Indigenous and Cultural Psychology
Understanding People in Context

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Close Interpersonal Relationships among Japanese
Amae *as Distinguished from Attachment and Dependence*

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Japanese have an indigenous concept, *amae* (甘え), that describes a behavioral pattern typically found in mother-child relationships. This concept became known internationally after the publication of a seminal book by a Japanese psychoanalyst, Doi (1971), who claimed that *amae* is a key concept for understanding Japanese mentality. Despite the numerous studies inspired by Doi's work, the concept of *amae* has remained vague, and consensus among researchers has not yet been achieved. Many international scholars misunderstand the concept, and believe that *amae* is similar to dependence and unique to Japanese, implying that Japanese (as compared to Westerners) are uniquely dependent in their interpersonal relationships. However, the uniqueness of the indigenous concept does not necessarily imply that the Japanese behavioral pattern the concept describes is also unique. This article clarifies the meaning of *amae* by distinguishing it from dependence and insecure attachment, both of which are often confused with *amae*. The *etic* nature of *amae* is then discussed.

WHAT IS *AMAE?*

Definition controversies

Doi defined *amae* in various ways. For example, he wrote that "one may perhaps describe *amae* as, ultimately, an attempt psychologically to deny

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the fact of separation from the mother" (1973, p. 74). He also wrote that *amae* roughly corresponds to dependency or dependency need (Doi, 1997), whereas in yet another article *amae* is defined as depending upon another's love or basking in another's indulgence (Doi, 1992). Most recently, Doi also defined *amae* as acting on the presumption that one's counterparts favor one (Doi, 2001). According to Doi (2001), one engages in this kind of behavior automatically without awareness. *Amae* is an expression of love and also represents emotional dependence. Because Doi's definition has been broad and has fluctuated over time, researchers have criticized the ambiguity in his definitions and some have proposed their own definition of *amae* (Kumagai, 1981; Lebra, 1976; Maruta, 1992; Okonogi, 1968; Pelzel, 1977; Sofue, 1972; Taketomo, 1986). For example, Sofue (1972) defined *amae* as depending on others with the expectation that they will accept it.

Taketomo (1986), who has advanced the most systematic criticism against Doi's theory, argued that Doi ignored the rules in *amae* interactions. According to Taketomo, *amae* episodes are characterized by the following features: (a) Interactions are under a temporary suspension of some ordinary restraints. (b) The suspension is agreed upon by the interactants. In such a situation, interactants are allowed to do what they are normally expected not to do. For example, a ten-year-old boy may ask his mother to dress him, although ten-year-olds are normally expected to dress themselves. A husband can behave like a child to his wife, although he is a mature adult. In these examples, the boy and the husband engage in inappropriate behavior that is not allowed in an ordinary interpersonal relationship. Their behavior is accepted when their counterpart accepts the suspension of the ordinary restraints: a boy's managing his own clothes and a husband's behaving in a mature way.

Given the disagreements on the definition of *amae* and the lack of empirical research (except a few sporadic and unsystematic studies), Kim and Yamaguchi (1995) administered an open-ended questionnaire on *amae* to 237 junior high students, 224 senior high students, 243 college students, and 137 adults. The questionnaire tapped various aspects of *amae* in everyday interactions. The results indicated: (a) *Amae* is associated with either positive and negative emotions or feelings. (b) *Amae* is acceptable as long as it does not disrupt interpersonal relationships. (c) There are two kinds of *amae* interactions: a vertical relationship, which is typically found between mother and child, and horizontal relationship, which is typical between friends.

What *Amae* Means in Everyday Life

Extending Taketomo's (1986) argument and the results of the open-ended questionnaire, *amae* can be defined as *presumed acceptance of one's*

inappropriate behavior or request (Yamaguchi, 1999a). In close relationships, one is able to presume that one's inappropriate behavior or request will be accepted due to the positive or at least non-negative attitude of one's counterpart. This definition of *amae* implies that two components, the inappropriate behavior or request and presumption of acceptance, are involved in *amae* episodes.

