

Reconsidering the Self in Japanese Culture from an Embodied Perspective

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1. Introduction

The emergence of a discourse on the embodied mind (e.g., Gallagher, 2005; Gibbs, 2005; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991) represents a radical change in the sciences of the mind, such as psychology and cognitive science. As the science of the mind has its epistemological basis in the modern mind-body dualism mainly derived from Descartes, the functions of the mind, including perception, thinking, memory, and decision-making, have been considered as not arising from any specific bodily form (Pfeifer and Scheier, 1999). By the same token, the self has also mostly been considered as an abstract and disembodied entity that integrates these mental functions. However, an embodied view of the mind has been generating a broad range of discussion on the self (e.g., Bermúdez, Marcel and Eilan, 1995; Fuchs, Sattel and Henningsen, 2010). My aim in this paper is to reconsider the self in Japanese culture on the basis of the notion of an embodied mind. In cultural psychology it has been suggested that the self in Japanese culture has characteristics of being interdependent and non-individualistic, in comparison with Western cultures (Matsumoto and Juang, 2012; Nisbett, 2003; Valsiner, 2014). I will try to give an account of the same characteristics from an embodied perspective, in order to find a path to an understanding of the self beyond cultural dichotomies such as “West and East” or “Europe and Japan.”

2. The embodied self revisited

The embodied self does not start with self-reflection, but with action in the world. For modern philosophers like Descartes or Kant, the transcendental subjectivity that can be represented as “I think” was the foundation for the empirical self. In contrast, for the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), the self is always and already involved in a concrete action toward the environment as a being-in-the-world¹⁾. Even when it is not involved in a particular action, the self is engaged with the world through the body that is itself built up with skills acquired through past experiences and is prepared to act skillfully in the present situation. According to Merleau-Ponty, the embodied self is represented as “I can” instead of “I think”²⁾. He writes, “consciousness is originally not an ‘I think that,’ but rather ‘I can.’” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 139).

As it is based on action, the embodied self is necessarily ecological. The term “ecological” here means that the self is intertwined with and extended to the surrounding environment. Human beings do not exist in a vacuum but rather in a certain environment that enables their actions. To play tennis, for instance, there must be balls and rackets to use, a court large enough to run about, and a partner to play with. Drawing on the ecological psychologist James Gibson (1979), we can say our actions are possible only in the ecological niches that afford them. The niche is a set of affordances that provide us with action possibilities; for instance, a firm and level ground affords us to walk in a stable manner. The surrounding environment, which totally includes nature, artifacts, social institutions, community, interpersonal relations, and so on, affords us to act in the way we practice during our daily lives. In this view, the self is the sum of action possibilities provided by the environment or, so to speak, the invisible side of an environment.

Taking the body and action into consideration in this way, the problem of self-identity starts to look totally different. The modern self tends to find identity in its individuality (not solidarity), autonomy (not heteronomy) and the interior (not the exterior) that is assumed to be private (Fromm, 1941; Kono, 2006). This tendency itself seems to derive from the reflexive structure of “I think,” where the self identifies itself as the same self through reflection. To borrow the well-known distinction between “I (the knowing self)” and “me (the known self)” made

by James (1890/1950), for the modern self the closed circle of self-reflection between “I” and “me” makes the basic sense of identity.

In contrast, the embodied self finds its identity through interaction with the environment. Since the self is the other side of the environment, its identity also is dependent on the environment. For instance, teachers may not be able to keep their identity without students or schools, and a musician cannot continue to be a musician without instruments or places to play music. In the same manner, in losing the environment that affords the self to act, the self becomes unable to keep its identity. For the embodied self, self-identity is not something sought through reflection internally but is expressed externally as a familiar environment. It is not self-reflection but habitual action that maintains self-identity. The self exists in-between the body and the environment.

3. The self in Japanese culture

Much psychological research has shown that the concept of self in non-Western cultures is fundamentally different from that in Western cultures. For instance, in their well-known study, Markus and Kitayama (1991) characterize the former as interdependent while the latter is independent. According to them, being an independent self means to be “an individual whose behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one’s own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and action” (p. 226). In contrast, being an interdependent self means “seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one’s behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship” (p. 227).

