Human Development

Further Clarifications of the Concept of *Amae* in Relation to Dependence and Attachment

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Amae

Researchers in the West have been intrigued by the indigenous Japanese concept of *amae*, which was introduced in Doi's [1973] seminal work. Despite the widespread research interest in *amae*, researchers both in the West and Japan have failed to reach an agreement about its definition. In this respect, Behrens made a great step forward in clarifying the concept of *amae* from a developmental perspective. I generally agree with her conceptualization of *amae* as well as her conclusion that empirical research should be conducted on attachment and *amae*.

This article will focus on three issues raised by Behrens, which are arguably essential for a better understanding of *amae* among Japanese: (1) conceptual elaboration of the definition of *amae*; (2) distinction between *amae* and dependence, and (3) the relationship between *amae* and attachment. I will present further discussions about those issues in the hope that they would facilitate empirical research in this area. In doing so, folk psychology approach will be adopted, because *amae* is an everyday phenomenon in Japan. Lay people in Japan are supposed to be observing *amae* episodes in their daily life. As Bruner [1990, p. 15] stated lucidly, 'people anticipate and judge one another, draw conclusions about the worthwhileness of their lives, and so on' through folk psychology. In the case of *amae*, Japanese would accept or reject their counterpart's *amae* request through their folk psychology. For a thorough understanding of Japanese *amae*, it would be of paramount importance to know Japanese folk psychology of *amae*.

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Refinement of the Amae *Concept*

I agree that '*amae* can be described as the presumption on others for indulgence and acceptance' [G. DeVos, 2003, quoted by Behrens]. However, this description as well as previous ones is still too broad and thus needs to be elaborated for *amae* to be differentiated from similar but distinct behavioral patterns, such as dependence and attachment. In an attempt to define *amae* more stringently, two components have been singled out as necessary conditions in Japanese folk psychology: inappropriate behavior or request and its presumed acceptance [Yamaguchi, 1999]. I propose that *amae* can be defined as presumed acceptance of one's inappropriate behavior or request [Yamaguchi, 1999]. In *amae* episodes, *amae* actors' behavior or request is inappropriate for their age, physical condition, social role, and so on. For example, it is inappropriate for a 10-year-old boy to be dressed by his mother, because 10-year-olds are supposed to be able to dress themselves. On the other hand, if the boy has a broken arm, his request for being dressed by his mother would be justified. In the former case, if the mother accepts his request, it can be described as indulgence, whereas in the latter case it won't be described as such.

Another essential ingredient of *amae* is the presumption that one's inappropriate behavior or request is accepted by one's counterpart. One can presume in close relationships that one's inappropriate behavior or request would be accepted due to the positive attitude on the part of one's counterpart. The 10-year-old boy could presume that his request for being dressed would be accepted by his mother but he could hardly presume that a stranger would accept such a request.

The proposed definition in a way paraphrases 'indulgence', which is the essential part of the previous definitions. In terms of indulgence, the proposed definition would be translated as 'the presumption of indulgence, which involves an acceptance of inappropriate behavior or request'. The advantage of this definition is that the meaning of indulgence is specified as the acceptance of inappropriate request or behavior. With this elaboration, the ecological validity of the definition is testable.

Ecological Validity of the Definition

We attempted to show that this definition describes how ordinary people use the word, *amae*, when they understand others' behavior. In one study, participants were presented with 20 vignettes that describe *amae* interactions in which a protagonist does something inappropriate. In the presumption condition, the protagonist presumed that the inappropriate behavior or request will be accepted by the counterpart, whereas in the no-presumption condition, the protagonist does not presume that it would be accepted. On the other hand, 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 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% of participants in the no-presumption condition or 59% of participants in the control condition labeled the inappropriate behavior or request as *amae*. Thus, the initial evidence indicates that the proposed definition is ecologically valid in the sense that the definition is consistent with lay people's perception and judgment.

