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Amae and Attachment: Security in Cultural Context

Fred Rothbaum a  Miki Kakinuma b

a Tufts University, Medford, Mass., USA; b Nippon Veterinary and Animal Science University, Tokyo, Japan

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Kazuko Behrens’ multifaceted description of *amae* represents an important contribution to our understanding of close relationships. In particular, we applaud her adoption of a contextualized, lifespan perspective. Focusing on adulthood is especially helpful in directing attention to larger social, economic, political, and philosophical realities in which close relationships are embedded.

At the heart of Behrens’ article is her comparison of *amae* and attachment. Here we attempt to build on Behrens’ comparison, by focusing on similarities and differences between *amae* and attachment in both early childhood and adulthood. Like Behrens we provide a multifaceted comparison of the two constructs, but in addition, we seek to identify larger themes that unite and differentiate them. The larger themes are that both *amae* and attachment are rooted in needs for closeness and security and that in different cultures these needs are linked to different values that underlie and give form to the institutions and societal realities in those cultures. We claim that the dominant values in Japan (and *amae*) center on harmony and that the dominant values in the US and Western Europe (and attachment) center on autonomy [Mizuta, Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Hiruma, 1996; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000]. In the first and second sections we compare *amae* and attachment in early childhood and adulthood, respectively. In the final section we elaborate on and consider implications of our ideas for Behrens’ formulation.

Amae and Attachment in Early Childhood

In early childhood, particularly infancy, *amae* and attachment are similar with regard to four key dimensions: the age at which they are first manifested; the motivation underlying them; the most salient behaviors and emotions characterizing them, and their association with mental health. At the same time, we view *amae*
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and attachment as different with regard to all four of these dimensions. By highlighting similarities and differences along the same dimensions, we hope to demonstrate the complexity of distinguishing between these remarkably rich constructs. While our formulation borrows from and is largely consistent with Behren’s formulation, unlike her we believe that the differences between amae and attachment are interwoven with the similarities.

Amae and attachment are similar in the following respects: (a) As noted by Behrens, both of them are first manifested at around 9 months, when the infant’s ability to distinguish self from other leads to anxiety about separation and efforts to overcome it. (b) Underlying both constructs is a desire for increased closeness, particularly to the primary caregiver and, ultimately, a desire for security. Both amae and attachment are especially evident in times of stress. Sixty percent of the parents in Behrens’ study stated that their preschool children amaeru either when they are sleepy or tired. Attachment too is most evident when the child is under stress, as evidenced by the use of stress induction (the ‘Strange Situation’) to study it. (c) The behaviors manifested are proximity seeking and contact maintaining, and the child’s emotions are negative. Almost all Behren’s examples of amae from early childhood are of this type, as are the behaviors and emotions focused on by attachment theorists. (d) Amae and attachment theorists distinguish between positive and negative forms. Positive forms, which are typically attributed to satisfaction (of amae and attachment needs), are seen as leading to later social competence.

There are also basic differences between amae and attachment with regard to each of these dimensions. The differences center on the fact that amae is closely linked with interdependence, a forerunner of harmony, and that attachment is closely linked with exploration, a forerunner of autonomy: (a) While both amae and attachment first emerge at around 9 months, several investigators maintain that amae is most evident later in childhood [Azuma, 1996; Kumagai, 1981], whereas attachment is most evident at 12–18 months. This may relate to Behrens’ claim that only one of the three types of amae that occur in childhood is evident in infancy. Later emerging forms of amae entail relatively sophisticated forms of interdependence that require dawning awareness of the distinction between relationships with close others and relationships with more distant others. (b) Amae is associated with a desire for merging, unity, and symbiosis, whereas attachment is associated with needs for protection and basic care. While stress triggers both needs, in the case of amae it is relatively mild stress (e.g., when the child is hungry, tired, or jealous of a sibling); in the case of attachment it is pronounced stress (e.g., threats to physical safety and/or separation from the caregiver). (c) Amae is closely associated with interdependent behavior and with an absence of autonomy (exploration); the opposite is true of attachment. This is consistent with findings by Vereijken, Riksen-Walraven, & Van Lieshout [1997] that amae relates more to dependence than to attachment. (These authors failed to include a measure of interdependence, so instances of the latter were probably coded as dependence.) Moreover, there are differences in emotions – amae is more associated with loneliness and sadness and attachment with fear [Behrens; Mizuta et al., 1996]. (d) Positive amae and positive attachment have different meanings. Positive amae is manifest in the child’s requesting indulgence in appropriate contexts – in circumstances where the caregiver is able to indulge the child’s needs. Key circumstances that make amae positive are the age of the child and the frequency of the requests; young children are expected
to request *amae* much more often than older children and adults. Positive attachment has more to do with the child’s ability to use the caregiver as a base for exploration and to re-unite with the caregiver following separations. At older ages positive *amae* is associated with *sunao* – willing compliance, cooperation, and receptivity [Kumagai, 1981] – whereas positive attachment is associated with autonomy, self-esteem, and self-assertion.

