

How Culture is Incorporated into Individual Life Themes: An Assessment of Cultural Influences as Revealed in Constructive Career Interviews in Japan

Shujiro Mizuno^a and Nobuko Hasegawa^b

^a Faculty of Psychology, Rissho University, Tokyo, Japan

^b President, C-mind Ltd, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract: This aimed to explore Japanese specific cultural themes in participants' career construction narratives. The researchers conducted Career Construction Interviews with six career consultants in Japan. Five themes were identified through their stories: conformity to norms, awareness of one's role, expressed emotions, family relationships, and selfhood. It was found that participants were too well adapted to the Japanese social system and that reframing the meaning of 'adjustment' is needed - rather than taking on new methods to change behaviors.

Japan has endured massive changes in its traditional employment system. While Japanese employees once used to enjoy permanent life-long employment they must now maintain employability throughout their working lives without job security. The Japanese government responded to this rapid change by enacting the Revised Promotion of Human Resources Act of 2016. As a result, various career services qualifications became subsumed under the single government title of 'career consultant.' Nationally licensed career consultants are expected to help those seeking employment within the context of these rapid societal transitions.

Fluid Employment

According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW; 2015) in Japan, the number of individuals seeking career transitions rose from 3,870,000 to 5,240,000 between 2012 and 2014. In a related development, non-regular or contractual employment as a proportion of total

employment increased from 20.2% to 37.4% between 1994 and 2015 (Statistics Today, 2015). The MHLW attributes such fluid job conditions to a falling birthrate, an aging society, changes in industrial structures, and globalization.

The onset of an aging society coupled with a falling birthrate means that Japan's population will decline rapidly. The resulting labor shortages will accelerate the introduction of artificial intelligence into the workplace. Nomura Research Institute (2015), in collaboration with C. B. Frey & M. A. Osborne, estimates that in ten to twenty years, 49% of jobs will be replaced by artificial intelligence and robots.

Savickas' Theory in Japan

To deal with insecure and fluid employment, individuals are expected to be autonomous in constructing their careers and maintain employability throughout the lifespan. Savickas (2011, 2012, 2013, 2015) proposed life design counseling as a career intervention paradigm suited to this 21st century reality.

Life design counseling has been proposed as an effective alternative to career guidance, education, and consulting models. Though it remains important to guide and educate clients, guidance alone does not foster the autonomy required in a fluid society that would enable effective changes in career behavior over time. Japanese language resources for this approach were only recently available after the translation of two key texts, *Career Counseling* (Savickas, 2011) and *Life Design Counseling Manual* (Savickas, 2015). The translation of these books resulted in 16 Japanese career development professionals undergoing Life Design training in 2017.

Introduction of Savickas' Theory into Japan

In 2013, at the centennial anniversary of the National Career Development Association's (NCDA) Global Career Development Conference, several Japanese participants, including the authors, discussed with Dr. Savickas how to introduce life design counseling to Japanese counselors.

Our first task was to understand the meaning of changes to work life in the 21st century. Savickas recommended that his article, "Life Design: A Paradigm for Career intervention in the 21st Century" (2012) be translated into Japanese to help in this task.

Secondly, we were tasked to understand career construction theory and the meaning of transition. Individuals are born into a culture and brought up in a culture, so Japan has its own stories about career transitions. When people face transitions, they experience dislocation in their sense of belonging. To adjust to such dislocation, they tend to reflect upon themselves and attempt to integrate their dislocation experiences into their life themes.

Thirdly, we needed to assess the ways in which culture is incorporated in the construction of the individual's story within a Japanese context. People explain their actions and construct reality through social processes and

interpersonal relationships. Therefore, they have their own stories as well as a cultural story.

This paper addresses this third assignment. There are a wide variety of stories of life and career design in the 21st century. However, the ways and the extent to which these stories differ from those found in Western countries are unknown.

Japanese Cultural Context

The Japanese people have unique self-concepts that influence their behaviors (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). Self-construal style for an interdependent society is characterized as maintenance of interdependent networks among people and the relationships of the society to which they belong. It is also characterized by sharing emotions and empathy with other members of the same group. The Japanese do not like to stand out and they want to play the role that is given to them.

