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Day-to-Day Experiences of *Amae* in Japanese Romantic Relationships

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### Abstract

The cultural psychology of romantic relationships is relatively understudied. To redress this lacunae, the present study examined the Japanese concept of amae – or, the state of expecting a close other’s indulgence when one behaves inappropriately – within the day-to-day relationships of 30 Japanese undergraduate romantic couples. For two weeks, both partners completed daily diaries that assessed their amae behavior (requesting, receiving, and providing amae), relationship quality, conflict, and motivation to enhance closeness. Results revealed that amae behavior was associated with greater relationship quality and less conflict. The motivation to enhance closeness partially mediated the association of amae with relationship quality.

### Day-to-Day Experiences of *Amae* in Japanese Romantic Relationships

To engage in *amae* is “to depend and presume upon another’s love or bask in another’s indulgence” (Doi, 1992, p. 8). Long considered a fundamental aspect of Japanese folk psychology (Doi, 1973; Yamaguchi, 2004), *amae* has been described as an “indigenous Japanese concept of relatedness” (Behrens, 2004, p. 1). Many questions have been raised regarding the nature and function of *amae* in close relationships. For example, does the expression of *amae* enhance or detract from the quality of close relationships? Do men and women express *amae* differently, and does gender moderate the association of *amae* behavior with relational quality? Because little empirical research has examined these questions (Behrens, 2004), the present study was intended as a first step toward gauging the day-to-day experience of *amae* in Japanese heterosexual relationships and its implications for relationship well-being.

#### *What is Amae?*

Derived from the Japanese word for “sweet,” *amae* refers to the feelings of warmth, security, and intimacy experienced when one knows that a counterpart will provide unconditional regard. Yet *amae* is more than a feeling state – it also refers to behaviors associated with those feelings (Yamaguchi, 2004). As such, it is proposed that there are two behavioral components to *amae*: (a) an inappropriate request or behavior, and (b) a presumption that the inappropriate request or behavior will be accepted by one’s counterpart (Yamaguchi, 2004). Behavior is considered inappropriate if it violates expectations associated with one’s age, status, or role. If a relationship is close, however, the codes of appropriate social behavior are temporarily suspended (Taketomo, 1986); the behavior may be perceived by both parties as excessive, but not necessarily transgressive,

as would be the case if the relationship was less close (Niiya, Ellsworth, & Yamaguchi, 2006). Amae has been variously translated into English as playful and babyish behavior (Taketomo, 1986), as whining, sulking, and being spoiled or pampered (Johnson, 1993), and as the British slang word “mardy” (Lewis & Ozaki, 2002). These English translations, however, have negative connotations that miss its usually positive meaning in Japanese.

Amae has also been likened to dependency and attachment, although Yamaguchi (2004) has argued that these are separate constructs. For example, amae entails exerting control over one’s counterpart, whereas dependency involves relinquishing all personal control. Indeed, the amae requester actively exerts control by seeking closeness or by manipulating others (Yamaguchi, 2004), contrary to Doi’s original conceptualization of amae as passive dependency. Moreover, because amae tends to be reciprocal, emphasizing the role of the amae requester *and* provider, it better reflects interdependence rather than dependence, which tends to be unidirectional (Rothbaum, Kakinuma, Nagaoka, & Azuma, 2007). Amae is also distinguishable from the attachment bond that develops between infants and caregivers. Relative to attachment, amae tends to emerge later in childhood, it is triggered by mild stress (e.g., feeling tired) rather than by threats to one’s safety, it is associated with sadness rather than with fear, and it is related to interdependent rather than independent exploratory behavior (Rothbaum & Kakinuma, 2004). In short, neither dependency nor attachment, nor any one word in English, can capture the complexity of the Japanese term.

That amae has no language equivalent led Doi (1973) to argue that amae reflects the unique psychology of the Japanese people. This view is consistent with the genre of

*nihonjinron* – studies of Japanese culture and identity that emphasize its distinctiveness. Others have pointed out, however, that Japanese culture is neither homogeneous nor ahistorical (Gjerde, 2004), and that the Japanese language, rather than an age-old embodiment of the national psyche, did not become a standard national language until the Meiji period (1886-1912). This relatively recent historical development challenges the essentialist view that *amae* terminology and its corresponding psychology have always been present in Japanese culture. Moreover, recent research has found manifestations of *amae* in non-Japanese cultures that have no vernacular for *amae* (Niiya et al., 2006; Rothbaum et al., 2007). *Amae*, then, may be best considered a fluid cultural representation that has different meanings and salience for different people. As such, Japanese are likely to show considerable individual variation in their *amae* behavior.

