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The relationship of *ijime* and *amae* in Japanese middle school classrooms

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The relationship of *ijime* and *amae* in Japanese middle school classrooms

**Abstract:**

The system of bullying in Japan, known as *ijime*, has been a highly visible problem for decades. The prevalence of this social problem has generated much national and international discussion, and yet it remains. My article proposes that *ijime* is such an issue because of the nature of Japanese society. Dependence, or *amae*, is the key to a harmonious society which leads to a fear and ostracization of those who are different. Moreover, *ijime* is frequently seen in middle schools because of high academic pressure. I use a first-hand account of a victim of bullying to provide an example of this issue, to analyze it in context and describe how it relates to the importance of interdependence in Japanese society.

Bullying in Japanese classrooms stems from a perception of non-conformity amongst peer groups; anyone who is seen as different from the rest of the class could be at risk of being bullied. The concept of bullying in Japan is called *ijime*, which comes from the verb *ijimeru* and means to torment or to bully. Often this bullying is portrayed by the media as physical abuse but it is important to note that most *ijime* in Japan takes the form of social exclusion or psychological torment (Fukuzawa and LeTendre 88).

The system of *ijime*, like Japanese society in general, appears to rely on a psychological concept of dependence, known as *amae* (Doi 28). The word *amae* comes from the verb *amaeru*, which translates as either acting like a spoiled child or depending on another person's goodwill. If one person stands out from their peer group, they may be seen as undependable upon by the rest of the group. This causes a subconscious fear among members of the peer group, which then leads to action that attempts to eliminate the difference. This action, often physically violent or emotionally damaging, can be seen as an attempt to strengthen the interdependence amongst members of the classroom at the expense of the bullied student. In order to understand the

prevalence of the *ijime* issue and how this dependence plays such a role in its existence, it is important to trace first the timeline of bullying in Japan and the societal response to it.

Tracing the history of *ijime* is quite difficult before the 1980s. While the consensus is that forms of bullying took place in top schools in prewar Japan, these actions were not recognized as *ijime* until the late 1970s and the early 1980s (Beauchamp and Vardaman, 29). The predominant reasons for this are a lack of definition for the actions that might constitute bullying, as well as an unwillingness to report these actions. Interestingly, the definition of *ijime* was still quite vague up until the mid-1990s, and even in recent times there has been an unwillingness to report bullying to the authority figures who might make a difference (Kobayashi 3). From the 1980s to present day, there have been several notably tragic incidents of *ijime* that the media, the Japanese government and educators point to as examples of this societal issue; these incidents have helped institutions respond to subsequent events and to draft preventative measures.

Public attention was first drawn to school age bullying during the 1980s because of the high numbers of victims who committed suicide (Beauchamp and Vardaman 28-9). Many of these students felt that the only way to escape the attacks was by removing themselves from their situation. The most highly publicized incident from this time period was the suicide of a Tokyo junior high school student named Shikagawa Hirohumi. In 1986, this thirteen-year old boy hanged himself in the Morioka railway station after suffering from *ijime* for months beforehand (Yoneyama 157). Shikagawa was forced by his classmates to do a number of things, such as fight a younger member of his school and running errands, all actions aimed at humiliating him. The culminating event was a mock funeral that most of his classmates and even a few of his teachers participated in. A few months later, he wrote a note explaining his actions and committed suicide. Numerous attempts to alleviate his victimization had been made previously

but were ultimately unsuccessful. His father contacted the school only to have his concerns dismissed with the suggestion that his son change schools while Shikagawa attempted to leave his group of friends. These attempts only led to an escalation in the violence from his bullies (Kobayashi 3-4; Yoneyama 157-8).

After Shikagawa's suicide a court ruled that this episode did not constitute *ijime*, which angered the media as well as parents and other school children nationwide (Kobayashi 4; Yoneyama 159). This ruling was sadly not unusual and directly correlated to the Japanese Ministry of Education's definition of bullying. They claimed that for an incident to be considered *ijime*, it had to be a series of continuous physical or psychological attacks upon someone who is weaker than their aggressor; the victim must suffer from significant amounts of pain (Kobayashi 3). This definition concluded with the phrase "and these incidents must be acknowledged by the school as bullying behaviors" (qtd. in Kobayashi 3). By contrast, if a school was unable or unwilling to acknowledge an episode of *ijime*, then it would not be recognized by the government. Governmental and educator views on the subject did not start changing until the 1990s after another highly publicized suicide.