Matsumoto (2007) explains how stereotypes of Japanese culture no longer reflect reality. Among younger generations, Japanese are individually oriented, their divorce rate is getting higher, and they are more emotional than formerly described. Life-long employment is decreasing as well, as Japanese salaried men are not as committed to one company as they used to be. Matsumoto suggested that Japanese are currently more oriented toward individualism.

However, we cannot deny that Japan is still an interdependent society. The researchers of this paper hypothesize that the core Japanese interdependent culture is still strongly influencing the Japanese psyche. It is said that the presenting emotion for the Japanese is shame (*haji*) (Benedict, 2005). Shame is characterized by an impulse to remove oneself from the interpersonal realm. This means that people often tend to avoid eye contact, lower their shoulders, and assumed a shrinking posture. Japanese behaviors often also have a double meaning namely: *omote* [*face*] and *ura* [*mind*] (Doi, 1985). *Omote* refers to what one shows to others. *Ura* refers to private feelings and

thoughts not to be shown to others. For example, if a Japanese roommate says "I have an exam tomorrow," she believes that her roommate will keep quiet for her. However, she may become surprised when her roommate invites her friends to the room. She should have explicitly stated, "I want you to keep quiet while I study." Japanese tend to emphasize *wa* [harmony], so that they may not directly express their wishes but instead only imply them (Hasegawa, 2009). Being dependent on others is called *amae* [dependency] (Doi, 1985). *Amae* is regarded as a positive quality for an interdependent society.

However, ascertains such as these may mislead researchers to develop stereotypes of Japanese culture. We conducted Career Construction Interviews (CCI) with six experienced career consultants and analyzed their life stories and life themes to uncover the cultural identities embedded within their individual stories. We also asked them to assess the impact of the CCI session.

Research Method

Six participants volunteered to engage in CCI's (Savickas, 2015) over two sessions: the first to complete the CCI itself, the second to provide feedback on the life portrait. Finally, all six participants responded to feedback questions posed a month following the second session. The six participants (five females and one male) were licensed career consultants ranging in age between the mid-30's to the 50's.

The CCI consisted of an introductory question followed by five additional questions:

Introductory question: How can I be useful to you as you construct your career?

Question 1 (on role models): Who did you admire when you were growing up? Tell me about him or her.

Question 2 (on preferred working environment): Do you read any magazines or watch any television shows regularly? Which ones? What do you like about these magazines or television shows?

Question 3 (on favorite life story): What is your favorite book or movie? Tell me the story.

Question 4 (on advice given to oneself): Tell me your favorite saying or motto?

Question 5 (on preoccupations): What are your earliest recollections? I am interested in hearing three stories about things that you recall happening to you when you were 3 to 6 years old, or as early as you can remember.

The CCI session lasted approximately 90 minutes. In observing a live CCI demonstration at the 2015 NCDA Global Career Development Conference, Savickas took only 45 minutes to complete the interview. However, because both the counselors and Japanese interviewees were not used to the process, more time was needed to explain the CCI questions in this study.

The researchers developed a written life portrait of each participant based on the information gathered from the first session. The second session focused on co-construction of the participants' life portraits. The researchers read the life portrait aloud to the appropriate participant, who then provided feedback.

Five questions for evaluating the impact of the CCI were developed from the *Session Rating Scale* (Duncan, et al., 2003), as follows. The researchers changed the term "therapist" to "counselor," and added a fifth question. All participants responded to these questions by providing a "Yes" or "No" answer.

Question 1: Did you feel heard, understood, and respected?

Question 2: Did we work on or talk about what you wanted to work on and talk about?

Question 3: Was the counselor's approach a good fit for you?

Question 4: Was there something missing in the session last time?

Question 5: What overall effect did you get from the CCI?

We used grounded theory for qualitative data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Birks & Mills, 2012) to explore participants' responses. The analysis procedure was as follows:

1. Collect sentences from life portraits describing heroes or heroines, favorite working environments and stages, favorite stories, trauma in early childhood memories, and favorite sayings.
2. Collected sentences were labeled according to the indicated meaning.
3. Labels of similar meanings were categorized into groups.
4. Relationships among the categories were analyzed, with consideration given to contexts in which the sentences were generated.

