**Table of Contents**

Introduction………………………………………………………….1

Group Harmony in Japan…………………………………………….2

Groupmind in the world of business…………………………………2

Ambiguous language in business…………………………………….3

A violation of ethics? ..........................................................................4

Maintaining familial bonds……………………………………….….6

Communicating with other cultures……………………………..…..7

Conclusion………………………………………………….….…….9

Works Cited………………………………………………………….11

**Introduction**

No matter how independent many of us strive to appear, every single one of us has a group that they rely on; the groups are often built on the basis of family, friendships, sometimes even common workplace. In the Western world, even though we have these relationships, and hold them in high regard, there is a certain emphasis on the self, and therefore, a certain amount of separation from those in the group. At the end of the day, if one is not self-sufficient, what use are they to anyone?

In Japan, these groups, also comprised of family, friends, and coworkers, also exist. They form a general net of support for any situation the person in question might run into. The important difference between the Japanese perspective and the Western perspective is that in Japan, there is a far greater emphasis on the group instead of the self. Far more often than in America, one is judged by their social connections or accomplishments in a group setting rather than personal accomplishments. Certain concepts that are seen or recognized in the West are seen to have a far greater importance in Japan; the classic idea of in-group/out-group is referred to as *uchito soto*, literally “home and outside”. The expectation of dependency in these groups is referred to as *amae*, and is seen in nearly every kind of relationship. Among the many tools for group harmony, one of the most common is the extreme level of ambiguity used in daily conversation, whether at the office or at home, in an effort to not say ‘no’ is referred to as *aimai*. While none of these concepts are unique to Japan, the level of severity to which they are encountered in daily life in Japan is what makes them unique.

But are these social constructs and emphasis on the group actually useful to Japan as a nation? The near refusal to say ‘no’ in order to keep the peace and not be seen as an obstacle for group improvement can just waste time that could be spent debating the proper direction for the group. The level of dependency and insistence of integration into the group can stifle individuality and prevent a person from accomplishing what they really want in favor of ensuring the group survives. In this paper, the effect of these negative aspects will be examined in both casual life and the world of business in an attempt to determine if these habits are a detriment to Japanese society rather than an aid.

**Group Harmony in Japan**

As previously stated, groups in Japan hold the highest priority rather than the person alone. The current theory is that this construct evolved when Japan hit the beginning of its long isolation period. As Japan was, at that time, a small island with little habitable space, the growing population seemed to make a universal agreement: in order to prevent tension from welling up within the various groups, every person sacrificed their sense of self and worked for the sake of the group. Now, thousands of years later, the habits remain even after the isolation has ended; let’s take a look at how they manifest.

**Group mind in the world of business**

In the West, although some companies and corporations may attempt to foster a healthy working environment and always encourage loyalty to the company, their results are abysmal compared to the mindset of a Japanese corporate worker. In Japan, the company is seen as a sort of second family, and workers give their all in ensuring that the company succeeds. From their entrance into the company just out of college, the youngest workers are adopted by superiors and trained to fill the exact role required of them, sometimes to the point that they can predict what their boss will want before they ask for it.

Some people put this difference down to the fact that work has a different meaning in Japan; according to them, ‘work’ is something to derive satisfaction from, rather than a necessity to earn a living. I believe this difference isn’t merely in definition, but also in cultural priority: in the West, success is measured in how much money you make, but in Japan, success is the amount of purpose you have served for the community.

With this perspective in place, the worker then sets to help their company succeed in anyway they can; one of those ways is by ensuring a harmonious working environment. As Ruth Wolf explains in her paper on the subject, a harmonious work environment leads to happy workers, which leads to a successful company. While this sentiment is often seen overseas as well, again, we see a clear difference in definition of how to create the harmonious workplace. In the West, the companies set specific rules of behavior for the workers to follow, using the rules to attempt to teach the workers empathy for their fellow man. Tensions rise when workers ignore them, often because they feel they have no reason to care, or no reason to go out of their way to make someone other than themselves comfortable. In Japan, on the other hand, the worker takes the existence of the happy workplace on themselves and works to create the healthy environment by denying their own desires or comforts in favor of providing them to someone else.