Thus there are fundamental differences as well as fundamental similarities between *amae* and attachment, and the evidence indicates that the differences are not fully distinguishable from the similarities. The essence of the similarity is that both *amae* and attachment are concerned with closeness and security. The essence of the difference is that *amae* is focused on the desire for interdependence and learning to distinguish relationships with close others from relationships with more distant others, whereas attachment is focused on use of the caregiver as a base for exploration and learning to cope with recurring separations.

**Amae and Attachment in Adulthood**

According to Behrens, there are two forms of attachment that emerge in adulthood – obligatory and presumptive *amae*. In this section, we focus on *amae* that is distinctive to adulthood, but we also consider the other adult forms of *amae* that have their origins in childhood. We contrast these various forms of *amae* with the adult manifestation of attachment security emphasized by Mary Main [Main & Goldwyn, 1994; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985] – autonomous attachment.

In adulthood, the similarities between *amae* and attachment are still notable, but they are at a more abstract level than in childhood. The similarities have to do with motivation (desire for security), skills associated with security (social intelligence), and the partners sought (intimate others). With regard to motivation, *amae* and attachment are primarily concerned with achieving security and, more specifically, with being understood and accepted. With regard to skills, positive *amae* and autonomous attachment require social intelligence – an understanding of, and sensitivity to, others. With regard to partners, both *amae* and attachment primarily occur in interactions with intimate others. According to Behrens, interview findings with Japanese adults indicate that they *amaeru* most often with spouses and mothers. Similarly, adult attachment researchers focus on relationships with spouses. While adult attachment researchers do not focus on current relationships with parents, they assess attachment security in adulthood through a protocol [the ‘Adult Attachment Interview’; Main & Goldwyn, 1994] that focuses on past experiences with, and feelings about, parents.

As in early childhood, the same dimensions that highlight the similarities between *amae* and attachment also highlight the differences. Yamagishi’s [2002] distinction between assurance and trust provides a conceptual framework that helps explain these differences. Assurance is a guarantee of security that occurs in highly cohesive groups and stable, long-lasting relationships; that is, in situations characterized by social certainty. Certainty results from structural aspects of the relationship, such as ostracism for violations of norms, that make it in one’s self interest to cooperate with others. Trust is a hope and faith in others that occurs in socially uncertain situations. To deal with this uncertainty, individuals must learn when they
can trust the intentions and trustworthiness of the other; this ability helps emancipate them from closed relationships. We believe that the assurance-trust distinction helps explain differences between amae and attachment with regard to the three dimensions mentioned above: the motivation for security, the skills underlying security, and the partners involved in the interaction.

**Motivation for Security**

In amae relationships, security means certainty about loyalty and cohesion; in attachment relationships, security means confidence in pursuing new opportunities. In the case of amae, the certainty or guarantee that the other will provide security derives from structural aspects of the relationship that ensure unity, loyalty, and fulfillment of obligations, such as in-group favoritism, clearly defined roles, external incentives to remain loyal and cooperate, and monitoring and sanctioning of violations of group norms. The fact that amae typically involves unreasonable and excessive demands highlights assurance – i.e., in making inappropriate requests and in granting such requests, partners communicate that their commitment to one another is unbounded and encompasses what is unreasonable and excessive. Thus amae expresses and fosters assurance; it reflects and reinforces both parties’ belief that the relationship is unconditional.

Attachment is more concerned with trust in self and relationship, due to a history of interactions with a particular individual. Attachment security helps the individual address social uncertainties – due to the emphasis on autonomy in relationships (e.g., the need for separations) and the lack of tightly-knit groups that enforce unity – so that s/he can take advantage of new opportunities. ‘Trust emancipates people from closed relationships (and fosters) spontaneous relations with new partners’ [Yamagishi, 2002, p. 11]. The more individuals seek new opportunities, the more they need to trust in others.

