

The Concept of *Omoiyari* (Altruistic Sensitivity) in Japanese Relational Communication

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Abstract

It is essential to explore Japanese concepts in Japanese languages as intellectual tools for future studies in Asia. In order to develop Asian theories of communication, therefore, Asian communication scholars ought to engage in this important task. This paper presents such an attempt by conceptualizing the concept of *omoiyari* for a Japanese theory of relational communication. In social psychology, the Japanese concept of *omoiyari* has been examined in terms of altruism, sympathy, empathy, and prosocial behavior, and a variety of cognitive models of prosocial behavior arousal have been proposed. In the field of communication studies, however, the concept of *omoiyari* has not attracted much scholarly attention, although aspects of harmonious Japanese communication are well documented. By synthesizing the relevant literature on *omoiyari* across disciplines, then, this paper formulates a definition of *omoiyari* for Japanese communication research, lays out its basic assumptions, and characterizes it in light of four major semantic areas of *omoiyari*: (1) prayer, (2) encouragement, (3) help, and (4) support.

Introduction

“Cast your bread upon the waters and it will return to you.”

--a saying reflecting *omoiyari*

When Japanese people feel another's kindness toward them and see someone's warm-hearted feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, they appreciate that person's *omoiyari*. The primary meaning of *omoiyari* is “an individual's sensitivity to imagine another's feelings and personal affairs, including his or her circumstances” (Shinmura, 1991, p. 387, translated by Hara). *Omoiyari* has attracted non-Japanese scholars' attention as one of the most important ideas in Japanese cultural value and communication (e.g., Lebra, 1976; Travis, 1998; Wierzbicka, 1997). The word *omoiyari* is often seen on signs bearing a school motto and at police stations. In many surveys of public opinion, Japanese people have listed *omoiyari* as a key concept on which they put high value. Although *omoiyari*-based behavior and activity are seen across cultures, Japanese people are the ones who put the highest value on *omoiyari* all over the world (Kikuchi, 1988; Akanuma, 2004).

This humane *omoiyari* concept has been emphasized in moral education at schools in Japan as the guiding principle to communicate with others (Ito, 1998a; 1998b). In educational psychology in Japan, the importance of *omoiyari* has been emphasized with its developmental views of children (e.g., Kikuchi, 1988). Recent inhumane crimes such as ill-treatment bullying or indiscriminate murder on the street are caused by the lack of *omoiyari*, and the importance of *omoiyari* has undergone a reevaluation in terms of education in the schools (Kanno, 1988).

Psychological aspects of *omoiyari* such as empathy and sympathy have been studied,

and its behavior has been studied as prosocial behavior, altruistic behavior, and helping behavior in social psychology (e.g., Harada, 1991; Kikuchi, 1998; Matsui, 1991). Although the term “*omoiyari* behavior” is not generally used as a technical term in social psychology (Matsui, 1991), the titles of several studies on these concepts are comprehensively translated into Japanese using the word *omoiyari* (e.g., Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989; Hoffman, 2001; Jones, 1993). Additionally, cultural psychologists Uchida and Kitayama (2001) developed a measurement scale of *omoiyari* from the viewpoint of sympathy.

In the field of communication studies, although aspects of harmonious communication have been well-researched, only a few studies have focused on *omoiyari* as an important factor of Japanese harmonious communication. For example, Donahue (1998) argues that *omoiyari* is a psychological factor in Japanese indirect communication. In health communication, Kakai (2002) argues that Japanese prefer ambiguity or not disclosing of cancer to their family members. Behind such indirect communication and style is the psychological and cultural background of *omoiyari*. These studies refer to the study on Japanese empathy by anthropologist Lebra (1976) and her definition and observation of *omoiyari*.

Although previous studies have contributed to pointing out the importance of *omoiyari* in Japanese mental culture and behavioral culture, there are three points to be further considered. First, many psychological studies based on Western concepts have not proposed clear conceptual definitions of *omoiyari*, so there is no consensus on its definition. Second, studies on *omoiyari* in other fields have only argued one aspect of *omoiyari* with its case contexts; we might be able to explore multi-aspects of *omoiyari*, taking various communication contexts and levels into consideration. Third, negative aspects of *omoiyari* have not been referred to adequately in previous studies on *omoiyari*. For example, there are cases when *omoiyari* toward others might not be appreciated or accepted by others.