**Ambiguous language in business**

This is the point where one often sees *aimai* rear its vaguely-defined head; as mentioned earlier, this level of ambiguous language is used when a person does not want to make it bluntly known that they do not agree with what their conversational partner has suggested. Instead of saying an outright ‘no’ or, even stating the ‘no’ in a polite yet direct manner, the person will use a phrase such as ‘chotto’ which means ‘a little’, or even going so far as to refuse to answer, letting the silence convey the discontent without actually having to say the word out loud. Any Westerners here can immediately perceive a large problem with this tactic; by avoiding the issue or refusing to take a stand, more time will be spent in trying to get the answer out of the person or the insight the person could have provided in their reasoning for saying ‘no’ is lost, and the project is allowed to move forward without all options explored. In the world of capitalist business, this could spell disaster for a company, which should be the last thing any worker wants. In Japan, this worry is abated by the belief that, because of the process of promoting based on age and time with the company, any superiors involved in the decision making process will have more experience than the lower caste workers, and therefore will have already taken the worries of the inexperienced into account. However, in certain markets, this means allowing many possibly out-of-touch old men make decisions about products marketed towards teenagers, which may not work as well as they expect.

**A violation of ethics?**

As aware as we all are of the dreadful ‘slippery-slope’ fallacy, there is one extreme that must be mentioned as a possible outcome of an exaggerated groupmind such as what may be found in a combination of *uchito soto, aimai,* and *amae*. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of basic human needs, inclusion in a group setting provides humans with a sense of security beyond what they can provide for themselves, as well as a chance to love, be loved, and simply belong. In that sense, the Japanese emphasis on maintaining the group can, in a sense, be seen as humanistic: these groups provide a sense of identity and meaning, allowing those included to experience that sense of security in a very real and lasting way. The problem appears when the group identity begins to erase all sense of individual identity. If all members of a group begin to act and think solely as a member of the group rather than as their own person, they may begin to lose their humanity. As seen in such infamous psychological experiments as the Stanford Prison Experiment, when a person takes on the identity of the group, they lose not only their own identity, but also the knowledge that people outside of their group, who, by definition, lack any connection to the person or group, and therefore any importance, should still be considered a person, and should still be treated as such. Such a loss of humanity, and any events that should spring from this loss could be grounds for a gross ethics violation.

Now, the Japanese people, over all, display an amazing amount of empathy for their fellow human, and many of their more unique cultural habits revolve around thinking about those around rather than the self. One may think that this stunning level of empathy would prevent any such ethical problem from occurring. However, it is important to take into account the amount of cultural constructs that focus on a sense of what can best be described as apathy towards the ‘outsider’ type; more commonly known as the *gaijin*. This word is generally used to describe anyone who is not Japanese, but can also mean “alien” or “foreign”. Should a *gaijin* cross a senior member of the group, and should a separate member be faced with a troubling decision, the combination of the person’s dependence on their group (amae) as well as their desire to remain on good terms with their group could lead them to simply say nothing (aimai) as an injustice is committed. Without a doubt, it would be easy for a Japanese person to see a *gaijin* as *soto* and by extension, less than human. In today’s world, generally there should be nothing to worry about in this sense, and so this scenario should be seen merely as an extreme product of groupmind. However, extreme as it may be, it should be considered a negative aspect of the group emphasis.

**Maintaining familial bonds**

Because of the level of importance applied to the workplace group in Japan as compared to the West, many of the the social constructs seen in the world of business may also be seen in the more casual, relaxed life of the Japanese, but with slightly different results. The emphasis on groups and group harmony is instilled throughout schooling; many schools in Japan heavily encourage students to join clubs; the success of the club will help the student prove that he or she is a team player later on down the road. The student not only learns to juggle social responsibilities with the responsibilities of studying and maintaining health, but also learns to juggle groups, as this is the point where the student will more than likely find themselves in more than one. When compared to the company group, these groups are (mostly) far more flexible and laid back, as it is perfectly acceptable to be a member of more than one. Business culture simply does not allow a person to do that--the loyalty must be given to only one company. And yet, even in this laidback state, these groups still have a much stronger definition, and therefore importance than groups in the West.

If you’ve ever asked a friend what they wanted for dinner, and the answer was “I don’t care,” you know that the use of *aimai*-like ambiguity can be seen (and experienced) anywhere in the world. And yet, even here, Japan retains its unique level of extremity in *aimai*. As mentioned earlier, instead of saying ‘no’ or expressing distaste, a person will say things that translate roughly into ‘that’s good, I think’ or ‘that’s good-interesting’. The practice of adding the word *kawaii*, meaning ‘cute’ to other, negative adjectives to lessen the blow of distaste has created subcultures such as *kimo-kawaii*, literally translated to “gross-cute”. This level of side-stepping is used in the direct hope of preventing hurt feelings and maintaining inclusion in the group. Again, we may start to see the beginnings of identity loss and herd mentality emerging, but in this case, the identity is not entirely lost. Instead, in the casual group settings, the personality is merely suppressed; the vague language allows one to easily fake a compliment while not revealing true feeling, but at the cost of ever truly being allowed to show the feeling. Although Japan’s culture is built on empathy and the ability to anticipate and cater to the thoughts of another person, the people of Japan are more likely to deny their feelings and thoughts, which may lead one to wonder if the Japanese are truly empathetic or simply very good at instilling the values of their culture into others.