#### *Motivations of Amae Requester and Provider*

*Amae* relationships are characterized by role-taking behavior – one person is the requester and the other is the provider of *amae*. In verb form, the act of requesting *amae* is called *amaeru*, and the act of providing *amae* is called *amayakasu* (Lebra, 1976). Either interactant can initiate *amae*; the person who *amayakasu* is not always the passive recipient of an *amae* request, but may actively encourage the other to *amaeru*. The requester is usually motivated by a need to feel positively regarded, understood, accepted, and intimate with the other (Rothbaum & Kakinuma, 2004), or by a desire to further one's own goals. These motives are referred to as noninstrumental and instrumental *amae*, respectively (Behrens, 2004). The provider is more likely to feel *amae* if he or she imputes a noninstrumental rather than instrumental motive from the other's *amae* request (Niiya et al., 2006). Even if the request inconveniences the provider, it may still stimulate

positive feelings in the provider if it signifies an affective, intimate, unconditional relationship between the parties. It may arouse negative feelings if the provider feels manipulated by the requester acting in his or her own instrumental self-interest rather than in the interest of the relationship (Niiya, Yamaguchi, Murakami, & Harihara, 2001).

Amae behavior may enhance relationship quality, then, when the requester and the provider are motivated by the desire to increase intimacy. Individuals with stronger intimacy goals tend to be more likely to engage in activities with their partner, to provide social support, and to perceive their partner as possessing similarly strong intimacy goals, which in turn may enhance relationship satisfaction (Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). Intimacy motivation is also associated with more positive emotion and greater cultivation of relationships through conversation (McAdams & Constantian, 1983). When intimacy goals are blocked, partners may experience more negative emotion; indeed, Japanese adults report feeling “lonely and sad” when their desire to request or provide amae is thwarted (Kim & Yamaguchi, 1995). To the extent that these negative feelings are directed at one’s partner for failing to adequately provide amae or to accept one’s indulgence, the likelihood of conflict may escalate.

#### *Amae in Romantic Relationships*

From Doi’s (1973) psychoanalytical perspective, adult amae relationships are expressions of the mother-child prototype internalized in childhood. Kim and Yamaguchi (1995) found that Japanese adults reported experiencing amae most frequently with spouses, followed by mothers and friends. Indeed, adults may behave helplessly, playfully, or coquettishly with their partners to increase intimacy (Behrens, 2004). Imagine, for example, that a wife is tired after a long day at work, and phones her

husband to ask if he will drive her home, even though she usually takes the train and it is inconvenient for him to drive so far. She knows it is an inappropriate request, but makes it regardless because she feels confident that he will oblige her out of love and devotion.

Extrapolating from research on friendships suggests that amae may be viewed positively by romantic partners because it signals that the relationship is intimate (Niiya et al., 2006), and can facilitate relationship initiation and maintenance (Kato, 1996), but little research to date has tested this hypothesis within actual relationships. Studies of adult amae tend to test participants' reactions to hypothetical vignettes instead of to real-life relationship events (Kato, 1996; Niiya et al., 2006). To the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first to use a daily diary methodology to examine the day-to-day experience of amae in real-life romantic relationships. In addition, we examined the ways that this experience may be moderated by gender.

*Gender.* Are there gender differences in adult amae behavior? Although some studies have found that women tend to express more amae in romantic relationships than men (Ohsako & Takahashi, 1994), such as requesting amae through coquettish behavior (Taketomo, 1986), others have observed that Japanese husbands request amae more often than do wives because they expect their wives to “mother” them (Lebra, 1976). Some Japanese wives may even refer to their husband as their “oldest son” because men tend to show helplessness in the domestic realm (Lebra, 1984), and request amae to foster intimacy or to manipulate their wives into doing things for them (Behrens, 2004). Similarly, Allison (1994) argued that, in heterosexual relationships, Japanese women are more likely to be the caregivers and men the care receivers, replicating the mother-son relationship from childhood. Lebra (1984, p. 267) argued that such role-taking behavior

in amae relationships sustains “an extreme gender hierarchy with male master and female servant.” Evidence of gender asymmetry in requesting and providing amae was found by Onishi and Gjerde (2002) in a sample of Japanese married couples. They found that, for securely-attached husbands, adherence to gender asymmetry was *positively* related to marital attachment and security, whereas for wives, asymmetry was *negatively* related to marital attachment and security. Thus, men appeared to reap more benefits from the gendered role-taking of amae than did women, who perhaps resented their husbands for requesting too much amae and wished to be indulged themselves. Based on these findings, we predicted in the present study that men would be more likely to request amae, whereas women would be more likely to provide amae to their partners. Moreover, we predicted that requesting and receiving amae would be more strongly associated with men’s relationship quality than with women’s, and further, that providing amae would be related to women’s *lower* relationship quality.

