



Psychologically Attached to Japan? The Vinai Norasakkunkit Interview

Interview by Robert S. Murphy (January, 2011)

With this interview, I am delighted to be introducing Dr. Vinai Norasakkunkit to the ESL/EFL community. I have personally know Vinai since the early 1980s, as we both attended Canadian Academy, an international school in Kobe, Japan. Vinai and I both acquired in interest in psychology and multiculturalism during our time in Kobe and we are both still very passionate about psychology and the effects of cultural differences. I've invited Vinai for an interview because he's worked with some of the top researchers in the field and because Vinai's work and perspectives should prove to be highly valuable to ESL/EFL teachers in Asia and around the world.

Robert S. Murphy: RM

Dr. Vinai Norasakkunkit: VN

RM: To better understand the context of your research, can you tell us a bit about your upbringing, especially your time in Japan?

VN: My family brought me to Japan when I was a year old. I attended international schools in Kobe, Japan until I graduated high school. Unlike most foreign sojourners in Japan, my parents worked within a Japanese organization and so we were exposed to Japanese cultural and institutional practices. I also worked in a Japanese department store for a year before going on to grad school, so I got first-hand experience working within a traditional Japanese organization myself.

RM: When did you develop an interest in psychology? Your specific field in psychology?

VN: I was always interested in psychology. In middle school, I remember sneaking into my sister's bedroom and reading her high school psychology textbooks. When I took psychology in high school, I became even more deeply interested in it. In college, I took a class called cultural psychology taught by a young professor at the time by the name of Shinobu Kitayama who then invited me to join his research lab. Shinobu Kitayama turned out to have an enormous influence in the field of psychology later on

by reintroducing cultural psychology into mainstream thinking. I was fortunate enough to witness that process as his mentee. Although I chose to get my Ph.D. in clinical psychology because I am also interested in mental health issues, I always came from a cultural psychological theoretical perspective. Today I consider myself more of a cultural and social psychologist than a clinical psychologist (even my dissertation adviser in the clinical psychology program was a social/evolutionary psychologist).

RM: What would you say are some of the most important discoveries/papers in your field over the last decade or so? Why?

VN: This is a difficult to answer since there will obviously be differences in opinion across individuals even within the field, but this is a selected list of important papers according to only my personal assessment of impact in various broad domains and the high impact factor of the journals they have been published in:

1. Markus, H. R.; Kitayama, S. (1991). "Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation". *Psychological Review* 98: 224–253. This paper reintroduced cultural psychology into mainstream psychology and challenged mainstream thinking by suggesting that most mainstream psychological models are based on a Western concept of the person and do not generalize very well to a more interconnected model of a person that is closer to one that the rest of the world adheres to. Hence, it motivated psychologists to expand psychological theories to make them more relevant to *all* human behaviors, not just Western ones.
2. Morris, M.W., & Peng, K. (1994). Culture and cause: American and Chinese attributions for social and physical events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 949-971. One of the first comprehensive studies to investigate how culture influences social thinking. Many similar papers followed afterwards.
3. Kitayama, S., Markus, H.R., Matsumoto, H., & Norasakkunkit, V. (1997). Individual and collective processes in the construction of self: self-enhancement in the United States and self-criticism in Japan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72 (6), 1245-1267. Although it might seem oddly self-serving to cite a paper in which I am a coauthor, this paper was also included as a modern classic in social psychology by Susan Fiske (2003, *Psychological Inquiry*, 3&4, 196-202) because it challenged the idea that the motivation to enhance one's image of the self was universal. Along with that, I would also consider this paper to be equally important: Heine, S. J., Lehman, D. R., Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1999). Is there a universal need for positive self-regard? *Psychological Review*, 106, 766-794.
4. Masuda, T.; Nisbett, R. A. (2001). "Attending holistically versus analytically: Comparing the context sensitivity of Japanese and Americans". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 922–934. This paper not only investigated how culture influences social thinking but also basic thinking. Many similar papers followed afterwards, including this important one: Peng, K. & Nisbett, R. (1999). Culture, dialectics, and reasoning about contradiction. *American Psychologist*, 54, 741-754.
5. Kitayama, S., Mesquita, B., & Karasawa, M. (2006). Cultural affordances and emotional experience: Socially engaging and disengaging emotions in Japan and the

United States. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 890-903. This paper highlighted in the process by which culture shapes dominant emotional experiences as being oriented towards a disjointed self or towards interpersonal relationships.

6. Han, S., Northoff, G. (2009). Understanding the self: a cultural neuroscience approach. *Progress in Brain Research*, 178, 203-212. – This paper investigated neural correlates in cultural differences in self-relevant processes. Other similar papers followed.