In order to develop future studies on *omoiyari* in Japanese communication, this paper attempts to concisely conceptualize Japanese *omoiyari* across disciplines. Additionally, the author believes that it is essential to explore Japanese concepts in Japanese languages as intellectual tools for future studies in Asia. In this paper, first, the author will review the relevant concepts in Western psychology which have been argued as *omoiyari* in Japan. Then, he will articulate Japanese *omoiyari* with its translation, definition, and major characteristics. Finally, using a diagram, he will propose four semantic areas of *omoiyari*, taking its communication levels and contexts into consideration.

***Omoiyari* and Its Relevant Concepts**

The idea of *omoiyari* has been argued from the standpoint of the concepts of altruism, sympathy, empathy and prosocial behavior. Although the causal developmental relationship among these concepts is controversial (e.g., Eisenberg, 1986; Hoffman, 1982; Toi & Baston, 1982), each concept in itself has been regarded as one aspect of *omoiyari* in Japanese social psychology and communication studies. This means that these concepts are seen as elements of *omoiyari*, and conversely that *omoiyari* can be conceptualized with a combination of these concepts.

The foundation of *omoiyari* feelings can be covered with the concept of altruism. Altruism is other-oriented and self-sacrificial (Kerbs, 1975). According to Cohen (1978), altruism refers to an act or desire to offer something gratuitously to others when needed. Cohen indicates that there are three components of altruism: (a) giving, or the desire to do so; (b) empathy; and (c) the absence of any motives of reward from doing the altruistic behavior.

Essentially, altruism lies in the motivation to help others and to aid others in their behavior. As this conceptual definition shows, altruism is the source that produces more concrete *omoiyari* feelings and behavior.

Based on altruism, *omoiyari* seems to comprise both sympathy and empathy (e.g., Kikuchi, 1991, 1998; Matsui, 1991). Sympathy refers to a concern for another person, agreement with and consideration for the feelings of others, or compassion (DeVito, 1986). It is generally conceived as a reaction to particular contexts such as the sadness or disappointment of others. Another view is that sympathy refers to a feeling for another person, while empathy refers to actually feeling as that person does (DeVito, 1986). Empathy in *omoiyari* is described in Bruneau's (1995) definition as "feeling into' another's feelings with one's own, vicariously, and attempting to achieve some I-thou congruence" (p. 87). Empathy implies understanding of others through imagining the situation of others (Travis, 1998).

Psychological aspects of altruism, empathy, and sympathy are reflected in prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior generally refers to "voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals" (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989, p. 3). Wispè (1972) suggests that prosocial behavior refers to behaviors that can be described as sympathetic, altruistic, charitable, and so on. Furthermore, prosocial behavior benefits others without anticipating external rewards, and is done under the conditions that it is done either for its own end, or as an act of restitution (Bar-Tal, 1976). Also, as Bar-Tal argues, prosocial behavior should not be carried out as a result of external threat, enforcement, or obligation, but should be due to an individual's freedom to decide to act in a certain manner or not.

Reviewing altruism, empathy, sympathy, and prosocial behavior in human communication, on the basis of altruism, people seem to have feelings of either empathy or sympathy at the stage of intrapersonal communication. Additionally, in the context of communication activities with others, when such feelings are seen in behavior, the behavior is regarded as prosocial behavior. As the findings in Uchida and Kitayama's (2001) survey indicate, *omoiyari* as sympathy had a positive relationship with emotional empathy and prosocial behavior. The combination of these concepts seems to help conceptualize aspects of *omoiyari*. However, since each concept cannot individually cover *omoiyari* in a comprehensive sense, we need a conceptual definition of *omoiyari* before applying these concepts to aspects of *omoiyari*.