In 1994, the experiences of middle school student, Okouchi Kiyoteru, brought about changes in governmental and educator perceptions of bullying. He was bullied for over two years by several other boys and like Shikagawa nearly a decade earlier, forced into humiliating situations. Besides being made to do various things he was unwilling to do, such as undressing and being left in the school gymnasium in only his underwear, he was also physically abused and even forced to give his tormentors money (Kobayashi 5). It is believed that he paid his aggressors more than 1.1 million yen over the course of two years. He was abused further after coming to the defense of another victim in his classroom; at one point, he was almost forcibly

drowned in a river, after which Okouchi completely submitted to his persecutors (Yoneyama 158-9). Although his teachers did take note of the signs that he was being bullied, they chose to ignore them because Okouchi lied when being questioned (159). They believed, like the Ministry of Education at the time, that if a student did not admit to abuse that it was merely harmless teasing.

After two years of this, Okouchi decided to end his life. He left behind a suicide note, detailing exactly why he died, which included accounts of specific incidents that had taken place, the names of four of his persecutors, and a record of how much money he had paid them over the years (Kobayashi 5; Yoneyama 158). His parents decided to release parts of the note to the public which caused an uproar (Yoneyama 159; Pollack). Consequently, the Ministry of Education determined that the definition of *ijime* must change and be recognized from the point of view of the victims. In the end, the definition remained basically the same, with the exclusion of the clause that required the school's acknowledgement that bullying was occurring (Kobayashi 4-5). Japanese society has changed as well; however, this change has not brought about an end to *ijime*, only created new ways that bullying is perpetrated, including a societal discussion proposing possible solutions to the issue.

One of the most infamous incidents of modern school age bullying in Japan took place in 2011. A thirteen-year old boy from the city of Otsu, only identified as Hiroki, jumped from the fourteenth floor of an apartment building to his death. For months, Hiroki had been physically abused, as well as subjected to extortion for money and even forced to rehearse his own suicide by three of his classmates. This incident, along with other less well publicized episodes of youth bullying in schools, caused the Ministry of Education to begin working on changes to legislation regarding education. Schools were expected to report *ijime* cases to the police and offer

counseling to any students who might be suffering from physical or psychological abuse (Murakami; McCurry). Clearly, Japan has reached a point where *ijime* is not tolerated, and yet it remains a highly publicized and discussed issue.

Advances in technology, including the growth of cell phone and internet use, has expanded the platform for bullying in Japan. While face-to-face bullying still occurs, there is a completely new aspect to psychological bullying. With the prevalence of technology, cyberbullying is now a major way for students to harm one another. Sharon Shariff, with the help of her graduate research assistants, Julie d'Eon and Yasuko Senoo, investigated numerous cases of Japanese cyberbullying in 2007. They discovered that many cases of both middle- and high-school bullying occurred via technology; cyberbullies took advantage of the convenience and pervasiveness of modern technology in order to alienate their victims. Despite the prevalence of cyberbullying in high schools, middle schools are the setting for most *ijime* likely due to the high academic pressure. Shariff encountered various examples of cyberbullying; one girl was forced to remove her clothing, during which her aggressors took photographs of her and showed them to other students (Shariff 50). Another girl was murdered by a classmate after they fought over instant messaging. Her murderer admitted that she had intentionally used a website to draw the victim out of her classroom in order to kill her (ibid 50-1). A slightly unusual case involved a first-year high school student who posted photographs of himself being victimized by another boy and girl. These photos drew attention to his abuse, which then led to the perpetrators being caught and punished (ibid 51). It appears that while the availability of technology has contributed to the problem of *ijime*, it has also made it easier for victims to out their bullies to families and teachers.