The two components of *amae* are the focus of the empirical examination in this study designed to test the validity of the above definition. Because *amae* is an everyday word, a folk psychology approach was adopted (Yamaguchi, 1999b). Japanese lay people experience *amae* either as the actor or the target in everyday life. In this sense, they are experts in *amae*, albeit their lay epistemology may not be systematic and thus limited scientifically. As Bruner (1990) stated, people anticipate and judge one another and draw conclusions about the worthwhileness of their lives through folk psychology. A folk psychology is also expected "to provide a system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transactions with the world" (Bruner, 1990, p. 35). Thus, a folk psychology of *amae* can provide a thorough understanding, because it reveals how people use the word in everyday life and thus allows one to grasp the *amae* phenomenon as commonly observed in everyday Japanese life. In addition, a folk psychology of *amae* guarantees the ecological validity of the definition of *amae*. The definition of a concept is ecologically valid if it is consistent with lay people's perception and judgment (Yamaguchi, 2004a).

Presumption of acceptance. In one study, participants were presented with 20 vignettes describing *amae* interactions in which the protagonist does something inappropriate (Yamaguchi., 1999b). In the presumption condition, the protagonist presumed that the inappropriate behavior or request would be accepted by the counterpart, whereas in the no-presumption condition, the protagonist did not presume that it would be accepted. In the control condition, no information regarding the presumption of acceptance was given. The participants were asked if they would label the inappropriate behavior described in the 20 scenarios as *amae*. Eighty-seven percent of the participants labeled the inappropriate behavior or request as *amae* in the presumption condition, whereas only 42 percent of the participants in the no-presumption condition and 59 percent of participants in the control condition labeled the inappropriate behavior or request as *amae*.

Ambivalent attitude toward amae requester. Because *amae* involves an inappropriate behavior or request, one might expect that the *amae* requester is disliked. We hypothesized the contrary; *amae* is at least sometimes perceived as an expression of love, as Doi (2001) and Kim and Yamguchi (1995) suggested. Thus, if one requests *amae*, one would be perceived as expressing love toward one's counterpart. In a similar vein, one

who never requests *amae* can be perceived as a person who never expresses love toward anyone. This kind of person would be perceived as cold. Thus, we predicted that people would have an ambivalent attitude toward an *amae* requester, because *amae* involves both positive and negative aspects. That is, an inappropriate behavior or request and an expression of love. To test this prediction, Yamaguchi (1999b) asked participants to evaluate a person (a) who always requests *amae*, (b) who sometimes requests *amae*, or (c) who never requests *amae*, on a seven-point bipolar scale (e.g., warm-cold). The results indicated, as predicted, that the participants had an ambivalent attitude toward the three types of *amae* requesters. On the likeability dimension, they liked a person who sometimes requests *amae* best and least liked a person who never requests *amae*. On the other hand, on the fairness dimension, the person who never requests *amae* was evaluated most highly and the person who always requests *amae* was evaluated as lowest on the fairness dimension.

The data collected so far suggest that one can count on others in close relationships when one wants to behave inappropriately or when one has an inappropriate request. But, how is *amae* different from attachment and dependence? Yamaguchi (2004a) claimed that *amae* can be differentiated both from dependence and insecure attachment. In the next section, Yamaguchi's (2004a) argument is elaborated.

AMAE AND DEPENDENCE

Dependence is also a controversial concept. It has been defined in various ways because it has been studied in three domains of psychology: developmental, clinical, and social psychology (Bornstein, 1993). For example, Birtchnell (1988) proposed a definition from a developmental perspective: the dependent person is an adult behaving as though he or she were a child (p. 120). Perhaps the most important characteristic of a dependent person would be that the person is dependent on others for acceptance and approval (Birtchnell, 1988). Attempting to incorporate previous definitions, Bornstein proposed a comprehensive definition of dependence including its motivational, cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Dependency is characterized by motivation to be guided by others, perception that others are powerful and can control the outcome of situations, a tendency to become anxious when required to function independently, and a tendency to seek approval, guidance, and to yield to others (Bornstein, p. 19).

Perhaps the most important difference between *amae* and dependence is its locus of control. In successful *amae* episodes, because the inappropriate behavior or request is accepted, the *amae* requester can control the outcome of the situation. In contrast, the dependent person cannot control the outcome. Thus, the *amae* requester can be a causal agent,

whereas the dependent person has to be the puppet of someone else. This difference in terms of the agent of control is discussed in Yamaguchi (2001). *Amae* can be considered a kind of control attempt in which the agent (i.e., *amae* requester) controls the situation through another person; known as *proxy control* (Bandura, 1982). It is intriguing that in *amae* episodes, the powerful people are controlled by the less powerful who make an inappropriate request that is accepted by the powerful person, especially when they are in a close relationship.