The Concept of Japanese *Omoiyari*

In Japanese communication, it is often seen that people say "show *omoiyari* toward others" when a person does not do so. The word *omoiyari* is directed toward anybody of the same generation and status, or toward younger people with regard to both in-group and out-group members. To say "have *omoiyari*" to elderly people, on the other hand, sounds arrogant, although the person is thinking "*omoiyari*" in his or her mind. In such a situation, it seems appropriate to use the word "*itawari*" (caring consideration with respect) instead, even though the person has the word "*omoiyari*" in his or her mind. In this section, the author attempts to propose an expedient translation of *omoiyari* into English which is comprehensible to both Japanese and non-Japanese people. Then, the author will define *omoiyari* in Japanese communication.

Translation of Omoiyari into English

It is impossible to translate Japanese *omoiyari* into English with one word or phrase

which is comprehensible to both Japanese and non-Japanese people. Even words such as compassion, consideration, thoughtfulness, mercy, and benevolence cover only one aspect of Japanese *omoiyari*. There seem to be two reasons for this difficulty. First, there are different views of *omoiyari* across cultures. For example, Yamagishi (1995) argues that for Westerners, *omoiyari* is not “thoughtfulness” to others, which is occasionally perceived to be unnecessarily imposed by others depriving one’s own right to choose his/her own behavior. Easterners, on the other hand, believe that thoughtfulness-based *omoiyari* is essential to living a group-oriented life. Secondly, as Travis (1998) points out, English words such as “considerate” and “thoughtful,” which are related to *omoiyari*, do not involve the same kind of “intuitive” understanding. This intuitive way of communication is also cultivated as intuitive listening and empathic understanding in Japanese ways of communication (Barnland, 1975).

As for a neutral and comprehensible translation term, Yamagishi (1995) points out that “sensitivity” can represent the feelings of *omoiyari* that are common to Westerners and Easterners and which do not have the connotation of imposing one’s thought on others. Therefore, in this paper, the author uses his own tentative and expedient translation of *omoiyari* as “altruistic sensitivity” taking the definition of altruism, “concern for the happiness and welfare of other people rather than for your own” (Sinclair, 1987, p. 42) into consideration, regarding altruism as the psychological foundation to produce *omoiyari*-based feelings such as empathy or sympathy.

Defining Omoiyari

Omoi in *omoiyari* means considerate caring for others, while *yari* is the noun form of the verb *yarū*, which means sending something to others. Therefore, “*omoiyari*” literally means sending one’s altruistic feelings to others. The difference among *omoiyari*, empathy, and sympathy is that *omoiyari* implies intuitive understanding and includes behaving in that way (Shinmura, 1991; Travis, 1998; Uchida & Kitayama, 2001). Consideration toward others is not always received, and *omoiyari* does not expect any reward. If any reward is expected, it is not *omoiyari* but business-like helping behavior.

One of the definitions of *omoiyari* which is frequently referred to is the one by cultural anthropologist Lebra (1976), which describes *omoiyari* as “the ability and willingness to feel what others are feeling, to vicariously experience the pleasure or pain that they are undergoing, and to help them satisfy their wishes...without being told verbally”(p. 38). Historical anthropologist Akanuma (2004) states that *omoiyari* is to guess others’ feelings and pay careful attention to their feelings, accepting what has happened (or will happen) to others as what has happened (or will happen) to myself. Social psychologist Ninomiya (1991) defines *omoiyari* as voluntary behavior for others’ benefit. The common assumptions underlying all these definitions are that *omoiyari* is voluntary and that people put high value on sharing feelings with others. As such, intuitive understanding is necessary. In this study, the author will define *omoiyari* as an intuitive understanding of others’ feelings that will occasionally lead us to conceive what to do or what not to do to others. Taking the conceptual issues of *omoiyari* into consideration, the author will further argue major characteristics of *omoiyari* in the following section.