**It’s polite to be vague**

One of the more intriguing reasons why Japan has kept the habit of ambiguity for so long is because of its partial evolution into a way of judging one’s ability to read social situations. Directly connected to *aimai* is *sasshi*, or the ability to read the implications of an ambiguous phrase. After several centuries of practice, the Japanese have it down to a near science. A person who cannot pick up on the incredibly subtle hints of *aimai* is seen as oblivious to the feelings of those around him. So it easily connects that in some situations, being direct or blunt with a person is actually an insult to their intelligence or ability to ‘read the air’. While their ability to read into every little detail is a skill worth sharing in Western countries, this does create a level of miscommunication between cultures.

**Communicating with other Cultures**

As already heavily implied by the previous information in this paper, there are clearly differences between Japan and the Western world when it comes to appropriate mindsets. Naturally, these differences have a way of affecting the communication between cultures. The western world views constant ambiguity as taking the easy way out and refusing to take a stand -- it wastes time and causes frustration to those who have to deal with the vague people-pleasers. In Japan, being blunt is seen as rude, even ignorant, and suggests that the person speaking with such direct language is unable to read the atmosphere of the room, or believes that other people are incapable of doing so.

So it should also be no surprise that these two sentences form the basis of the cultural stereotypes for each player. The problem with these stereotypes, as with all stereotypes, is that the exaggerated details, while stemming from the truth, encourage those in other cultures to simply stop trying to learn. Once one has a firm grasp of a stereotype, they will constantly expect the stereotype out of any person who identifies with the group. This only encourages the spread of ignorance. I would like to introduce personal experience here, as an example: next year, I will be travelling to Japan to study abroad. Naturally, I had to inform my superiors at work that I would more than likely be resigning before I started on my travels. The response on my boss, who has been to Japan on previous occasions for work, was to joke that I might not fit in well, because all of the women in Japan had a far more submissive attitude than I did, as they would constantly run around, ‘waiting hand and foot’ on him when he was there. I tried to explain that this attitude only came from the Japanese looking to make everyone comfortable instead of focus on making themselves comfortable, but my explanation fell on mostly deaf ears. Because the definitions and priorities are so different, his view of Japan, while quite welcoming, seems quite distorted to one who has looked into the culture.

What should be done instead, and what is starting to happen now, is a general cultural education, on both sides. But until we are all fully encouraged to learn and understand how to deal with the cultural differences instead of being annoyed by how different they are from our own way of life, the stereotypes and misinformation will continue.

**Conclusion**

As this information demonstrated, there are many negative points--some of them quite worrying--to these particularly group-centered social constructs found in extreme in Japanese society. The individual is deeply suppressed, if not entirely shattered so that the delicate harmony of society can be easily maintained; when other cultures attempt to communicate, the differences in perspective and action cause miscommunications that lead to negative stereotypes. The insistence on being vague rather than speaking one’s mind can waste time and money of those involved. As the sense of identity is slowly twisted into the ideal identity of the group, a whole slew of ethical questions regarding humanity spew forth. And yet, these sacrifices do actually maintain harmony; they have proven their success over several centuries of use. Japan is home to a peaceful, successful society, where all members work to keep it running smoothly.

But are these sacrifices worth it? Honestly, it depends on the person. Clearly, culture has a great effect on what traits and aspects one holds dear in life, and individuality and harmony, while both seen as important, are not held together. It appears that in our current world, one must choose one or the other--you cannot have both. Americans, as a whole, are generally too independent to want to keep the peace for long, as once they realize part of themselves is being pushed down, especially if it’s for something they deem unworthy, they will react with anger, be it quiet distaste that makes them dispise what it is they have to do, or full blown, fever pitch anger that fully breaks the harmony they were trying to instill.

One thing is certain: this has worked for Japan. The difference in mindsets, especially the culture-wide sense of empathy found in Japan makes enough of a difference between the two that the Japanese have no problem making these sacrifices, as they are looking at a much bigger picture than the rest of the world.

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