As Bandura (1982) correctly pointed out, proxy control has the problem that individuals attempting it have to give up their direct control over the situation and thus miss the opportunity to acquire necessary skills to directly control the situation. However, individuals with sufficient interpersonal skills to persuade powerful others to work for their benefit have advantages in terms of survival: they can keep the situation under their control as long as someone who is powerful is available and willing to help them.

The second difference is the need for approval or guidance. The *amae* requester knows what they want. In this sense, the *amae* requester does not need any guidance and thus is psychologically independent. Because the *amae* requester presumes that his or her inappropriate behavior or request will be accepted by the counterpart, he or she does not need approval from the counterpart. Thus, unlike the dependent person, the *amae* requester can maintain or even bolster his or her sense of self-worth. As long as the *amae* request is accepted, *amae* requesters can be self-confident in terms of controlling the environment to their liking and also in terms of the approval of the counterpart.

One possible defect of *amae*, from a Western perspective, is the lack of direct control of the environment. *Amae* requesters cannot control the environment directly because they are less powerful or reluctant to do so directly. This problem, however, depends on the dominant cultural values. In a Western society, one is supposed to be independent and autonomous. To become an adult in a Western society means that one has acquired the requisite skills to function independently in the society. In East Asia, on the other hand, individuals are not always required to be autonomous. Rather, interdependence is emphasized (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and proxy control is more widely accepted. Probably for this reason, *amae* episodes can be seen among adults as well as children in East Asian societies. Successful *amae* requesters are often successful in society because those who are good at *amae* (i.e., proxy control) can control the environment to a greater extent than those who never request *amae*. In Japan, children who cannot request *amae* are often seen as maladapted (Okonogi, 1968). In *amae* episodes, one can maintain and verify a close relationship and at the same time control the situation. This may be the reason people choose to request *amae* rather than attempt to directly control a situation.

AMAE AND ATTACHMENT

According to Bowlby (1969), "attachment behavior refers to seeking and maintaining proximity to another individual" (p. 241). Beyond physical proximity, attachment involves strong bonds of affection to particular others, typically one's parents in the case of infants. Bowlby hypothesized that an attachment behavioral system guides infants to be attached to their caregivers for safety and survival. Although systematic empirical research on attachment started with infants, attachment relationships have been found among adolescents and adults as well.

In laboratory settings, attachment has been systematically studied using the Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In Strange Situation studies, securely attached children who play happily with the toys and explore a new environment in their mother's presence are considered most adaptive. However, Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, and Morelli (2000) advanced the argument that attachment theory is deeply rooted in Western thought and cannot be readily applied to Eastern cultures. They identified three core hypotheses of attachment theory: sensitivity hypothesis, competence hypothesis, and secure base hypothesis. Of those three hypotheses, the latter two are relevant here.

The competence hypothesis assumes that competence is a consequence of infants' successful attachment to their caregivers (Rothbaum et al., 2000). Rothbaum et al. argued that the definition of competence reflects Western values and cannot be valid in the East. Although competence includes autonomy, independence, and self-efficacy in the West, those behavioral tendencies are not necessarily valued in the East, such as Japan where interpersonal harmony is emphasized. Thus, the claimed link between the secure attachment of infants and their competence cannot be found in Japan (Rothbaum et al., 2000). As argued in the previous section, one can attempt to depend on others when one has confidence in their favorable attitude toward oneself. Thus, in terms of attachment theory, securely attached children can afford to presume the acceptance of their inappropriate behavior or request by their counterpart because they feel they are accepted.

The secure base hypothesis of attachment theory assumes that the secure base with the attachment figure is used by infants to gain the support necessary for adaptation to the outside world (Rothbaum et al., 2000). From the perspective of *amae*, one would question whether the secure base is used only to adapt to the environment. If infants can gain support from the attachment figure, they may well use the attachment figure as a proxy to obtain what they want. The goal of those infants would not be limited to adaptation to the environment. If they can gain support from the attachment figure, they may well overuse the secure base to the extent that their inappropriate needs, which are not necessary for adaptation to the

environment, are fulfilled. The Western theory of attachment assumes that caregivers limit their support to what infants need to adapt to the environment. However, if caregivers are more flexible in terms of providing support, they can let infants request *amae* and accept such requests.