**Social Intelligence Underlying Security**

Amae is associated with a pivotal Japanese form of social intelligence called kejime – the ability to shift easily between public and private contexts and to understand how to act in each. The mature adult knows when it is acceptable to exercise amae (namely in private situations). Because of the Japanese emphasis on tightly knit groups, it is extremely important to adhere to social norms. Positive amae hinges on the ability to read social contexts and thereby determine when, where, and with whom one is released from norms and obligations. Without kejime there is no assurance; it is the individual’s ability to adhere to the rigorous system of norms, as well as knowledge of when s/he is released from the latter, that guarantees acceptance by others and granting of amae.

Autonomous attachment is based on the ability to identify others who are likely to be responsive to self’s needs. Yamagishi [2002] claims that social intelligence – assessing the goodwill of the other vis-à-vis the self – is essential to trust. Our claim here is that it is also essential to autonomous attachment. Attachment theorists suggest that this kind of social intelligence (selecting partners who are responsive) requires a ‘coherent’ understanding of experiences with and emotions about early caregivers. In contrast to amae, which involves an understanding of group norms regarding obligations, attachment involves an understanding of experiences with individual partners – present and past.
Partners Involved

Obligatory and presumptive amae, the two forms of amae unique to adults, involve relationships with nonintimate others – members of wider social networks at work and in one’s extended group or neighborhood. In adulthood, the ability to read social contexts and thereby determine when one is temporarily released from social norms and obligations is extended to nonintimate relationships, so that assurances that amae requests will be met can be obtained in those relationships as well. By contrast, autonomous attachment only involves relationships with intimate others. In the absence of group norms dictating responsiveness, intimate partners are the only ones who consistently and willingly provide the responsiveness necessary to ensure security.

Conclusions

We view our ideas as extending Behrens’ formulation; we have attempted to show how several of the similarities and differences she highlights are interwoven. Our more important extension is the claim that the differences between amae and attachment cannot be understood apart from the values and institutions of the societies in which they are embedded. Behrens’ discussion of the ‘amae-on-giri system’ is consistent with this thesis. For Behrens, however, embeddedness is not a key point, whereas from our viewpoint, it is the main point.

Yamagishi [2002] is concerned with external circumstances that promote trust and assurance, not with their developmental and relational antecedents. That explains why he never mentions amae or attachment. We think it is critical that the developmental pathways of trust and assurance, and their links to security, be explored. Evidence reviewed above suggests that Yamagishi’s notion of assurance relates closely to concepts of adult amae; central to both is the link between security and harmony. Similarly, his notion of trust relates closely to attachment theorists’ concept of an autonomous state of mind; central to both is the link between security and autonomy. That is, assurance (amae) and trust (attachment) are forms of security that differ in the values and societal realities to which they are linked.

Why are amae and attachment so closely tied to the values of harmony and autonomy, respectively? We believe that these values are central to the economic, educational, religious, and political institutions, as well as demographic and historical circumstances, for which children in Japan and the West must prepare. With respect to employment, for example, many Japanese have historically worked for large, stable companies with which they identify. Employees begin each workday by singing company songs [Ouchi, 1981]; they rely on consensus in business decisions to achieve ‘certainty as to how the decision will be reached and certainty that it will be accepted’ [Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984, p. 963]; they rarely strike and when they do they limit strikes to brief, almost apologetic gestures [Ouchi, 1981]. By contrast, Americans shift companies repeatedly so as to rise quickly, and they emphasize self-maximization and personal initiative rather than teamwork. With regard to education, the Japanese emphasize learning to become part of the group and careful attention to and painstaking practice of skills modeled by others, whereas Americans emphasize the process of discovery, self-initiative, and individual projects [Weisz et al., 1984]. These examples highlight the Japanese
emphasis on harmony and the American emphasis on autonomy in different spheres of adult life. *Amae* relationships, in which security is inextricably linked with harmony, and attachment relationships, in which security is inextricably linked with autonomy, predispose the development of vital skills needed to succeed in these spheres.

If, as we suggest, *amae* and attachment are inextricably tied to certain values and societal institutions embodying these values, then attitudes and practices involving *amae* and attachment should change as do the institutions. Our examples regarding the Japanese worlds of work and education are dated because those worlds are undergoing rapid change – there is decreasing emphasis on harmony and increasing emphasis on autonomy. In regions of Japan where change is most marked, we would expect the least positive views of *amae*; this may help explain the negative views about *amae* found by Vereijken et al. [1997] in their Tokyo sample. Research in traditional versus rapidly changing regions of Japan should be conducted to understand *amae* and attachment in multiple contexts as well as how these constructs relate to various social institutions in those regions. Increased understanding of the ways in which shifts in values and institutions lead to changes in the complexion of security in the different contexts and at the different ages identified by Behrens would inform developmental accounts of *amae* and attachment.

References


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