Many of the cases followed in this study concluded with the perpetrators being punished for their actions. The girl who took photographs of her victim forced to pose naked and shared them, had texted the images to friends who then shared them with other classmates. This led to the images being seen by their teachers. The girl who murdered her friend over an internet dispute had left a trail of their communication. The boy who posted photos of his bullies took matters into his own hands as much as he possibly could by publicizing his abuse (Shariff 50-1). It is possible that the ease of access to technology and lack of control over it is the reason why even in modern times most instances of bullying still occur in person. Because bullying incidents in person are “more insidious and invisible from the eyes of adults” (Kobayashi 5), the challenge of identifying these incidents as bullying makes it “difficult for parents and teachers to intervene” (Fukuzawa and LeTendre 59).

If measures are being taken to discourage bullying and harassment amongst school children and they continue nonetheless, there is likely some aspect of society that encourages it, even if indirectly. According to Takeo Doi, an important aspect of the Japanese psyche is the concept of *amae*, which can also be seen in cultures globally but is more often discouraged elsewhere. *Amae* is a psychological concept that exists in societal interactions, and it predominantly defines relationships amongst the Japanese. They make unique use of a set of terminologies that are used to define *amae* because it is so visible in everyday interactions. In fact, Doi claims that “the Japanese social structure is formed in such a way as to permit [its] expression” (28). *Amae* is a feeling of dependence amongst members of society that stems from the ‘ideal’ relationship between a parent and a child. This relationship permits a one-sided assumption of goodwill, wherein one person may be self-indulgent and presume upon another person without being expected to reciprocate. While Western societies typically seem to

discourage such behavior beyond childhood, in Japan it is expected to continue into adulthood. This may mean that a person requests something of someone else that they could reasonably do themselves. Since this dependence provides a social lubricant of sorts, it is considered acceptable behavior. Members within a group then are forced to rely on each other because of these obligations, which then creates harmonious societal interactions.

The concept of *amae* was first discussed by Japanese psychologist Takeo Doi during the 1950s. After a bewildering trip to the United States, he became curious about the differences between social interaction in America and Japan. He stumbled upon the idea that both cultures, like many other cultures and even animals, rely on dependence amongst members of society to function, and yet Japan might be the only society that is fully aware of it. The Japanese language is full of words and terms that define this dependence while, according to Doi, possibly no other language does this. Doi became convinced that “the special qualities of the Japanese psychology had a close relationship with this fact” (15). After a series of lectures and papers on the subject of Japanese dependence, in 1973 Doi wrote his internationally recognized book, *The Anatomy of Dependence*.

*The Anatomy of Dependence* was Doi’s attempt to analyze Japanese psychology and define it for the rest of the world. He discusses the uniqueness of Japanese dependence, even while recognizing that dependence is not exclusive to Japanese society. Since, as Doi sees it, *amae* is so integral to understanding how society functions, he explores what happens when it breaks down in relationships. If *amae* is frustrated in peer interactions, relationships within a group can no longer function in a harmonious manner. Japanese society is so highly dependent on this harmony that without it, relationships cannot exist. He also defines the unique language

of *amae* for his readers so they can better understand how it functions within the society of Japan at large.

There are several key terms that are unique to the Japanese language that are related to this concept of dependence; to understand how *ijime* and *amae* interact in social groups in Japan, one must understand the terminology. First is human feeling, called *ninjō* in Japanese, and social obligation, called *giri*. These concepts often rely on one another within Japanese societal relationships. In an ideal relationship, human feeling and social obligation work together but under other circumstances, they may also conflict with one another. In his book, Doi discusses the example of a person with multiple social obligations. Ideally this person will be able to repay his or her multiple obligations, but if fulfilling one means neglecting another, conflict arises (Doi 34-5). His or her *ninjō* demands that goodwill be kept amongst everyone, but goodwill cannot be achieved while sacrificing *giri*. As he says, “the motive force behind the inner conflict is the desire to retain goodwill” (35) which observers might also call *amae* or dependence.

Another key term is the idea of *tanin*, meaning the lack of closeness between two individuals in a social group. *Tanin* is used to describe people other than oneself, but is more than just ‘other people’. A parent-child relationship is often considered to be the ideal relationship between two people because it could never be considered *tanin* or lacking in closeness, and thus should be aspired to in all relationships (Doi 37). If one person is in a *tanin* relationship with another person, these two people could never be expected to be entirely dependent upon one another. There is no closeness in their relationship, so an assumption of good will could never be made completely on one side or the other.