Rothbaum et al. (2000) related attachment to dependence in their argument, because they equated *amae* and dependence. However, because *amae* can be distinguished from dependence, the relationship between attachment and *amae* should be readdressed. In this respect, it can be argued that attachment can lead to *amae* when caregivers provide support for infants unconditionally beyond their support for infants' adaptation to the environment. Thus, from the present perspective, attachment can be a source of *amae*, but it should not be equated to *amae*, which involves an inappropriate behavior or request. As a result of attachment, infants or even adults can develop *amae* behavioral tendencies rather than independence and autonomy. Although Doi (2001) argued that Bowlby's work on attachment between child and mother is relevant to *amae* in Japan (p. 83), attachment as studied in the West and *amae* represent two different constructs.

MOTIVATIONS UNDERLYING *AMAE*

If *amae* is not equivalent to psychological dependence or insecure attachment, what motivates people to engage in *amae* behaviors or requests? So far, the need for unconditional love or favor has been emphasized by theorists. In normal situations, newborns are given unconditional love from their mother. Then they may well develop the need for unconditional love, which is similar to what Balint called primary object-love (Balint, 1956). According to Balint, infants assume that their pleasure is also their care-givers' pleasure. Infants also feel that they should be loved and satisfied by their parents without giving anything in return to the parents. This kind of love is passive and it can be distinguished from active love, which develops at a later stage of individual development.

The second need that motivates people to engage in *amae* behavior is the need for control. As discussed previously, people attempt to control the physical and social environment for their own well-being using *amae* requests.

Each of these two motivations would lead people to engage in inappropriate behavior or make inappropriate requests. In other words, *amae* can be motivated by the need for unconditional acceptance and/or the need for control. For example, when a boy requests an expensive toy, it can be motivated by the child's need for unconditional acceptance by his parents and/or his desire for the expensive toy. If the acceptance by his parents is more important for the boy, he will not insist on the expensive toy. As long

as he can confirm that he is accepted by his parents, he will be happy even if he is offered a less expensive toy. In contrast, if he is more interested in the toy, he will insist on it. Once he gets the toy, he may ignore his parents because his parents' acceptance is less important in this case. This line of reasoning suggests that there are two different kinds of *amae*, which can be referred to as emotional *amae* and manipulative *amae*. Although both kinds of *amae* include inappropriate behavior with the presumption of acceptance, the goal of the *amae* request is different in each case.

Emotional Aspects of *Amae*

This is a prototype of *amae*, because the need for love/favor is most essential for infants, who cannot survive without being taken care of by adults. Even after having grown up, the sense of being accepted unconditionally is comfortable for children and even for adults. Suppose that a young girl requests her boy friend to purchase jewelry for her, even though she already has a lot. If this request, which is inappropriate in an ordinary situation, is intended to confirm that she is accepted by her boy friend, the requested jewelry is less important than confirming his unconditional love. What she is seeking is his acceptance. As such, what is requested does not matter. It can be a new dress, a car, or anything that is inappropriate for that situation. She is just eager to know that she is accepted by him to the extent that even an inappropriate request is approved.

Manipulative Aspects of *Amae*

This type of *amae* is more frequently found among older children and adults who have learned that they can obtain what they normally cannot afford by requesting *amae* of more powerful people. As described, an *amae* request can be used to control one's social and physical environment. If the need for control is dominant, what is requested is more important than being accepted by one's counterpart. In the case of the young girl who requests jewelry, if she really just wants the jewelry, once she receives it she may even leave him. In an extreme case, she would pretend that she is seeking unconditional love from her boyfriend, who is really just a tool to get what she wants. This kind of *amae* is manipulative and undesirable to the counterpart.