Results

Analysis of Session Impact Scale

All the participants answered “Yes” to Question 1, indicating positive relationships between counselors and clients. To Question 2, two participants responded “Not sure,” suggesting that they were not sure whether a their goals and desired topics of discussion were adequately addressed. To Question 3, one participant responded “Not sure,” indicating uncertainty about whether CCI was a fitting approach to their needs. Below are extracts of participants’ feedback on the impact of the CCI.

Participant A (male):

I feel like I was understood. When I was asked how my hero would resolve the issue, I was able to get a different perspective on the issue. I found what my preoccupation was; the reason I behave as I do now is deeply rooted in my childhood experiences. In the last session, the metaphor of a golden thread was introduced. My golden thread is, "I wish to help others as well wishing to grow myself." When I touched the golden thread, I felt the power rising in me.

Participant B (female):

I felt understood because the counselor took tender care of me. I think this approach was very good for me because I could talk about myself in story form. I became conscious of how I was describing myself. I have been doing my present

task every day so that I have no time to reflect upon myself. On the way home I felt as if the self which is engraved in my bones had been released.

Participant C (female):

I felt like I could talk as I wished. It was difficult to understand how each question was related to the others, but when I listened to the self-portrait, I felt like I was confronting my real issues. I am not someone who talks about my good points, but by describing my heroes and early memories, I could express myself freely. I was set free from unexpressed frustrations; the words just hit me right on the target. I felt my need to be proud of and confident in myself. I feel like as if I met myself through the counselor.

Participant D (female):

I felt like I had to be honest with myself because the counselor was so patient with me. The counselor waited until I could compose myself. I did not have any issue to resolve so that I could not make the best of the session. I was not forced to tell things I didn't wish to, but I felt guilty when I could not respond to the questions. I realized that I had been working hard just to meet the demand of people around me. From now on I will not exceed my capabilities and will live a comfortable life.

Participant E (female):

I did not understand the impacts enough. I felt a negative impact from the CCI because I had to face something I did not want to see clearly. I know I had better accept my dark past, but now I cannot afford to do so. I believe there are some things we had better forget forever. I wish I could overcome my traumatic memories, but I have no idea how to do that. However, I can say that I gained a different perspective on my life, so I have some hope in the CCI. I have decided to study more about the CCI.

Participant F (Female):

I was able to concentrate on the session because the conversation did not resemble a chat among my friends. I found what my preoccupation in life was, so I will no longer be

held a captive of that. I felt a little bit of resistance when disclosing too much about myself. I revealed far more than I wanted to. This session was perfect for me because I could deepen my self-understanding. I found that I wanted to live an unrestricted life as I wished, but that I somehow oppressed myself not to do so. I found what I wanted were good coworkers, professionalism, and coolness.

In the case that participants gained a better understanding of themselves through participating in the sessions, they expressed higher satisfaction with the CCI approach. Two participants expressed their anxiety and doubt about exploring themselves. For example, Participant D confided she did not have any issue to resolve at the time of the session, but she admitted she gained a different perspective on life. Participant E wanted to forget her traumatic memories forever, but she realized that she had been working too hard to respond to the demands of people around her.

Analysis of the Selected Sentences

The researchers collected 30 sentences from the life profiles and categorized them under five themes, described below. In the lists that follow, each sentence is accompanied by an English label. The original Japanese expression is provided in parenthesis.

Conformity to the norms.

Courtesy (*reigi*): "[When I was in kindergarten] good manners are necessary for even among friends."

Sacrifices (*gisei*): "I will not sacrifice myself for my family." (She felt she had sacrificed herself).

Authority (*kenni*): "I did not bow down to authority (as most would do so)."

Trusted relationships (*shinrai*): "Trusting relationships in the family are very important."

Fear of exclusion (*nakama-hazure*): "All of sudden my friend started to talk to me as if I was a stranger."

Fear of being a spoiled kid (*agamama*): "[I regretted that] I was the king of the mountain who was cruel to the weak."