Major Characteristics of Omoiyari

To have a sense of *omoiyari* and to behave with *omoiyari* are regarded as ideal communication in Japanese society. For example, according to a survey by the Ministry of

Education in Japan cited in the Yomiuri-shimbun (1994), elementary and junior high school teachers in Japan answered that they put the highest value on *omoiyari* in moral education. Additionally, in a survey on child-birth in Japan by the Yomiuri-shimbun (2005), 86.7% of the parents expected their children to be a child with *omoiyari*. As these data show, to have *omoiyari* is essential in Japanese relational communication across contexts. In this section, the author will begin to argue major characteristics of *omoiyari* based on its psychological, behavioral aspects, along with the assumptions of *omoiyari* in previous studies. Then negative aspects of *omoiyari* will be briefly mentioned. Finally, four context-based semantic areas of *omoiyari* in human communication will be proposed.

Psychological Aspects of Omoiyari

Omoiyari has been considered altruistic feelings or emotional participation in others' minds (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989; Kikuchi, 1988), and there are three characteristics which occasionally lead to actual prosocial behavior. The first is that *omoiyari* does not include the concept of "otherness" (Akanuma, 2004). This means that *omoiyari* means to understand the other's feelings, not taking one's self-concept into consideration (Otsuka, 1991). In this assumption, there is a Japanese interpersonal view that puts high value on oneness with others. For example, Hamaguchi (1985) argues that Japanese people think that since affectionate mutual aid is essential, people should read mutual true intention, and the relationship once established must be respected as valuable. Oneness with others gets reinforced through mutual *omoiyari*.

The second is that *omiyari* is neither based on pity from superiority nor on mechanistic give-and-take relations (Otsuka, 1991). The motivation of *omoiyari* is voluntary, and does not expect gratitude from others (Kikuchi, 1991). If a person expects any reward when they help others, that is not *omoiyari*. Such a reward-expecting behavior will not be respected but rather despised, and is against the virtue of *omoiyari*.

The third is that the value of *omoiyari* is evaluated based on purity of consideration of others. It goes without saying that the purer the consideration is, the more appreciated it is. However, such pure consideration of others occasionally contradicts its behavior. A commonly cited example is that physicians and family members are reluctant to directly disclose terminal diagnoses to patients because of *omoiyari* (Kakai 2001; Paton & Wicks, 1996). Such communication, which might be regarded as deception, will not be criticized by others because they know the family's true feelings. Behind this type of communication, there is an unspoken assumption that true and honest feelings will be understood by others even though one's behavior contradicts his or her psychological feelings.

Behavioral Aspects of Omoiyari

Omoiyari in behavior has been studied as prosocial behavior in social psychology. Kikuchi (1998) provides four common characteristics of *omoiyari* based on its psychological assumptions. The first is that *omoiyari* as prosocial behavior includes the idea of an action which is helpful for others. However, this does not necessarily mean that the prosocial behavior will be willingly accepted by others. The second is that *omoiyari* as true prosocial behavior is not done with the expectation of a reward from others. This is not a matter of whether a person receives or rejects a reward, but rather the premise that the person had no desire to receive a reward in the first place. The third is that *omoiyari*-based prosocial behavior is accompanied by a kind of cost or risk of self-sacrifice. The final condition is that *omoiyari* as prosocial behavior

should be voluntary. This means that a person is not bound by any sense of duty to others, but is willing to behave prosocially as a choice.

Japanese *omoiyari* behavior is uniquely seen in conflicting situations. For example, it is often stated that Japanese prefer to avoid conflict rather than to try to resolve it. In such a situation, the Japanese are inclined to use ambiguous or euphemistic expressions with their *bokashi* (ambiguous) logic (Nayayama, 1986), and to use *honne* (true intentions) and *tatemae* (public principles) properly (Doi, 1985) so as not to hurt others' feelings. Such a linguistic feature can be described as "the language of *omoiyari*," and it is listener-oriented (Ando, 1986). Even to enemies, they do not tend to deliver a fatal blow. Such communication styles are represented in proverbs such as *teki ni shio wo okuru* (to show humanity even to one's enemy) or *bushi no nasake* (samurai-like mercy). *Omoiyari*, however, is not always performed desirably. In the following section, negative aspects of *omoiyari* will be mentioned with cases that are against its psychological and behavioral assumptions.