  The two kinds of *amae* are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Both the need for unconditional love/favor and the need for control can underlie an *amae* behavior or request (Figure 1). That is, *amae* requesters may be seeking both unconditional love/favor and a specific object or goal to different degrees, depending on the situation and the target of the *amae* request. Thus, in most everyday practice of *amae*, it is very difficult for observers to know which motivation is more dominant in an *amae* requester's mind.
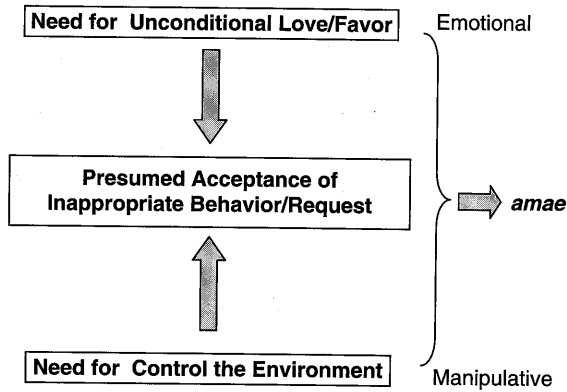
Figure 1. Motivation underlying *amae*.

The above reasoning has implication for how to deal with the undesirable aspect of *amae*, i.e., inappropriate behavior or requests in close relationships. When an inappropriate behavior or request is intolerable to the *amae* requester's counterpart, the counterpart can stop or decline the inappropriate behavior. The mere rejection of an inappropriate behavior or request, however, may be taken by the *amae*-requester as the rejection of love, which is typically underlying *amae* as long as the request is not completely manipulative. If this happens, the close relationship between the son and the mother, for example, would deteriorate to the extent that the son loses confidence in his mother's love. It is advisable, therefore, that the counterpart differentiates between the inappropriate aspect of *amae* and the emotional aspect of amae. For example, suppose a ten-year old boy asks his mother to dress him. The mother could reasonably decline his request, but in doing so she is advised to add that she loves him despite his inappropriate request.

UNIVERSALITY OF *AMAE*

Given the distinction between *amae* and closely related concepts such as dependence and attachment, readers might be ready to accept the possibility that *amae* episodes are universal rather than unique to Japanese culture. As a first step to examine this possibility, *amae* episodes in which a protagonist requests something inappropriate with the assumption that his/her counterpart will accept the request were presented to undergraduate students in the U.S. and Taiwan (Yamaguchi, 2004b). In one episode, a protagonist asked her best friend to take care of her cat for one week after she had made reservation for a one-week tour, presuming that her

best friend would agree to take care of the cat. In response to being asked whether they would make such a request, U.S. and Taiwanese participants answered that they would do so to a greater extent than the Japanese subjects, indicating that Americans and Taiwanese would engage in a behavior which is labeled as *amae* by Japanese. Thus, although the research still remains explorative, the initial evidence suggests strongly that *amae* is an *etic* phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Amae can and should be distinguished from the similar concepts of dependence and insecure attachment. Even though individuals who request *amae* may be physically or financially dependent on their counterpart, they can be independent psychologically. Those who request *amae* have their own agenda regarding how to adapt to the environment or what they want. In this sense, they are psychologically independent when they behave inappropriately or make an inappropriate request. If their counterpart keeps accepting their behavior or request, the counterpart is under their control. If successful in their *amae* request, they cannot only adapt to the environment but also get what they want, even though what they want may be inappropriate for their age, social status, or situation.

Insecure attachment is also different from *amae*. One may request *amae* of a person to whom one is securely attached, expecting of this person almost unconditional love or favor. Thus, attachment provides a basis on which one can request *amae*. When one is insecure about one's acceptance by a caregiver or more generally a powerful person, one will not be able to initiate an *amae* behavior or request. In this sense, *amae* reflects healthy and socially acceptable psychological development in East Asia, as long as its inappropriateness does not exceed a certain limit that varies with relationship. Socially adaptive East Asians are those who can be both autonomous and skillful *amae* requesters depending on the situation. As previous studies have shown, those who request *amae* sometimes are best liked. Psychologically independent and autonomous people in East Asia can in some situations request *amae* to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships. Because the counterpart can feel valued by the *amae* requester, inappropriate behavior or an inappropriate request within limits can be useful in facilitating a close relationship.

Conceptual clarification of *amae* and related constructs such as insecure attachment, and dependence suggests that *amae* may be a universal rather than indigenous Japanese phenomenon, albeit the concept of *amae* may be unique to Japanese culture. The initial evidence indicates that people in other cultures also engage in inappropriate behavior described

as *amae* by Japanese. Future studies will reveal the *etic* nature of what the indigenous Japanese concept of *amae* entails.

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