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## TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY : A CASE FOR *JANKEN*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore the relationship between human action and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this functioning occurs by focusing on a widely practiced Japanese children's game, *janken* ('Paper, scissors and stone'). We start from a general observation that although known in other parts of the world, this game has a special place in the lives of modern Japanese children. We point out that in Japan, apart from being a widely practiced starting game among children, it also serves as an important tool for group management. Generally believed to be originated in China, *janken* seems to have undergone a sociocultural processes of selection, adaptation, and variation. We argue that in order to understand the sociocultural processes that result in the *janken* as known today, it is necessary to approach it with multiple levels of analysis to include, for example, the individual socialization process, the person-context interaction process, and the sociocultural development process. We present some preliminary thoughts on these aspects.

**Key words:** *janken*, sociocultural research, children's game, group management, cultural tool.

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'cultural psychology' began to attract the attention of the first author about ten years ago. Coming to the field of developmental psychology with a background in social anthropology, the term seemed to promise a potential solution to the problem of the relationship between human psyche and culture. According to one of its proponents, the aim of cultural psychology is 'to examine ethnic and cultural sources of psychological diversity in emotional and somatic (health) functioning, self organization, moral evaluation, social cognition, and human development' (Shweder, 1991, p. 497). Although some writers on this subject have generally described it as an approach towards understanding the relation between human mental functioning and social, institutional and historical contexts, its boundary and potential and limits have yet to be explored (Edwards, 1995, p. 55; Moll, 1995, p. 361, Shweder, 1991, p. 73). A newly founded journal, *Culture & Psychology*, is one of the major platforms for such discussions.

In this article, we hope to contribute to the understanding of the sociocultural processes through which a cultural activity is situated in a social setting by focussing on a Japanese children's game, *janken*, or 'Paper, scissors and stone' in the English speaking world.

What is so special about *janken* that makes it a topic of our examination? This question can be answered by two general observations concerning *janken*: (1) *Janken* is not only widely known but also practiced by Japanese children both in the playground as well as in classroom. (2) *Janken* is recognized as a legitimate method of decision making in many situations in the lives of children as well as that of the adults. The significance of these observations becomes even clearer when the role of *janken* in Japanese society is compared with that in other society where similar game is also widely known. While in other society, games may be started by various starting games among which *janken* (or its equivalent) is but one. In contrast, *janken* precedes almost all social plays that involve more than two children. Partly because of its prevalence in Japan, the nature of children's social interactions are shaped by the adoption of *janken*. In other words, in Japan, *janken* is a cultural activity through which social lives of the children are mediated.

There are a number of previous studies on different aspects of *janken* from a traditional psychological viewpoint. One researcher for example, addressed the topic of imitative learning of social behaviors among kindergarten children using *janken* as the target behavior (Ushijima, 1969, 1973, 1974). Another researcher focussed on the rule-understanding aspect of *janken* among kindergarteners (Minamitate, 1987, 1988). However, these studies failed to view *janken* as a cultural activity which is the result of complicated sociocultural processes. We argue that by approaching *janken* from a cultural psychological point of view provides us a good example for investigating the relationship between human action and its cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this action occurs.

#### JANKEN AS A CULTURAL ACTIVITY

The activity in question, *janken*, is widely known as a children's game in many parts of the world. For example, it is known as 'Paper-scissors-stone, or Rock-paper-scissors' in the English speaking world. The Opies provide a survey of similar games in the ancient world (Opie, 1984, pp.27-28). However, despite similarities in the motoric actions and rules, the games have drastically different social implications in their respective cultural contexts. The Western version, 'Paper, scissors and stone' has a very limited application and is not observed often in daily life. In contrast, in Japan, *janken* is not only widely observed among children (and sometimes even among adults), its wide acceptance creates a new category of situations which otherwise would not have existed (example will be given below).

*Janken* as it is known today should be properly understood as a cultural activity which is a result of historical development involving complicated factors at various levels.