7. Chiao, J.Y. & Blizinsky, K.D. (2009). Culture-gene coevolution of individualism-collectivism and the serotonin transporter gene (5-HTTLPR). *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 277 529-537. – This was an ambitious study attempting to explain the origins of individualism and collectivism from a culture-gene coevolutionary theory perspective similar to this paper: Fincher, C.L., Thornhill, R., Murray, D.R., & Schaller, M. (2008). Pathogen prevalence predicts human cross-cultural variability in individualism/collectivism, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 275 1279-1285.

8. Finally, this one: Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? (Target Article, Commentaries, and Response). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33, 61-83, 111-135. This comprehensive meta-analytic study investigates how much of the generalizations in psychological science is based on the outlier samples of Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Developed (WEIRD) countries and therefore don't generalize very well to the majority of the world's populations.

RM: What have you found out about Japanese people from your research?

VN: My current research tries to reconcile some of the contradictions in the literature suggesting that many Japanese have collectivistic orientations but with individualistic aspirations. Much of the individualistic aspirations among today's Japanese show up on self-report (i.e., questionnaire studies) but not in automatic behaviors (i.e., in experimental results) which are consistently oriented more towards collectivism than individualism. However, I argue that many of the institutional practices that support collectivistic goals in Japan are becoming less sustainable in the context of the economic structural changes that are occurring in Japan. Consequently, there are an increasing number of individuals, especially among the young, who are falling through the cracks and, therefore, find it difficult to participate in society. I am currently investigating these "cultural dropouts" and showing that their behaviors are no longer oriented towards collectivism. Although they are not necessarily oriented towards individualism either, I am suggesting that there are psychological consequences to being cultural dropouts and psychological trends associated with it. This tendency is a growing trend among Japanese youth.

RM: Markus & Kitayama, two names that come up even in the EFL/ESL literature. You have written papers with them. Can you tell us about that?

VN: The 1997 paper with Kitayama, Markus and Matsumoto (Hisaya) was a study based on my undergraduate project which Kitayama came up with the design for and I came up with the overarching basic idea for. I wrote it up for my undergraduate

honors thesis, and the study was later elaborated to include a second study and then published with Markus as the second coauthor. Also, in 2002-2003, I did a research fellowship in Shinobu Kitayama's lab at Kyoto University for my clinical psychology dissertation. During that time I also helped to write a paper on how culture influences what constitutes and predicts subjective well-being. This paper was published in the Journal of Happiness Studies in 2004 with Yukiko Uchida as the first author, me as the second author, and Shinobu Kitayama as the third author. Recently, I wrote a paper on the relationship between culturally divergent social anxieties and cognitive styles coauthored by Shinobu Kitayama and Yukiko Uchida and we submitted that to a journal and hopefully it will be accepted for publication soon.

RM: What are common myths about psychology that you'd like to see go away?

VN: I think that the most common myth about psychology, which I blame the media for, is that we only assess, diagnose, and treat mental health issues with patients lying on a couch or that we like to analyze individual behaviors. This aspect of psychology is only one subdiscipline within psychology (i.e., clinical psychology) when there are countless disciplines in psychology, many of which are concerned with understanding the basic nature of mind or mind and society. I would like to see people be more aware of the influence of fields in psychology that do basic research or everyday behaviors. These fields include social psychology, cultural psychology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, etc. In these fields, rather than analyzing individual minds, we are more interested in analyze aggregate behaviors under various conditions.

RM: Many readers of this journal are living in Japan but are originally from another country. As a psychologist, what advice can you provide for people trying to adjust to life in Japan?

VN: I would say just to observe and be open to new experiences. In observing the "Japanese way" be prepared to have what you take for granted be challenged in terms of what is good, natural, or normal. Although there may be time of frustrations, there are many beautiful and humbling things you can learn from living in a dramatically different culture. Japanese people can show you the beauty of subtlety, interpersonal sensitivity, social harmony, introspection, politeness, and humility, for example. The paradigm shift that comes from such an experience is something that you can incorporate into your own identity and worldview. Hopefully, this experience will be humbling, eye-opening, and empowering all at the same time.

RM: What advice do you have for Japanese people who are learning to adjust to foreigners in Japan?

VN: I would say to be aware that if foreigners are living in Japan, they are already open to new experiences to begin with and therefore they are probably more approachable than you might expect. As many foreigners may not be familiar with the common sense shared among Japanese, they may do or say things that may seem strange at times. And though you allow them to get away with it because they are foreigners, I think they would greatly appreciate anything you can teach them in terms of Japanese expectations and norms.