Let me cite some further research. Referring to the difference between Westerners and Easterners, Nisbett (2003) states as follows:

To the Westerner, it makes sense to speak of a person as having attributes that are independent of circumstances or particular personal relations. This self—this bounded, impermeable free agent—can move from group to group and setting to setting without significant alteration. But for the Easterner (and for many other people to one degree or another), the person is connected, fluid, and conditional. [...] The person participates in a set of relationships that make it possible to act and purely independent behavior is usually not possible or really even desirable. (pp. 50-51)

Here, the contrast is that the Westerner’s self is “bounded” and “impermeable” but the Easterner’s self is “connected” and “fluid.” Although somewhat stereotyped, this view is widely shared in current cultural psychology: the self in western cultures is individualistic and thus independent from the social context of interpersonal relations, while the self in eastern cultures is rather collective and not independent from the particular context of the surrounding interpersonal relations.

Focusing on Japan in particular, it is well known that the self in Japanese culture is relationship dependent (Matsumoto and Juang, 2012). Japanese usage of the first-person pronoun is most distinctive; the pronoun for “I” in the Japanese language varies depending on the interpersonal context. “*Watashi*” is the most commonly used word in various situations, but it is replaced by “*watakushi*” in formal situations and “*atashi*” (for women), and “*ore*” or “*boku*” (for men) in informal situations. It is important to note that word choice is regulated by one’s relationship with the audience. Even such common nouns as “mother (*okasan*)” or “teacher (*sensei*)” can be used as first-person pronouns to refer to oneself in conversation if the audience is a child or student who has a complementary position in the given situation. Thus, it is possible to say that the mode of the self varies in an intricate manner, depending on the self-other relationship.

In psychopathology, it is well known that there is a culture-bound syndrome labelled “*taijin kyofusho* (TKS, 対人恐怖症),” literally meaning “phobia of interpersonal relations.” Individuals with TKS suffer from extreme social anxiety: they tend to be overly tense and nervous in front of other people, being afraid of blushing, stammering,

being looked at, or acting in an awkward manner. TKS is a kind of social anxiety disorder (social phobia), but what distinguishes it is a concern about others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In general, patients with social anxiety are embarrassed in front of others behaviorally and experience fear as a direct reaction to the presence of others. In addition to this, patients with TKS experience a fear that their own appearance and behavior may offend others because of their symptoms, such as stammering or looking odd. They are not only embarrassed by the presence of others but are also afraid of their self-image and that their self-image might be perceived negatively by others (Kimura, 1972/2002).

This pathological structure implies that the self in Japanese culture is not sustained internally as a clearly bounded individual but is constituted as the self through being perceived positively by others. The choice of first-person pronoun is also a part of this constitution of the self; choosing an appropriate pronoun in response to one's audience helps the self to operate in a smooth manner in the given situation. The establishment of a stable relationship with others is an actual part of the constitution of the self in Japanese culture. The self and the other are co-constituted through the relationship.

The phenomenological psychopathologist Bin Kimura (1972/2002, 1988/2000) gives an account to the co-constitution of self and other using the notion of "*aida* (間, あいだ)." In its most basic usage, "*aida*" in Japanese means the spatial or temporal distance between two things or events. However, Kimura's usage of *aida* does not focus on the distance, but rather on the betweenness through which both the self and the other come into being. *Aida* is not a factual distance between two bodies, but an ontological source through which the self becomes aware of itself. The following passage nicely summarizes Kimura's view on *aida*:

It is when the self encounters with non-self that the self is able to be aware of itself as the self. [...] However, the "non-self" is also able to be "non-self" as far as it is distinguished from the self. [...] Thus, both the self and non-self come into being at the same time. (Kimura, 1972, p. 14)

What Kimura describes with the notion of *aida* is not a pre-established relationship between the self and the other. It is something pre-personal and anonymous that makes possible the very relationship at the personal level between the self and the other. *Aida* is in-between and cannot be owned either by the self or the other. According to Kimura, the self does not have its own foundation in an interior, but in *aida* (in-between), where both the self and non-self are differentiated.