The final key term is *enryo*, which is the Japanese word for restraint. According to Doi, “This word was originally used [...] to mean thoughtful consideration [...] but [now is] used as a

negative yardstick in measuring the intimacy of human relationships” (38). This term is closely related to the concept of *tanin*, meaning that the less close a relationship is, the more restraint exists in inter-relational actions; the relationship lacks intimacy. Doi also believes that “in their hearts [...] the Japanese do not care much for *enryo*” (38-9). This is likely because restraint in a relationship is the same as a lack of *amae*. One cannot depend on another if the relationship between the two is distant and each individual is unlikely to tolerate all actions or behavior. To really make sense of these concepts and observe how they allow us to understand bullying within the Japanese context, they must be viewed in the context of actual relationships.

The educational environment of Japanese middle school creates high pressure for several reasons. This is the time when young people are being pushed to study for their upcoming high school entrance exams. This time when students are forced to take numerous lecture style classes that they may not be interested in, as well as attend “cram schools” in the evening, which ensures review of the materials learned in the classroom, is known as “exam hell”. These exams can determine the outcome of a person’s professional life; if someone goes to a top-level high school, this can ensure that they will be accepted at a top-level university, which in turn can allow them more chances to be promoted throughout their career.

This academic pressure discourages middle school students from socializing after school, so all of their interpersonal relationships are limited to the classroom. In Japanese junior high schools, friendships are often based on common elementary schools, homerooms, clubs, and proximity of where students live (Fukuzawa and LeTendre 52). Friendships are formed largely in homeroom classes because so much time is spent there (ibid 54). These friendships become extremely important for the students who are under severe stress with very few ways to alleviate it. In fact, many students view school as a time to be with friends rather than to learn (ibid 45-7).

Basically, students are using school to create *amae* relationships with one another in order to cope with the amount of work they have to do in preparation for their future.

In a typical classroom setting, *amae* might develop in the following way: ninth-grade Girl A might be placed in homeroom class number two. Over the course of the year, Girl A becomes close to three other girls because they all live near each other and sit near one another in class. Girl A's relationship with the others becomes less *tanin* over time, and the amount of *enryo* between them also lessens. They feel that they are close friends who can depend on one another. Every time a practice exam is scheduled, they study together and encourage one another. However, Girl A and her friends are competing for top scores on these tests; Girl A might use her friends to study and as a measuring stick for her own success. In addition, her parents might encourage these relationships because this friendly competition could inspire Girl A to challenge herself and become more successful.

Japanese author, Mitsuyo Ohira published a memoir in 2001, called *So Can You*, that discusses how she was bullied in junior high school and what a far-reaching impact this had on the rest of her life. Because of a mistake that she made in her classroom, she was subjected to *ijime*, which progressively got worse until she attempted to take her own life. Ohira's parents tried, unsuccessfully, to help her until they too gave up. Her teachers put a minimal amount of effort into helping her, but ultimately viewed her struggle as a minor bout of teasing. This occurred at a time when the definition of *ijime* was still vague enough so no one took it especially seriously. The lack of concern led to Ohira's action to solve her problem, and consequently impacted her life all the way into adulthood. This girl was unable to depend on any of the people that should have supported her, which led to a frustration of *amae* and subsequent negative reactions toward these people.

As an adult, Ohira's life lacked direction until she encountered an old family friend while working at a hostess bar. This man encouraged her to repair her relationship with her parents and to figure out what she wanted from her life. Ohira followed this friend's advice and realized that she wanted to be a lawyer, despite the fact that she had not continued her education past middle school. She learned she could take the national law exam in preparation for a career as a lawyer, if she took a correspondence course. After taking the course, she studied for months and passed the exam on her first attempt. This experience inspired her to write her book and travel around the country speaking to parents and children about her life. She wants to break the cycle of *ijime* for other victims as well as encourage young people to work through their hardships so they can lead a better life.