The fact that *janken* can be observed among two years old children suggests that it has its first appearance in parent-infant play. The adoption of *janken* or its infantile

version in this earliest dyadic context within the family is not carried out in a cultural vacuum but must have obtained various suggestions from the larger world beyond the family. Thus, parents or adults either take the idea from their memory as children or from what is current in the neighbourhood or in street and playground. What takes place in dyadic interaction must make some cultural sense. This process of participatory appropriation of *janken* contributes to the formation of a cultural activity (Rogoff, 1995). As a result, by the time children are ready to participate in a social interaction with others outside the family, they have already learned the 'basics' of *janken* and therefore are well prepared for its applications. At the same time when *janken* is being adopted in children's socialization, its range of application begins to include non-game contexts such as in deciding individual roles in carrying out a task assigned to a children's group at school. This method gains its legitimacy either by impressing the teacher who is responsible for the management of the class with its efficiency, or by 'persuading' the participating children and adults concerned with its fairness or harmlessness under the circumstances. In other words, as a cultural institution, *janken* has the sanction of the society in general. Furthermore, in sanctioning *janken* as a culturally appropriate activity, a zeitgeist is being created and strengthened. In this way, the individual activity and the cultural, institutional process "make each other up" (Shweder, 1990).

#### INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECT

From the point of view of the individual, *janken* requires the correct timing of finger gestures, the arm movements, and the prescribed chants. These must also be coordinated with those of rival participants. Once the participants have presented their "hands," the finger positions have to be scanned and compared to determine winners and losers. This computation is usually accomplished quickly and accurately, at which time the participants either determine a result, or continue for another round in the case of a tie.

Apparently children in Japan learn the skill of *janken* from their parents or peers at a very young age. Presumably, this process begins in parent-infant play. With very young children, parents or adults may show the different finger formations while they repeat the "jan, ken, pon" chant. In such a parent-infant interaction situation, a researcher can ask questions such as 'what is the distance in between the dyad?,' 'what are their relative eye levels?,' 'in what mode (verbal, gesture, etc.) is the communication being carried out?,' and 'what are the assumptions underlying the adult's behavior toward the child?'. In other words, while concentrating on a specific behavior (*janken*), a researcher can focus on the issue of cultural transmission processes. Aspects of cultural transmission that are specific to motoric skills, or vocal-movement coordination, together with Japanese features of cultural transmission can be examined here. Data and ideas thus obtained can be compared with those found in the literature on these topics.

#### PERSON-CONTEXT DEVELOPMENT

As individual children grow older, their relationships also develop. Relationship

with other members of the family other than the mother adds on to mother-infant relationship. When children are old enough to locomote and play by themselves, their relationship further extends, and they come into contact with people in the neighbourhood. The beginning of primary school education marks another milestone in the development of children's social relationship. In each of these stages of development, while children play or interact with one another, *janken* can be considered as taking place in many different contexts. What is considered appropriate in one stage or one context might not be so in another. It is all these context-specific "meanings" of *janken* that constitutes a part of children's understanding of this activity. In order to understand *janken*, as many as possible of these different contexts at different stages and their associated meanings will have to be examined, not only from the point of view of the individuals, but also from that of the different groups formed at each stage.

### SOCIOHISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Because of the lack of a research-based account of the development of *janken* in Japanese society, only a speculative outline will be attempted here. In a preliminary attempt to find a visual representation of *janken* in ukiyo-e or other genres of pictures, several popular books on these subjects were scanned. However, among hundreds of pictures depicting children and their lives, only one work by Utagawa Hiroshige (1757-1858) including the picture of two children playing *janken* was found (Edo kodomo bunka kenkyukai, 1993). Just as 'Paper, scissors and stone' does not seem to appear in popular Mother Goose songs, *janken* does not seem to have left its trace in Japanese folk tales either. Of course, these negative findings do not by themselves prove anything, but they seem to suggest that *janken*, as it is known and practiced nowadays, is a relatively new phenomenon.