Therefore, to be more precise phenomenologically, the self in Japanese culture is not relationship dependent. Rather, it is oriented to the fundamental place where both the self and the other come into being in an ontological sense. Through encountering the other, the self becomes aware of itself and may reconfirm its own identity by recognizing its difference from the other. A firm and bounded self-identity is not made through self-reflection, but rather through encounters with the other.

4. Re-describing the self in Japanese culture

By reconstructing the discussion about the self at a fundamental level it is possible to find a clue to how to undermine the stereotyped images of both the "independent," "bounded" and "individual" self in Western cultures and the "interdependent," "connected," and "collective" self in Eastern cultures, including Japanese culture. As we saw above, from an embodied perspective it is inappropriate to presuppose a self that keeps its identity through self-reflection. Rather, the self is based on interaction with the environment, and its identity is also underpinned by the more-or-less constant circumstances that enable the habitual actions of everyday life.

The self in a certain culture is also a product of this interaction. In the case of European cultures, as an example, we can refer to the analysis by Tuan (1982), who described how the birth of individual consciousness in modern Europe reflected architectural change, such as the division of public space into separate rooms in a house. The question here is what kind of interaction with the environment makes the self "interdependent" and "collective,"

as is considered to be seen in Japanese culture. In my view, it is a specific type of embodied interactions with others that brings these characteristics to the self, that is, an emphasis on subtle nonverbal behaviors practiced in interpersonal communications.

Needless to say, in every culture, we can observe various types of nonverbal behavior in interpersonal communications (Knapp and Hall, 2010). Most of them are expressed as bodily signals such as eye contact, body motions and gestures, interpersonal distance, facial expressions, paralanguages and so on. However, in Japanese culture there is a tendency to deal with interactional synchrony in a conscious manner. Synchrony is the smooth and well-timed coordination of nonverbal behaviors, which appears as the rhythmical circulation of action and reaction, including turn-takings in conversation (Tanaka, 2015).

At the phenomenal level, what Kimura refers to as *aida* is experienced through synchrony among interactants in communication. Though Kimura elaborated *aida* as an ontological notion, it is in fact experienced as a certain communicative temporality that is intersubjectively shared by both the self and the other. *Aida* is written as “間,” which can also be read as “*ma*,” by means of which concept Japanese people refer to the shared temporality in communications. “*Ma ga au* (間が合う)” is a common phrase to indicate the experience of synchrony. My claim here is that this kind of synchrony-stressed embodied interaction is the basis of the “interdependent” and “collective” character of the self in Japanese culture, since it brings a sense of unity among the interactants.

However, I would also like to add that synchrony is not always achieved through actual communications. It is merely an idealized form of interpersonal communication in Japanese culture. As a matter of fact, dissonance, discordance, and incongruity are often experienced as well, and the interactants become aware of their own individuality through these moments. They are the moments when the self is able to be aware of itself as the “self” through the difference from “non-self,” as Kimura has stated above. Thus, the self in Japanese culture is not always collective but has an individual aspect as well. The point is that this is not likely to be expressed in a verbal manner, since the experiences of individuality are basically given through embodied interactions, especially through nonverbal signals. Rather, silence in front of others is a commonly used form of behavior that expresses individuality. Silence does not necessarily mean consent, but can mean difference, individuality, and independence from others in interpersonal communications.

In short, the dichotomy of “individual vs. collective” or “independent vs. interdependent” is too coarse and stereotyped to describe the cultural difference of the self. In Japanese culture as well, there is a sort of individual self which is not expressive but internalized, not interactive but separate. As Lebra (1994) points out, the self in Japanese culture tends to be divided into the outer part that is highly adapted to the social world and the inner part that is considered to be the locus of one’s true motives. In the context of our discussion, this implies that the outer self looks collective and interdependent while the inner self is individual and independent.

Notes

- 1) Needless to say, the term “being-in-the-world” derives originally from Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Merleau-Ponty preferred to use “*être au monde*”, which literally means “being at the world” or “being toward the world.”
- 2) Merleau-Ponty’s usage of “I can” (*je peux*) derives from Husserl’s “*ich kann*.” Both refer to one’s capacity for action toward the world.

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