Ohira's memoir cannot be used to provide a complete argument about all Japanese culture on its own but it does serve as a valuable piece of evidence to explain the connection between *ijime* and *amae* in Japanese middle schools. It is one of the rare first-person accounts of a bullying victim in Japan and provides insight into the workings of Japanese education and the nature of relationships within this system. When looking at Ohira's experiences by considering *ijime*, there are three basic societal relationships to be examined. The first is her relationship with her classmates; these were the people who perpetrated the abuse against her, so this relationship is the one with a complete breakdown of *amae*. After her initial transfer into her new school, Ohira had reason to hope that she would develop successful relationships that she could rely on in order to succeed in the struggle that is Japanese middle school. Her classmates seemed interested in getting to know her and in developing these relationships as well. One day, however, she accidentally ignored the so-called "bad girl" of the class which led to this girl and her friends, who also were considered delinquents, to ignore her (Ohira 23).

This seemingly minor interaction between Ohira and these girls eventually led to her being tripped and kicked, her personal possessions being thrown out, and gossip being spread about her around the school (28-9). The relationship between Ohira and her classmates was never able to leave the *tanin* state; there was always a coldness and restraint between them. Her classmates saw her as different because she was a transfer student with no previous ties to friends from elementary school. In addition, she had also angered a person who was viewed as dangerous. Ultimately, this combination pushed Ohira into the role of outsider. Her classmates, including the girls whom she had started to befriend, could not allow her difference to upset the balance of the society of their classroom. They believed that she could not be depended on and as a result, made it clear to her that she could not depend on them either.

Several months after her incident with the delinquent girl, she walked into her classroom one morning and attempted to engage one of her friends. She asked her if she had seen a specific television program the night before. After not receiving a response, Ohira asked if she was able to hear her, to which she received no response. When she attempted to speak with the girl again, the girl got up and walked away only to talk to someone else about the same television program (24-5). This refusal to engage is a clear example of a breakdown of *amae*. Ohira attempted to be accepted by and indulged by her friend but because she was already viewed as undependable, her former friend did not allow it.

In an attempt to eliminate Ohira's difference within the classroom, her classmates basically destroyed her will to live. They removed any desire she might have had to be a part of the peer group by staging a series of physically and psychologically damaging episodes. Although she decided to leave the group definitively by attempting to commit suicide, she ended up failing. Now her classmates would not allow her to return to the group because her failure to

end her life set her apart from the others. She not only was a reminder of what they had done to her but also a complete outsider because she had attempted something that was so far beyond the norm.

The second relationship that Ohira struggled with was with her teachers. She describes her middle school teachers as being distant and uncaring, disinterested in actually connecting with their students (39). After an incident where water was dumped on her in the bathroom, Ohira stressed herself into being ill so she stayed home for a few days. Her mother realized that something was bothering her at school, so she questioned her. At first Ohira lied and claimed that she was just exhausted, but finally her mother learned that she was avoiding her classmates because they had been tormenting her. Her parents called the school, and her teachers said they would resolve the problem. Ohira did not want to return to school claiming, “I don’t think my teacher really knows what’s going on” (39). Upon her return to school she realized that she was correct; her teacher viewed the situation as a minor dispute.

After her suicide attempt, Ohira refused to go back to school, a common reaction to *ijime*. Eventually her parents determined that she had to try to move on with her life, which included a return to school so she could finish her education. Unfortunately, upon contacting the school for assistance with the situation, the teachers and principal determined that they could handle the situation and rejected her request to transfer to another school in order to make a fresh start (59-60). At first Ohira refused until her mother guilted her with the idea that the people around them believed that “there must be something wrong with [her] parents, [Ohira] just wasn’t brought up right” (61). Ohira believed that her mother hated her because of her suicide attempt. She did not want her to hate her more by not attending school, so she went back for her third year.