Amae *as Distinguished from Dependence*

Amae and dependence appear very similar and thus they have often been confused in the previous literature [e.g., Johnson, 1993; Vereijken, Riksen-Walraven, & Van Lieshout, 1997]. The confusion of *amae* with dependence, in my view, is largely responsible for the misunderstandings and disagreement on the meaning of *amae*. Thus, a conceptual distinction between *amae* and dependence is indispensable for a thorough understanding of *amae*. This section will attempt to highlight the difference between *amae* and dependence from a perspective of control.

Effective control of one's physical and social environment is essential for one's survival. In this respect, *amae* can be considered as an attempt to exert control over one's environment, whereas dependence typically results in the relinquishment of control. To understand this difference, a distinction between primary and secondary control is important. As most readers must know, this seminal distinction was first introduced by Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder [1982]. In my view, this distinction is essentially concerned with the target of control. The target of primary control is one's environment, because one attempts to exert control over one's environment in this kind of control. On the other hand, the target of secondary control is the self, because in this type of control one attempts to change one's own feelings or interpretations to fit in the environment [for a detailed analysis, see Yamaguchi, 2001]. Applying this distinction to cultural contexts, Weisz, Rothbaum, and Blackburn [1984] argued that attempts at primary control are not welcome in the Asian cultural milieu in which interpersonal harmony is highly valued. It is because individuals in this type of control attempt to 'enhance their rewards by influencing existing realities (e.g., other people, circumstances, symptoms, or behavior problems)' and thus often resort to 'personal agency, dominance, or even aggression' [Weisz, Rothbaum & Blackburn, 1984, p. 955].

Amae *and Control over the Environment*

Amae and dependence represent two extreme and contrastive responses in a situation in which one needs to exert control over the environment. In *amae*, individuals attempt to control their environment using someone who is more powerful in the situation than themselves. As stated in the foregoing section, *amae* involves the presumption that one's inappropriate request or behavior is accepted. An obvious implication of this presumption is that *amae* actors can afford to expect that someone will accept their request or behavior, which would not be accepted normally. In terms of control, therefore, successful *amae* results in accomplishing or obtaining something that the *amae* actor desires, with the request or behavior being accepted. Thus, as far as the counterpart accepts the *amae* request or behavior, the counterpart is under the control of the *amae* actor: the counterpart has to fulfill the *amae* actor's request. For example, children sometimes attempt to accomplish or obtain something inappropriate for them by using their parents. Although individuals are not acting as an agent in this kind of control attempts, the target of control is something other than themselves. Thus, this kind of control can be considered as an attempt at primary control. People can ask someone else to exert control for their benefit. For this reason, such control is termed *proxy control* [Bandura, 1997].

Dependence and Relinquishment of Control

Unlike *amae*, dependence can be characterized by the relinquishment of control in a situation in which one's agency is desirable or even required. A perusal of definitions of dependence would reveal a common component of dependence, an excessive reliance on others, although researchers have failed in constructing a universally accepted definition of dependence or dependency [Bornstein, 1993]. For example, according to DSM IV [American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 668], the dependent personality disorder is characterized with 'submissive and clinging behavior and fears of separation'. More specifically, the first component of the definition is that one 'has difficulty making everyday decisions without an excessive amount of advice and reassurance from others' [American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 668]. Obviously, according to this definition, dependent people in interpersonal interactions will be under the influence of their counterpart rather than the other way round. Thus, although both *amae* and dependence take place most often in close relationships, the consequence of dependence stands in stark contrast to that of *amae*. Dependent people relinquish their control over the environment and they are under the influence of their counterpart, whereas successful *amae* actors can afford to control the environment and also have someone, who is often more powerful than themselves, under their control.

Amae *and Dependence in Cultural Contexts*

The above conceptual analysis explains why *amae* can be seen even among psychologically healthy Japanese adults. *Amae* actors in Asian cultures can avoid the primary control syndrome, such as personal agency, dominance, and aggression, which disrupts interpersonal harmony. With successful *amae*, less powerful people can exert control over their environment without disrupting interpersonal harmony. On the other hand, because personal agency is desirable in the West [Bandura, 1997], one would not attempt at proxy control as far as direct personal control is affordable.