Awareness of one' role.

Fixed social role (*yakuwari*): "My role to serve foods at lunch time [in school during lunch time] was fixed."

Supporting actor (*wakiyaku*): "[To my surprise] my stage role was changed from a hero to a support role [when casts were announced for the school play]. And my brother got complete attention from parents."

Assigned role (*wariate*): "Mother vented her anger on me, I could do nothing but to accept her anger as my assigned role in a family."

Acceptance of given position (*ukeireru*): "The way to happiness is to do one's best on one's given circumstance (no matter how hard it is)."

Expressed emotions.

Apologizing (*shazai*): "When I threw a piece of ice, it hit a man, but I was not able to apologize to him."

Refusal (*kyôzetsu*): "Mother refused a birthday cake from my father, which was a big surprise to me."

Bullied (*ijime*): "I regret being bullied when I was a child."

Lost place (*ibasho*): "I got lost when I was playing with my brother and felt so lonely (that I wished it would never happen again)."

Regretful (*kôkai*): "I do not want to look back on my life (because I was not a happy child)."

Family Relationships.

Obligation (*ôn*): "A girl who was successful in an entrance exam because she had help from parents felt obligated towards them."

Protecting the mother from danger (*mamoru*): "I hit my grandmother with a broom because she was cruel to my mother."

Showing off to parents (*bûrikko*): "I was a girl who wanted to prove herself to her father who had died the year before."

Acceptance by blood relations (*ketsuen*): “People who were approved of by the family were stronger than others”.

Overprotection (*kinshi*): “My mother did not buy me a bicycle because she thought I might get injured.”

Resisting parental guidance (*hannko*): “I was a girl who opposed her parents’ guidance and walked her own way.”

Trust (*shinrai*): “Trusting relationships in the family are very important.”

Overprotection (*kahogo*): “I resisted my parents’ overprotection.”

Selfhood.

Dependency (*amae*): “My mother chided me for being too independent; She thought I should be more dependent on her.”

Inability to ask for help (*tsuyogaru*): “I was unable to ask for help me.”

Dependency on others (*amae*): “People around me give me heart-warming experiences.”

Maintaining peace (*wa*): “Your role is just to accept suffering and not to express it.”

Duty first (*gimu*): “We cannot help a person who cannot do his or her duty first.”

Compliance (*nattoku*): “When young, I drew a picture of a naked woman, and was scolded for that. (I assented I was wrong to do so).”

The five identified themes were interrelated. It can be said that social emotions such as obligation, dependency, compliance, refusal, and regret were generated in the context of familial relationships and roles in society. It can also be said that the participants felt their selfhood stronger when they either conformed or did not conform to the social discourse of Japanese culture. If cultural stereotypes were considered oppressive, they experienced feeling overprotected, trapped, excluded or rejected. However, obeying cultural norms could also lead to positive emotions like being peaceful, trustful, and feeling accepted.

Discussion

Stories usually contain causality or relationships among events (Savickas, 2011). For example, we can read causality between power and blood in the first extracted sentence on the list, “People who are accepted by the bloodline or family are stronger than others.”

Participants in this study told stories of two extremes: too much self-assertiveness, or non-assertiveness. Those who reacted to the interdependent self sometimes exercised a strong independent self-assertiveness. Examples of self-assertive or reactive sentences include: “I did not bow down to authority,” and “I will not sacrifice myself for my family.” Some non-assertive sentences are included in the category titled, ‘Awareness of One’s Role,’ detailed above. Non-assertive individuals tend to accept what is given to them.

If individuals cannot conform to cultural norms, they experience common negative emotions such as apologizing, refusal and feeling bullied. Often their biggest fear is being excluded from the group. Participants are always aware of whether they are conforming to norms.

They also realize that one’s role is the source of emotions. If a person becomes the target of an emotional outburst, he or she tends to accept it as their role. However, if the role in the family or school is fixed, he or she will also experience pain. When sudden changes in roles occur, he or she will also experience emotional dissipation. Family relationships were very important to participants. However, too much protection or overly firm guidance by parents became the source of frustration. Dependency is expressed as expecting specific behavior from the children. Awareness of one’s role or assigned role in society or family has been suggested as the source of self-awareness. If a person cannot find their place, they will feel rejection or isolation. Because their role is often assigned or given, they can only accept what is given to them.