According to one account (Masuda, 1989; see Kako, 1975 for similar view), *janken* originated from China. We do not know how and when it came to Japan nor what transformations it has gone through. It is even doubtful whether its earlier history can be fruitfully traced. One speculation attributes the original development of *janken* in Japan to the contact between the Chinese merchants and the Japanese geishas in Nagasaki during the Tokugawa Shogunate period, when Japan isolated herself from the rest of the world. Known first as '*Hon-ken*' (the original ken) or '*Nagasaki-ken*,' it was adapted and modified to become '*Tōhachiken*' or '*Kitsuneken*' ('fox'-ken) which further diversified into '*Toraken*' ('tiger'-ken) and '*Mushiken*' ('worm'-ken). Unlike the original Chinese game which is a game of guessing the total number of fingers put out by the players, these Japanese derived versions have only three finger formations or gesticures. The term '*janken*' comes from '*ishi-ken*,' or '*stone*'-ken.

Kako, a writer on children's culture, thinks that it was the children who 'picked what was good in these different versions and brought them into their lives' (Kako, 1975, p. 36). He further mentions two reasons why the 'stone'-ken, or *janken*, was "selected" by the children. One reason is that *janken* can be played with a single hand. This is important because "excited with expectation and decision, a child can make big arm movements up and down and concentrate on the expressions of the hands while the other hand can hold the toy." The second reason is that not only the finger

formations can be expressed centrally and easily carried out, the result can also be instantly judged without ambiguity (Kako, *ibid*, p. 37). We agree with this author in assuming that *janken* has gone through a selection process, but we argue that the selection process should include the socialization process in which the children and the socializing agents interact, as well as the cultural context in which these processes occurred.

The socialization process of *janken* today that we can observe directly is the product of sociohistorical processes. An examination of *janken*'s history in Japanese society will provide us the opportunity to look into the 'social or cultural motive' for the development of *janken* among present-day Japanese school children. As we noted above, the position in present-day Japanese school culture occupied by *janken* is very different from that of its equivalent, 'paper, scissors and stone' in, say, the school culture of the USA. While *janken* is not only widely practiced as a game in itself, it is widely adopted as a tool for group management, not only in kindergartens or primary schools, but also beyond that. In contrast, 'paper, scissors and stone' does not seem to be employed to the same extent even among school children, let alone level beyond that. Indeed, several Western persons we talked to said they recognized the game or knew the rules, but they did not remember ever playing it.

Although to our knowledge a historical account of *janken*'s development in Japanese society does not exist yet, we do not think the introduction and the subsequent development of this activity took place with the premeditated aim of more efficient group management. That *janken* has become a tool for group management is a new development. Although *janken* was known to some people, or even to most people, we hypothesize that there was time when it was only a game for children.

One hypothetical context for the development of *janken* as a group management tool is the modern educational system. With its introduction, a large number of children were brought together and organized into different hierarchical groups such as grades, classes and squads (*han*) for the first time in Japanese society. Under such a situation, the knowledge and skills about *janken* may have taken on a new form to become a tool for group management. This hypothesis can be further strengthened by the trend towards democratization in primary schools after World War II. Following the War, Japanese school children were more often encouraged to manage themselves, and teachers have come to avoid too much direct control over many aspects of children's daily lives. This environment may have encouraged the development of *janken* as we know it today.

An alternative context for the development of *janken* as a group management tool is in the Japanese military organization, although it is hard to speculate on when this took place. While the notion of military organization might discourage the assumption of anything as 'loose' as *janken*, it seems not entirely unreasonable to assume that there were matters not under the control of the military system of order and command. There also may have been cases when *janken* was clandestinely practiced to settle minor matters among peers when not on the front line. These admittedly speculative ideas need to be examined against empirical data.

What these two contexts (the military organization and the modern schools)

have in common is a hierarchical organization with a task. Furthermore, while there is an overall hierarchy (they both have levels of human groupings in which members belonging to the same units (e.g., the squads, the 'han') are of equal "rank" that when carrying out the task there is no "natural order" for deciding who gets which job. Under such circumstances, *janken* seems to suggest itself to participants who have been socialized with the skills.