Attachment and *Amae*

Attachment and *amae* are closely related, as neatly summarized by Behrens. Indeed, there appears to be a consensus among researchers on this point [e.g., Doi, 1973; Rothbaum et al., 2000]. However, the relationship between attachment and *amae* is not yet known exactly, nor is there consensus on how they are supposed to be related theoretically. Rothbaum et al. [2000, p. 1100] argue that 'the normal *amae* relationship in Japan' involves insecure-ambivalent behavior (Type C), whereas Behrens argues otherwise. This section will attempt to elucidate the relationship between *amae* and attachment, based upon some preliminary data obtained in Japan.

Attachment Style and Amae

The insecure-ambivalent attachment style is accompanied with dependence [Goldberg, 2000]. With the assumption that *amae* and dependence are equivalent,

researchers may well be tempted to connect insecure-ambivalent attachment with *amae*. However, now that we have conceptually distinguished *amae* from dependence, there is little theoretical ground for predicting an association between *amae* and insecure-ambivalent attachment. In fact, empirical data collected with an open-ended questionnaire suggest that Japanese lay people tend to associate *amae* with securely attached children rather than insecure-ambivalent children [Kim & Yamaguchi, 1995].

As a first step toward a systematic examination of the relationship between *amae* and attachment, Yamaguchi and Ariizumi [2003] adopted a concept matching approach, in which two seemingly relevant concepts are contrasted empirically [Yamaguchi, 2003]. Specifically, in one study, a description of the typical secure attachment (Type B) as well as the insecure attachment (Types A and C) in the strange situation paradigm was presented to adult Japanese. The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought each type of child would show *amae* behavior. Although the adult Japanese in this study were not experts in psychology, it should be noted that *amae* is an everyday phenomenon in Japan and the word, *amae*, is used in Japanese everyday life. Thus, it was not difficult for those Japanese to answer the question. The results revealed two important distinctions in the present context. First, Japanese associated *amae* with the description of securely attached children more than the description of the insecurely attached children. Second, two types of *amae* were distinguished: desirable and undesirable *amae*. Of the two types of *amae*, desirable *amae* was associated with securely attached children, whereas the undesirable *amae* was associated with insecurely attached children.

In the second study, we focused on adult attachment and adopted Bartholomews and Horowitz's [1991] classification and description of prototypes. This study also confirmed that Japanese associate desirable *amae* with the securely attached adult behavior, whereas they associate undesirable *amae* with the insecurely attached adult behavior. Among the insecure attachment styles, the preoccupied type, which is equivalent to the ambivalent or resistant attachment style among children, was associated with *amae* most. In addition, the securely attached adults were perceived as more autonomous than the preoccupied. These results indicate that *amae* is perceived as most common among the securely attached children and adults, who tend to show desirable *amae*. On the other hand, the undesirable *amae* was perceived as more common among the Type C children or the preoccupied. If 'normal *amae*' in Rothbaum et al. [2000] refers to something healthy or socially acceptable, the normal *amae* among Japanese should be considered to be associated with the secure attachment rather than the insecure attachment. In sum, the first stage of the empirical research on attachment and *amae* has revealed that *amae* is not typically found among insecurely attached individuals. Rather, as in the West, securely attached individuals are perceived as more socially adapted and tend to show a desirable kind of *amae*. This conclusion, albeit being tentative due to its reliance on lay perception, would not be surprising as far as one understands that *amae* is not equivalent to dependence.

Conclusion

As Behrens persuasively argued, *amae* awaits more empirical attention. Indeed, the results of preliminary research indicate that Behrens' proposal is promising. To further advance empirical research on *amae*, this article emphasized the importance of Japanese folk psychology. Folk psychology can offer an ecologically valid definition of *amae* and thus help us understand *amae* as practiced in Japanese cultural milieu. A better understanding of *amae* in Japanese culture would eventually lead us to examine the universality of *amae* as compared with dependence or attachment. The time is ripe for a systematic research on *amae*.

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