As previously mentioned, Ohira's treatment upon her return was even worse than before the suicide attempt but her teachers barely acknowledged that she was suffering. During an introduction exercise in her homeroom class, her classmates mocked her with the idea that "her hobby is killing herself" (64). Her homeroom teacher merely brushed the comments aside and told the class that they needed to settle down. Her teachers, like her classmates, viewed her as different because she was unable to make a place for herself within the society of her peer group. She was unable to depend on her teachers because they felt they could not depend on her to graduate without drawing attention to herself as an individual amongst her classmates. In order to downplay her identity as an individual, they ignored her suffering. They pretended that her inability to be a part of the group did not exist and simply avoided the issue.

In her final year, when approaching graduation, her homeroom teacher created a further distance between Ohira and himself by yelling at her in a manner reminiscent of her classmates. She had decided to turn her life around by becoming a hair stylist; after taking and passing the entrance exam to beauty school, she went to share the good news with the one person she thought would be proud of her. Upon greeting her homeroom teacher, he began to yell "look at your hair! You shouldn't be seen anywhere with hair like that" (84). He was trying to bring her back from her delinquent life that she had reached, but ended up pushing her further away. She then felt like she could depend on him even less than before, so in this way he ensured that she would no longer be part of her peer group.

The final relationship that must be examined was the one with her parents. Before Ohira's suicide attempt, her mother and father tried to solve her problems for her without really understanding what they were. These attempts stopped after she tried to kill herself because their relationship had become more *tanin* than it had been previously. They felt that if their only

daughter could do something so horrible instead of something more productive, they would not be able to depend on her. This poor reaction to her *ijime* brought them to ignore her trauma and focus on how she made them look to the outside world. They then requested that she attempt to be more normal, which threw the balance of *amae* off even further. Ohira knew that her parents did not understand her experiences and that this lack of understanding meant that she could not depend on them.

Mitsuyo Ohira had no one with whom to have a proper *amae* relationship, despite her best efforts to create one with the various individuals around her. Consequently, she relied on an outside social sphere that would accept her and not try to ostracize her for being different. This group was a local gang who also had failed to create traditional relationships founded on reciprocal dependence. These people all desired to be accepted and indulged by those around them, so it was unlikely that they would not allow her to do so with them. She finally found the acceptance she had longed for amongst an unusual group of people.

Japan has a long history of bullying amongst school children, specifically in the middle school years. This history can be traced back to the 1980s, with at least one highly publicized case that led to some moderate educational reform (Fukuzwa and LeTendre). These incidents are ultimately due to the bonds of dependence that form during these years of high academic pressure. If one student is somehow viewed as different from his or her peers, it might be believed that they cannot be relied upon and thereby undercut the interdependence that supports Japanese society (Doi). This then causes fear amongst the members of the peer group, in this case the middle school students surrounding the one seen as abnormal. These students will then bully the different student psychologically and physically in an attempt to force them out of the group. In many cases, including Mitsuyo Ohira's, this bullying alienates the young student to the

point where the victim feels the need to remove themselves from the situation by committing suicide (Ohira).

The fact that new types of bullying have emerged alongside the changes that are occurring in daily interaction, such as with the prevalence of technology, points to the continuance of an already long occurring issue. Bullying will not stop just because times are changing; serious action has to be taken in order to affect a complete change. If minor and ineffectual actions continue to be taken, it can be determined that *ijime* will continue as long as there is a Japanese society.

When I reflect upon this project, my understanding of *ijime* in Japanese classrooms has not only grown, but completely changed. When I first developed my question and began my research, I felt that bullying was completely un-Japanese and could not understand how such a thing could even happen. I felt that it must be rare and that the incidents I heard about merely took place because they were so tragic. After being informed of Doi's work, I began to put the puzzle pieces together and came to realize that bullying was in fact closely related to how Japanese society functioned. Ultimately, I learned a lot about the history of bullying in Japan, which includes the ways that society is responding to these incidents. I have always intended to make my home in Japan and teach English to Japanese students. With the discovery of the prevalence of *ijime* in the classroom, I only hope that this will make me a better teacher and allow me to make contributions toward ending such incidents in Japanese classrooms. If given the opportunity, I would like to take my experiences as a teacher and in the manner of Mitsuyo Ohira, become a point of contact for outreach. This may be difficult due to my own outsider status within the country, but could create additional discussion for the topic as well as giving bullying victims someone they could speak— an individual who would understand their situation, while not being a part of it.



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