Assuming that *janken* or its equivalent is equally widely known, or knowable, to any society, it is an interesting question why it has developed into the *janken* as we know it now. We argue that one of the reasons lies in its socialization process. It is our impression that Japanese children engage in *janken* from a very young age. If this impression can be confirmed, this phenomenon by itself can be explained as due to the prevalent presence of *janken* in Japanese children's world that parents or adults find the 'material' or 'topic' of *janken* readily available and appropriate. Appropriate because it is likely to arouse the interest in young children, and it is interesting to play with young children. Another reason lies in the way it is perpetuated or reinforced by the society to which older children enter. Once the socialization process has succeeded in preparing each new generation of Japanese children for doing *janken*, children themselves and/or adults involved with the management of children's groups not only find it useful, they often find new ways of applying it. The fact that *janken* is found to be useful is not enough. It has to be judged (by both the children and the socialization agents) as appropriate. In other words, here we are dealing with the motives and the morality underlying the socialization process of *janken*.

There are many non-game occasions in which *janken* is applied. For example, in many primary schools, children adopt *janken* as a means in assigning the different tasks to individual children when carrying out the cleaning-up of their classrooms. In this case, obviously, it is considered appropriate that the decision is made in this manner. Few would disagree, be they Japanese or otherwise. However, in another example in which *janken* is carried out to decide who should be responsible for collecting the dishes and trays and carrying them to the cafeteria kitchen when a group of students finish their lunch, a person from Western society, for example, might not agree with the moral judgement implied in the adoption of *janken* in such a case. More frequent application of a rule tends to create atmosphere and moral judgement that pave the way for its easy acceptance; the rarity, on the contrary, tends to prevent the development of understanding and appreciation necessary for the introduction of the rule.

#### IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING HUMAN ACTION

Most of the social activities in a society have their 'reasons', which the individuals living in it can express when asked. Indeed, in folk theory, membership in a society is sometimes 'defined' by the degree of knowledge an individual possesses concerning these reasons. However, there are some other reasons that can account for the social behaviors of a society but are beyond the conscious grasp of its members. We are referring to some of the models, images or meta-images in a society concerning a particular custom or ways of doing things, such as the images of childhood or childrearing (Chen, 1996; Ward, 1965). Some of these images or meta-images emerge only as

a result of intensive analyses and interpretations by specialists. That some aspects of cultural things are beyond conscious grasp of its members is a fact which can be explained in terms of the lack of comparative formulation of the issue in the society which in turn implies that there is no survival or operational 'function' for such a formulation in the maintenance of the custom or ways of doing things in a certain way. The practitioners of the custom or ways of doing things operate from a different view point from the specialists who formulate the model or meta-image to account for the custom or ways of doing things. In other words, the specialist and the practitioners have different motives. In addition, unlike the specialist who approaches the issue within a limited span of time and concentrates on formulating an answer, the practitioners (usually involving socializing agents (adults) and the socialized (children)) take a much longer span of time during socialization in developing the behavioral pattern, not having to answer the same question. To the practitioners, their main concerns are the accomplishment of more practical everyday activities, such as feeding the infant or getting fed, preparing a meal or eating the meal with other members of the family, or carrying out the classroom clean-up assignment, etc. In these situations, both the socializing agents and the socialized have their respective objectives and tasks at hand (including regulating emotional expression), that it is not possible for the socializing agents to point out these details, nor is it necessary to do so, even if they may have a better understanding of the sources or contexts of the information or messages they are trying to pass on to the children. Thus, social activities are being accomplished mainly through actions by the participants, without their being explicated at the same time. As patterns of behavior are acquired in such a way, the practitioners usually are not aware of their having meta-models or themes.

Just like most native speakers of a language are not aware of the existence of a grammar, children participating in the application of *janken* to various settings are not aware of there being a grammar of *janken*. However, we suggest that it is not only possible to extract and to compile a *janken* grammar as applied in modern Japanese society, the knowledge thus obtained will also contribute to our understanding of child development in Japanese society in particular and the process of culture transmission in general.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we use *janken* as a window to look into the relationship between human action and its sociocultural aspects. We suggest that when approached from a cultural psychological viewpoint, an activity such as *janken* can lead us to questions not usually expectable from the traditional psychological point of view. We have to admit that most of the ideas presented in this article are still pure speculations. However, we believe that we have made a sketch of what seems to be important aspects for further systematic analysis and interpretation.

In full agreement with Rogoff, we want to emphasize that in order to have a fuller understanding of a human activity such as *janken*, it is necessary to consider how individuals, groups, and society in general transform as they constitute and are constituted by sociocultural activity (Rogoff, 1995).

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