As hypothesized, the qualitative data gives some evidence that the interdependent nature of

Japanese self still exists. The researchers can conclude that there are many common Japanese cultural themes in stories of the present research participants.

Implication for Counseling

As to cultural influences, Western ideas about life design interview or CCI (Savickas, 2015) should be customized appropriately when applied in Japan. We anticipate similar universal themes in the lives of Japanese participants and Westerners. However, beyond anticipated common issues, counselors must pay attention to Japanese social influences such as conformity to norms and fulfilling traditional roles in family and society. The following accounts are narrative descriptions given by Japanese applied to Western themes that appear in the CCI manual (2015).

From victim to victor.

One participant's occupation was lost along with their fixed role in society to the extent that they experienced rejection from the group. However, the participant still had the same life issues as before their transition. Sometimes he or she tried to set themselves free from this preoccupation so that they summoned the courage to raise their voice and become a proponent of advocacy. We saw in this person a story of a helpless and ignored a child who grew up to be an efficient helper who offered a helping hand to those lost and in trouble.

From preoccupation to occupation.

One participant was concerned with feelings of selfishness and being spoiled but then changed to become helpful and open-hearted. This person is now a professional counselor who tries to understand people in need.

From deconstruction to co-construction of self.

One of the participants' childhood stories was preoccupied with concerns about being dominated by parental guidance. Her parents prohibited many of her activities because they feared it might cause her injury. She wished she

could have lived her life with freedom. However, with a counselor's help, she could develop her capabilities. The piece of advice that she could give herself was to live for 'freedom, equality, and philanthropy.' She could set herself free from any limitations that pressed on her now.

From forced choice to intentionally chosen option.

One of the participant's parents made decisions for her life without their child's consent. She decided to do her best at her assigned job. Even though she was not able to choose her way of life, she has the freedom to do her best to succeed. She successfully reframed the meaning of freedom, allowing her to exercise her freedom in her given position.

From weakness to strength.

One of the participants was a helpless child who was unable to ask for help. Now this person has become a counselor who can understand a client's insecurities. With the support of colleagues, this person can now help others without sacrificing themselves. What seemed to be weakness has been turned into strength, that is, the capability of asking help from others.

Another participant's life theme is 'to live' and to fulfill one's purpose in life. This person used to sacrifice himself to help others, but always felt overwhelmed. It seemed that there was no time left for him to enjoy his life. However, he came to realize that to become a good helper and to continuously develop himself is his theme in life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researchers in this study argue that career counseling for Japanese people should involve consideration of how an individual's life and cultural themes are integrated. The key to assessing culture is to paying attention to emotional expressions, such as apologizing too much, refusing things, and feeling bullied, lost, regretful, or that one is enduring.

Savickas writes, “Career construction theory explicitly acknowledges that, in individualistic and collectivistic contexts, either interdependency or independence may be adaptive. Nevertheless, self-control is important in both contexts” (2013, p.160). However, adapting alone cannot resolve the developmental needs of our Japanese clients, because almost all the cultural themes discernible in the participants’ responses are characteristics of over adaptation. Therefore, we need to empower clients to increase control over themselves and their environments. Deconstructing from the inflexible life theme seems to be very important for Japanese clients. However, the counselor should be careful not to deconstruct the culture, but rather to raise awareness of the cultural themes in play behind the issue presented. As evidenced by participants’ stories, some are successfully reframing the meaning of the phenomena rather than actively changing their situations, while some tend to be reactive to the cultural framework of their society. The latter group may tend to be over-assertive or react strongly against repression. It may be useful to widen their perspectives on these issues, however, counselors working with Japanese clients should take into consideration to what extent they can make a change.

This research has certain limitations, notably sample size and gender imbalance. We will continue to accumulate stories from Japanese clients since we recognize that storying is needed when conducting the CCI with Japanese clients. In a sense, we are committed to writing the story of career counseling in Japan.

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