Explaining low crime Japan

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The introduction of *Crime in Japan: A psychological perspective*, my recent co-authored book, opens with the novelist Kazuo Ishiguro's observation on British depictions of the Japanese.[1] His observation is actually the start of his 1985 review, in the *London Review of Books*, of John David Morley's 'Pictures from the Water Trade: An Englishman in Japan'. Ishiguro remarked that the British were compelled to depict the Japanese as "extreme and bizarre" as to assure themselves that their way of life bore no resemblance to that of the Japanese. He then went on to review Morley's book, and although generally complimentary, he found that old, imperialist ways still persisted: simplistic explanations for Japanese ways of living and a tendency to assume that anything unfamiliar must be uniquely Japanese. "Behind this", Ishiguro wrote, "seems to lie the sadly familiar presumption that white-European cultures comprise world culture".

Introducing *Crime in Japan* in this way intended to highlight the concerns of trying to understand crime and justice phenomena beyond Europe and North America as an outsider, and within a collective knowledge base that is predominantly informed by a white Western viewpoint. The study of crime and criminal justice, known as criminology, whether past or contemporary, is no exception. Often, the simple reason given in criminology for why studies of other countries and populations are needed is there are few compared to the many of Western countries and populations. Advancing understanding by including other lands and people is to expand the knowledge base and make it more collective, and significantly, to increase the accuracy of that base. For precision is relative to whom collective knowledge represents, erases, and caricatures.

Japan has been of particular interest in criminology because of its comparatively low crime rate. After World War II, countries like Germany, England and Wales, the US, and Canada experienced rising crime rates, which were attributed to industrialization, and the rates never returned to the pre-transformation numbers. This, too, was expected of Japan, but higher crime did not happen. Although there was an initial surge, the crime rate subsequently declined and continued to do so over the same period. In addition, its economy at that time was remarkably strong. This success of a thriving economy and low crime was what attracted attention from scholars who wanted to know why this was the case. A number of explanations had been given, ranging from the country's supposed homogeneous population to geographical location. But the most complicated, because of the larger issues and implications that surround it, is the cultural explanation.

The cultural explanation is simplistic

Explaining low crime with culture is to say that collectivist traits like group-orientation, inclination towards harmony, and high self-control are why the Japanese do not murder, assault, and steal from each other as much as others in different countries. Evidence of this is limited, but commentary and speculation are many; so much so that Japan has been considered the country that endures the most stereotyping in comparative analysis by Western scholars. The frequent criticism is that the cultural explanation is simplistic and does not provide a complete understanding of crime in Japan. Although this is true, it is also true of any single explanation for crime. Culture is not in itself the issue, but when it is used to reduce a group of people to a few characteristics thought to be inherent, it gives the false impression that it is easy to explain away any phenomena because of that group's perceived lack of complexity, and therefore, that group's inferiority.

The cultural explanation used in this essentialist way is a familiar narrative with a long history of use to emphasise the irreconcilable differences of those who originate from 'the Orient'. In the US, for example, those of Asian ancestry have long been considered to be an 'invasion' and the 'Yellow Peril', whose perceived foreignness, regardless of how long they and their families have lived in the country, is perpetual.[2] The mass relocation and imprisonment of Japanese Americans by their own government during World War II comes to mind. When no longer perceived as a threat, a similar, though more positive, narrative of innate difference is bestowed: 'the Model Minority'. Inherent cultural traits derived from a Confucian belief system are thought to be responsible for success across an array of social and economic indicators when the reality is that this narrative is used to shame other racial minority groups. Either narrative of innate difference sees outcomes, good or bad, as resulting from fixed cultural traits. The present pandemic has shown the tenuous nature of this narrative: anti-Asian hate crimes in the US rose tremendously in 2020 because of the false belief that COVID-19 is intrinsic to anyone who is thought to look Chinese.[3]

The cultural explanation, when transformed into a narrative of innate difference, has also been used by the Japanese, but to demonstrate their exceptionalism, and at certain points in history, their superiority to other Asian 'races'.[4] Romantic and idealised Western understandings of Japanese crime and criminal justice have appeared alongside, and were possibly encouraged by, the discredited but enduring body of work called *Nihonjinron*, comprising theories on a distinctive Japanese national and cultural identity. Post-war, particularly during the height of economic prowess beginning in the seventies, *Nihonjinron* took on a favourable view of prevalent, inherent Japanese characteristics, attributing interdependence and nurturance of group relationships to current societal achievements. The late seventies ushered in a number of campaigns that provided opportunities for other countries to learn from Japan in its approach to education, management, and industry. Low crime, in this context, was considered yet another aspect that supported Japanese exceptionalism.

