the changing world and to begin to occupy a more favorable position in a future international pattern (Xiyue, 1999). For the Japanese American, this would mean being recognized as truly American without having to deny one culture to be accepted into another, with all the rights and privileges guaranteed in our Constitution.

The principles of social justice are the regulatory standards for the basic institutions within a society. The Encyclopedia of Ethics, Volume 2 (1998) presents a concise overview of Rawl’s principles of social Justice. The first is that each person has the right to the most widespread basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others. The second principle is two-fold, and states: social and economic inequalities should be arranged so that they are (a) assigned to positions and offices open to everyone through fair equality of opportunity, and (b) able to be of the most benefit to the least advantaged in society. The first principle covers basic liberties such as freedom to move and express oneself, the right to vote and run for office in free elections, and equal protection under the law. The second principle provides a “liberal critique of feudalism and the radical critique of a pure private ownership economy” (p.120).

In her article, “White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies” (in Mio, 2004), McIntosh describes her invisible knapsack of unearned White privileges. Seen from this perspective, one could infer that social justice only truly extends to those of European American heritage, males more so than females.

Within the American history, one event demonstrates the three concepts of discrimination, inequity, and social injustice of the dominant European American super-ordinate culture in dealing with subordinate cultures. In February 1941, ten months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor President Roosevelt issued an executive order as Commander in Chief to place Japanese Americans living on the West Coast under strict curfew laws as a measure of protection for the area. Congress passed a resolution in March of 1942, supporting the president's action. The President later ordered the removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry from that region for the duration of the war. By spring of 1942, about 112,000 people (two-thirds of them were U.S. citizens) had been relocated to internment camps scattered across the interior of the country.

The appendices to this paper have not been included for this publication due to copyright issues. However, the interested reader may look to an article reprinted from Library Journal February 1, 1943, a personal letter from “Fusa”, a young Japanese-American girl, and the description and image of a work by Henry Sugimoto from his Collection 1928-1990 (Camp Rohwer 1944-1945, Camp Rohwer in Fall) for insight. They provide personal reflections in word and in the powerful medium of paint on canvas of both Japanese Americans and European Americans who experienced this period in our history first-hand. Evidence discovered decades later showed that government officials had deliberately misled the Supreme Court about the military need for the mass evacuations. No Japanese American was ever convicted of espionage or sabotage (CQ Encyclopedia, 2003).

Jeffrey Mio of California State Polytechnic University, Pomona published an article (2004) recently of a contempo-
rary example of discrimination, inequity, and social injustice against Asian Americans. He claims that up to the present, fruitful discussions regarding race relations and ways to improve them have been black and white, literally. He says Asians are left out of the equation, and attributes this to the Asian American being a “perpetual foreigner” (p.91). This is a grave example of discrimination, inequity, and social injustice. Those who see these true Americans as not truly American based on their appearing as other than white are likely shunting them to the side in discussions of racism and other considerations because they assume they are not here to stay (Mio, 2004). This affords them little voice; indeed it perpetuates the “us/them” dichotomy I just fell into myself.

I was fortunate enough to be able to live and work as a legal alien in Japan for almost six years. In that time I was afforded an opportunity most European Americans never live. I became the Other, the subordinate within a society populated overwhelmingly by a super-ordinate culture. I found that the more “Japanese” I behaved, the further I got in my personal and business dealings. I had to deny much of my own culture in order to get along there until I learned to strike a balance that was more palatable. It was a humbling, but a personal experience I consider pivotal. I began to desperately seek the similarities between myself and my friends and colleagues instead of being daunted by our differences, ultimately forging lifelong friendships. I learned from personal experience that the cultural bias that I carried was part of me for better or for worse, but acknowledging it as a factor in my experiences with people of various cultures has made for a wonderful travelogue of events. This time I spent in Japan and in other countries is what sparked my interest in what it must be like for the Japanese in America and the Japanese Americans. I am now a student of the Japanese language and culture in order to serve the particular needs of Japanese American clients in research as a clinical psychologist working from a cross-cultural theoretical framework. This said I do not believe that all Japanese Americans are just like my acquaintances in Japan, aside from better English-speaking skills and less raw fish in their diets. My aim is to understand the cultural roots of the population I wish to serve in future, that I might be more effective in my research aimed at meeting their needs.

As a society, the European American super-ordinate has made some headway towards extending equity and social justice to the Japanese Americans. In 1988, forty-six years after WWII, in the Japanese-Americans Reparations Act, Congress officially apologized to those still surviving internees (about 60,000) and set up a fund of $1.25 billion for division among them as tax-free gifts of $20,000 each. The fund was also allocated to the historical study and education about the internment. In 1998 President Clinton awarded Fred Korematsu the Presidential Medal of Freedom (CQ Encyclopedia, 2003).

While these steps are necessary, they only begin an effective strategy to establish true social justice and equity for Japanese Americans. Jeffrey Mio (2004) describes allies to this cause as those “who advocate for groups across demographic characteristics” (p.93). A strategy aimed at the ends mentioned above needs prominent allies within academia and the media to make known the importance of the issue at hand, and push it from the edges of the awareness of our society to the center of debate.

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As Henry Kissinger pointed out, “The paradox is that a country that thinks of itself as acting in the name of universal values is seen by too many others as acting arbitrarily, or inexplicably, or arrogantly” (May, 1999). As a culture, European Americans have been guilty of this in refusing to acknowledge the validity of the Japanese American culture due to a myopic view of the world at large and our own society in particular. Seeking to acknowledge and understand other cultural perspectives will only happen here if we do so in spite of our biases rather than in accordance with them.

References


