RESEARCH NOTES

STANDARDIZED ERROR AND JAPANESE CHARACTER: A NOTE ON POLITICAL INTERPRETATION

By JOHN F. EMBREE

BACK in 1927 Vilhjalmur Stefansson wrote a little book entitled The Standardization of Error. In this essay he shows first of all that errors which fill social needs become standardized and, he suggests, it might be construed as antisocial to try to destroy them by raising points of fact. To this end, there is an advantage to knowledge by definition in contrast to knowledge by observation. This, as the writer points out, gives to arithmetic its finality. Two and two is by definition four. In the social sciences also, we have many “facts” that are so by definition and so become immutable.

In the nineteenth century national characteristics tended to be interpreted as matters of innate temperament. This semi-racial interpretation of culture fell before the onslaught of Boasian and other attacks but still left us with different cultures and nations and the need to “characterize” them. Beginning with Ruth Benedict’s Patterns of Culture in 1934, and the work of Gorer and others during the war, a new set of generalizations concerned with national character structure came into being. Judging from the avidity with which the new characterizations of culture have been seized upon, especially by non-anthropologists, they must fill a real social need—a need for some easy phrases to describe foreign cultures and to justify our behavior toward them.

In the specific field of Japanese “national character” a whole body of lore has grown up, mushrooming from an initial essay by Geoffrey Gorer. This paper and the way its points have been adhered to, despite questions of observed phenomena to the contrary, illustrates very well Stefansson’s point of the social
advantage of knowledge by definition over knowledge by ob-
ervation.

The Japanese have been defined as having a tough time of
it as children and as growing up with compulsions which in
turn produce national aggression. Any data of observation
which may counteract this definition are dismissed as irrelevant
or not basic to Japanese culture. Nonetheless there are one or
two standard errors in this interpretation which have received
wide acceptance and upon which the writer would like to com-
ment. One of these is the idea that the Japanese home is a dan-
gerous place.

Gorer writes:

The Japanese house is dangerous for a baby, and is conceptualized as
even more dangerous than it is; a baby can break the paper walls or
burn itself on the open charcoal burner; and it is believed that even
the weight of a baby may be too heavy for the raised joists which
support the house. These joists follow the shape of the white mats;
and as soon as a baby can walk he has to learn to avoid stepping on
the joints between the mats. One of the greatest crimes that a child can
commit is to step on the sill, for that, it is said, would risk having . . .
the cautery, moxa, burned on its back. The Japanese child has to
“learn” its home completely, until, even when burdened, there is no
risk of stepping where he should not; a mistake involves not only the
possible incidental pain of falling or being burned, but also severe
punishments from the parents.1

Benedict remarks:

The Japanese even exaggerate the dangers of the house. It is “dan-
gerous” and completely taboo to step on the threshold. The Japanese
house has, of course, no cellar and is raised off the ground on joists.
It is seriously felt that the whole house can be thrown out of shape
even by a child’s step upon the threshold. Not only that, but the child
must learn not to step or to sit where the floor mats join one another.
Floor mats are of standard size and rooms are known as “three-mat
rooms” or “twelve-mat rooms.” Where these mats join, children are
often told, the samurai of old times used to thrust their swords up from
below the house and pierce the occupants of the room. Only the thick
soft floor mats provide safety; even the cracks where they meet are
dangerous. The mother puts feelings of this sort into the constant
admonitions she uses to the baby: “Dangerous” and “Bad.”2

of Sciences, 1943, V, 110.
2 Ruth Benedict, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, Cambridge, Houghton Mifflin, 1946,
p. 260.
Carrying this view to the ultimate extreme we find Leites interpreting as follows:

According to Geoffrey Gorer and Ruth Benedict Japanese adults issue complicated and heavily sanctioned prescriptions to the child as to how and where he may or may not move around the house (in American terms, they behave as if most of the house were composed of radiators and as if they were set upon punishing the child for having touched hot radiators).³

Now, coming back to the prosaic matter of what life is like in a Japanese home, what do we find by observation? None of the three theorizers on Japanese character cited above complicated their theoretical structures by observational checks. Since most Japanese are farmers or urban workers, it is from this milieu that the data should be drawn.

The ordinary Japanese home is a place of familiarity, a place of safety, and a place where one is protected and fed. In it also are to be found supernatural protectors; the ancestral spirits by the Butsudan, regional spirits by the Kamidana, various spirits of good fortune such as Ebisu and Daikoku in the kitchen. The house, even when empty of adults, is still a familiar and relatively safe place because of these spiritual presences. This is not to say that a Japanese mother would leave an infant alone. There are hazards such as falling off the front step or into the fire pit. But it is safe enough for the children, and even babies may be left in the care of ten- or twelve-year-olds in the home.

Most of a small child’s satisfactions come in the environment of home; song and story from grandparents, food from mother, games with siblings and age-mates.

As to the matter of running about the house and stepping on sills or mat cracks, the average child as observed, suffers from no restrictions in this regard. He is kept out of the ritual tokonoma alcove and away from the fire pit, just as in an American home a child is kept from a valuable flower vase or the kitchen stove; but there is no careful stepping for fear that the house will fall down or that a samurai will stick one from below. It is possible that in certain districts of Japan or in certain upper

social classes some etiquette in regard to sills and cracks exists and with it a folk rationalization, but such is not the general practice in Japan. (Similarly in certain upper-class urban American homes a young child must step with extra circumspection to avoid damage to furniture or art objects.)

Home is also where one may relax. Tears which may not be shed in public before strangers may find vent at home. In hot weather one may shed clothing and lounge about freely (and over cracks!) on the floor.

In much of the character structure writing about the Japanese there is an ethnocentrism which fitted in well with the social needs of the war period during which the "scientific" conclusions as to their character were made. Racist interpretations were socially as well as scientifically unacceptable at this time but "character structure" interpretations were all right and served just as well in the literate world to "explain" the international and domestic behavior of Japan.

Margaret Mead, for example, refers to Japanese culture as one that functions but is "not pleasant." Geoffrey Gorer speaks of the career of Japan as one of "almost continuous" aggressive warfare and explains this allegation by a peculiar Japanese need to make the world safe for the Emperor. Reversing the argument, he explains the remarkably long Japanese period of isolation and peace, 1600-1863, as due to a withdrawal reaction. (This is a fine example of Stefansson's knowledge by definition.)

In regard to Dr. Mead's reference to Japanese culture as unpleasant the question immediately arises as to unpleasant from whose point of view? The average Japanese regards American culture as unsettling and therefore as unpleasant. Japanese culture is an old one with well-grooved patterns of behavior to which the child is trained. He knows what is expected of him. Situations which can be met by conventional behavior are usually easier and less unpleasant for anyone than situations in which one does not know what is the right response. Too many uncertain situations may lead to a nervous breakdown, in rats,

---

in Japanese, and in Americans. From this point of view the Japanese would be justified in referring to American culture as one that functions but in which it is "not pleasant" to live.

All of this is not to deny that different social groups are characterized by particular culture patterns or that there are culturally determined ways of inculcating these patterns of behavior and associated values in the growing child. But more attention should be given to objective fact when making generalizations about such culture patterns, especially when we are involved in descriptions of whole nations. One should also question the validity of using culture patterns which determine individual behavior within a social group as an "explanation" for national and international socio-economic-political developments. As I have noted before, a summary (even when accurate) of a nation's citizens' behavior traits, while of some value in predicting individual behavior of members of the society, does not provide a magic explanation for a nation's aggressive warfare whether it be Japanese, British, American, or Russian.