Negative Aspects of Omoiyari

Omoiyari does not always function as we hope. For example, overly imposing *omoiyari* on others might be a psychological burden or, even worse, an annoyance. This is called *osekkai* (meddlesome) and is the antithesis of empathetic understanding (Lebra, 1976). Especially when the elderly want to meddle in younger people's affairs, the younger people cannot say "Please mind on your business." This type of *omoiyari* could be considered *osekkai*. In the worst case scenario, when *omoiyari* is not accepted by the receiver as the source expected, the source might blame the receiver in his or her mind. This is called *sakaurami* (to think ill of a person who meant to be kind). At the point when the source feels *sakaurami*, however, his or her kindness to others is no longer regarded as *omoiyari*.

Four Context-Based Semantic Areas of Omoiyari in Human Communication

As argued above, *omoiyari* consists of both affective aspects (altruism, sympathy, empathy) and a behavioral one (prosocial behavior). Using these concepts, the author will attempt to conceptualize four semantic areas of *omoiyari*. The following figure representing the four areas of *omoiyari* is based on intrapersonal communication (Areas A and B) and interactive level (Areas C & D). [See next page.]

The fundamental assumption is that Area A and Area B are at the level of intrapersonal communication and cover one's cognitive and affective aspects. Area C covers the interaction stemming from Area A, and Area D covers the interaction stemming from Area B. Area A and Area C are based on sympathy, while Area B and Area D are based on empathy. Every feeling and behavior by a communicator is based on altruism and with intuition.

Area A is the situation where a person is worrying about someone's undesirable situation and praying that it will be improved. The feeling is based on altruism and sympathy. In this context, examples such as praying for the recovery of another's health or sympathizing with the struggle of others are included. In contrast, in Area B, the communicator has a feeling of encouragement in his or her mind, and the feeling is based on altruism and empathy. For example, praying for the success or health of others is included in this area.

Area C and Area D cover people's behavioral aspects in their relational communication and social activities. In these areas, verbal and nonverbal interaction is exchanged, and helping behavior is added when necessary. Area C, which stems from the psychological feelings of Area A, stands for prosocial behavior based on altruism and sympathy.

Communication activities such as helping behavior or volunteer activities are included in this area. Also, Area D, which stems from the psychological feelings of Area B, is based on altruism and empathy, and includes situations such as supporting other people's success with one's own will or participating in activities to share happiness with others.

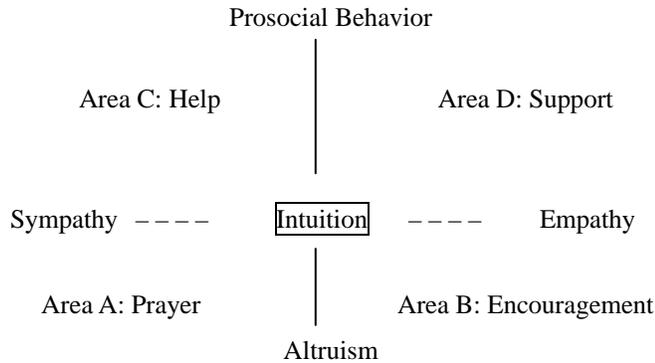


Figure 1. Four Context-Based Semantic Areas of *Omoiyari* in Human Communication

Concluding Remarks

The primary purpose of this essay was to conceptualize Japanese *omoiyari* (altruistic sensitivity) with its psychological and behavioral characteristics, and to propose four types of *omoiyari* (prayer, encouragement, help, and support) from the viewpoint of communication. Although the author was only able to review a portion of the previous literature on *omoiyari*, he hopes that the essence of *omoiyari* conceptualized in this paper will contribute to further studies of Japanese relational communication.

Based on the conceptualization in this paper, the author expects future studies to be conducted in three areas. First, various communication styles in each of the four semantic areas of *omoiyari* (prayer, encouragement, help, and support) should be further examined and discussed. Secondly, the possibility of combining these four areas should be further examined using empirical studies. Third, based on the emic studies on this type of concept all over the world, to seek commonalities of *omoiyari* views across cultures is strongly suggested. Based on these studies, derived-etic views of altruistic sensitivity are highly anticipated.

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