RM: Is bilingualism/biculturalism detrimental? What hazards should we be aware of? Benefits?

VN: That's a tough question. Based on my limited reading of this issue, I think bilingualism/biculturalism is a wonderful thing if it is fostered in the right way, or else it may lead to confusion and identity conflicts. Bilingualism, for example, can easily turn into nonligualism, where none of the languages is developed to a sufficient level of proficiency. I think parents and/or teachers (but especially parents) have to be cognizant of the context in which children are code-switching or switching cultural frames. For example, I would advise against code-mixing of languages within a sentence. Rather, I think using situations to cue code-switching or switching cultural frames is the best way to develop multiple language abilities and cultural frames proficiently. In other words, within one situation, if one can be consistently using one language or one cultural frame but also be able to switch languages or cultural frames to use them consistently in a different situation, that might help to avoid language proficiency and cultural competence issues. As for avoiding cultural identity conflicts, from a cultural psychological perspective, since humans thrive on meaning-making, a bicultural person who is socialized to internalize pride in some cultural beliefs, meanings, and practices by being part of a cultural community may experience less conflicts than a bicultural who is left in cultural limbo to figure out their own cultural identity without the support of any cultural community. Again, I am not an expert in this area, so I am just using my own experience and applying a cultural psychological perspective to make this suggestion.

RM: Most Japanese learners of English in Japan do not become bilingual. From my research, I like to say that English (through traditional Grammar-Translation methodology) becomes a manifestation within their Japanese self. Does this resonate well with your work? Please elaborate.

VN: If I understand you correctly, I think you are saying that language learning gets incorporated into one's own existing identity and cultural worldview. I think this is true, especially if language learning is not associated with an alternative cultural frame. If we just learn language through rules and grammar than language alone should not act as a cue for switching cultural frames and should simply be incorporated into existing frames, just as learning any mechanical or technical information will be. For English to be dissociated with the Japanese sense of self, I think it needs to be learned in a different cultural context and be associated with the network of associations in that alternative context.

RM: Some bilinguals/biculturals retain a more dominant side while other bilinguals/biculturals seem to have at least two distinct personalities that flip-flop with the language usage and context. Is the later borderline insane? Sounds like a split personality that we see in horror movies! Can you shed some light on this? (Some parents are afraid of this.)

VN: Code-switching and cultural frame switching is perfectly normal. We all have networks of associations in our minds that can be quite distinct from each other and each network of associations can be activated by some cue or situation in the environment. In experimental social psychology, this is called "priming." By showing a picture of an American flag to an American, for example, I can "prime" or activate

many of the associations (including attitudes, values, and behaviors) associated with patriotism. In fact, anybody can be primed to switch cultural frames in experimental situations too (see Oyserman, D., Sorensen, N., Reber, R., & Chen, S. X., 2009. Connecting and separating mindsets: Culture as situated cognition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97, 217–235). Of course, some networks of associations are more elaborate and complex than others and the more complex networks tend to be more dominant than less complex ones. For some biculturals, however, multiple networks of associations can be more or less equally elaborated and complex. In such instances, activating one or the other cultural frame can look like a distinct personality from the other, and this speaks to how complex multiple cultural networks of associations are in that person's mind.

RM: What are your current passions? Where can we find more information about your work?

VN: There are many very smart and productive cultural psychologists, and my passion is to follow their work and perhaps intuit some ideas from them for my own research. I should be updating my own personal website soon to include more recent work but for now, some of my work is available on my outdated websites (http://www.facebook.com/l/c6520Yz8prs61IRKQ8du0Zfjuow;krypton.mnsu.edu/~no_rasy) but some more recent work is available (although only in Japanese) at the journal website of the research center where I currently work (<http://www.facebook.com/l/c6520TjDXtsCHJqfTNNVvz6MLYQ;kokoro.kyoto-u.ac.jp/jp/kokoronomirai/>; see volumes 4 and volumes 5). Also keep an eye out for the special issue on the psychology of globalization in the *Journal of Social Issues*, which should be coming out later this year. I should have a paper in there with my collaborator Yukiko Uchida on shifting motivational tendencies among youth in postindustrial Japan. I am also writing a couple more papers related to this in collaboration with a sociologist for a journal. We hope to submit that to a sociology journal.

RM: What do you want to research next?

VN: I hope to extend my current work on the psychological consequences of cultural dropouts and the economic structural changes. I also want to follow up on some ideas about how East Asian religions have influenced cognitive styles and also how culture can influence how people form impressions of others in culturally divergent ways.

RM: Thank you for the wonderful interview Vinai!