A matter of translation

Whether Japan truly has low levels of crime, however, has been contested. As found in other countries, the fundamental limitation of official crime data, often derived from police reports, is its capacity to capture only the tip of the iceberg. Domestic violence, sexual assault, and white-collar crimes are likely to be underreported, and their prevalence are actually thought to be high. The use of self-reports, where information is given by individuals themselves, is one way to counter this limitation of official data.

My early research compared the level of violence between Japanese and American male youths using self-reports, and unexpectedly found that violence was more prevalent among the Japanese. As the result conflicted with the presiding understanding of low crime Japan, the paper had difficulty getting published. The study needed replication as it compared two different versions of interpersonal violence: "hit someone with the idea of seriously hurting them" was used in the pre-existing English version, but the direct "hurt someone in a fight" was used in the Japanese translation. Part of the challenge of making comparisons is that exact translations may not yield comparable results. The use of a forthright understanding for the Japanese translation was thought to be the equivalent of the meaning conveyed by the English version. Before, a 2009 study compared anger among Japanese and American children. Usually anger is understood as an expression, but when a measure that captured experience rather than expression was used, anger was unpredictably higher in Japanese children – it seemed that they were better at self-regulating their anger so did not show it.[5]

Studying unfamiliarity

While *Crime in Japan* features culture as one of seven examined explanations, the explanation actually filters into the others – what behaviours are deemed illegal and the sort of responses towards them, not to mention what a justice system decides to manifest as, are dependent on cultural values and practices.[6] The result is that each explanation serves as a glimpse into related idiosyncrasies that mingle with each other and might give rise to particular crime phenomena. It is evidence that crime is not the consequence of a mistaken understanding of culture as a container of innate, fixed qualities. Similarities to what is already known about crime are also identified in the book, and situating these explanations in the collective knowledge base while traversing varied cultural presumptions are the challenges of cross-cultural research.

There is then the question of why bother? If studying unfamiliarity makes one susceptible to wrong presumptions or to conclude that it is impossible to make any interpretation, then such study must be futile. But wanting to understand others has been a characteristic commonly shared amongst us. 'Explaining' low crime Japan is misleading because explanations are never simplistic, and the same is true for all crime phenomena everywhere. Yet curiosity, the want to understand, can be a potent driver for fact in all its captivating complexity.

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Notes

1 Ishiguro, K. 1985. 'Uchi', *London Review of Books*; https://tinyurl.com/lrb-ishiguro-uchi.
2 Tchen, J.K.W. & Yeats, D. 2014. *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*. Verso.
3 Le, T.K. et al. 2020. 'Anti-Asian Xenophobia and Asian American COVID-19 Disparities', *American Journal of Public Health* 110(9):1371-73; Tessler, H., Choi, M. & Kao, G. 2020. 'The Anxiety of Being Asian American: Hate Crimes and Negative Biases During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45:636-46.
4 Kazufumi, M. & Befu, H. 1993. 'Japanese Cultural Identity: An Empirical Investigation of Nihonjinron', *Contemporary Japan* 4(1):89-102; Yamamoto, K. 2015. *The Myth of "Nihonjinron", Homogeneity of Japan, and its Influence on the Society*. Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, University of Leeds (working paper).
5 Bear, G. et al. 2009. 'Shame, Guilt, Blaming, and Anger: Differences between Children in Japan and the US', *Motivation and Emotion* 33 (article number 229).
6 Karstedt, S. 2001. 'Comparing Cultures, Comparing Crime: Challenges, Prospects, and Problems for a Global Criminology.' *Crime, Law, & Social Change*, 36, 285-308.