#### *Overview of the Present Study*

The present study explored the associations of amae behavior with relationship quality and conflict in Japanese heterosexual relationships. We also examined whether these associations were mediated by the need for intimacy, and moderated by gender. To date, no study to our knowledge has examined amae in romantic relationships by asking both partners to complete daily diaries over a period of time. The dyadic nature of this data meant that the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) could be used to examine the influence of the actor’s and the partner’s independent variables on the actor’s dependent variable (referred to as *actor* and *partner effects*, respectively). For example, the actor’s relationship quality may be a function not only of



the actor's own amae behavior (actor effect), but also of the *partner's* amae behavior (partner effect). We tested the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Actor's and partner's amae behavior will be positively associated with actor's relationship quality and negatively associated with actor's perceptions of conflict.

*Hypothesis 2:* Traditional role-taking behavior, in which the male partner is more likely to request amae, and the female partner to provide amae, will be positively associated with relationship quality for men, and negatively associated with relationship quality for women.

*Hypothesis 3:* Actor's motivation to seek intimacy will mediate the association of actor's amae behavior with actor's relationship quality and conflict.

## Method

### *Participants*

Thirty-four heterosexual dating couples were recruited from two large universities in Japan. The study was advertised through announcements in a psychology class and through an email sent to psychology students. Both partners participated in the study; each received 3000 yen as an incentive. All participants were born in Japan. Ten participants (15%) had lived outside of Japan for an average of 1.9 years; of these participants, 70% indicated that they had lived in the United States. Women and men did not significantly differ in age ( $M_s = 20.58$  and  $21.16$ , respectively;  $p = .21$ ). The average length of the participants' relationship was one year ( $SD = 1.17$ ) and ranged from 2 months to 5 years; 77% of relationships were between 3 and 12 months in length. Additionally, 77% of participants indicated that it was a dating relationship, 16%

indicated that they cohabitated with their partner, 2% were engaged, and 5% did not specify their relationship status. Finally, 23% of men and 42% of women lived with their parents,  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 2.66, p = .10$ .

### *Procedure*

This study consisted of an intake phase and a diary phase. For the intake phase, partners arrived at the laboratory together and were placed in separate rooms to complete questionnaires assessing demographic indices (the intake questionnaires also consisted of items assessing aspects of the relationship and personality styles, but these will not be discussed here). When both partners were finished, they were given oral and written instructions about the diary phase of the study. They were informed that every day for the next 14 days, beginning later that day, they would be emailed a diary record. They were asked to complete it at night and email it back to the experimenter. At the end of the two-week period, they would then receive a full debriefing and their payment.

At this point, participants were asked if they wished to proceed with the diary phase of the study. 31 couples went on to complete the diary phase of the study, but one of these couples was eliminated because one partner did not provide adequate data. To encourage participants to remain in the study, couples who agreed at the end of the intake session to complete the diary phase were asked to sign a form that indicated their commitment to finishing the study. During the diary phase, participants who did not complete a daily record that day were emailed a reminder to complete their diaries on time. Finally, participants who agreed to complete the diary phase would not receive their full payment until the end of the 14-day period. Therefore, 30 couples comprised the final sample size. The couples were told that they would receive the diary record via

email every day for 14 days. All participants indicated that they had access to email on a daily basis. Each participant was given 5 paper copies of the diary record and 5 envelopes in case they did not have access to email at any point during the diary phase and had to mail their responses. If they forgot to complete a survey one day, they were asked to skip that day rather than to complete the diary by memory the following day.

At the end of the intake session, participants were again informed that they would receive an email that day containing the diary record and were asked to reply to it before going to bed that night. They were asked to complete the diary record in private to ensure that partners did not see each others' responses, and to contact the experimenter at any time throughout the two-week diary phase if they had any questions or concerns.

Participants were given an information sheet consisting of instructions, definitions of key terms, and contact information for the experimenters. At the end of the diary phase, participants were emailed a debriefing form, and either obtained their payment directly from the third author or received it in the mail.

### *Materials*

All materials were first translated from English to Japanese. A second translator, unfamiliar with the hypotheses of the study, back-translated the materials from Japanese to English. The original and back-translated English versions were then compared, and changes were made to the Japanese materials to reduce differences while preserving cultural appropriateness in meaning.

*Demographic questions.* During the intake session, participants answered questions about their gender, age, place of birth, whether they had ever lived outside Japan (if yes, where and how long), the number of relationships lasting six months or

longer they had been involved in prior to their current relationship, length of their current relationship, the status of their current relationship (dating, cohabitating, engaged, married, or other), their parents' employment status, level of education, and marital status, and whether they were currently living with their parents.

*Diary record: Part A.* The diary record consisted of two parts. In Part A, participants were asked to describe “the last interaction you had with your partner today.” *Interactions* were defined as any verbal exchange between the participant and his or her partner that lasted 10 minutes or longer. Talking on the telephone therefore qualified as an interaction, but email, instant messaging, and text messaging did not. Moreover, activities wherein the partners were together but did not talk (e.g., sitting beside one another in class or watching a movie together) did not qualify as discrete interactions. In this section of the diary record, participants indicated the nature of the last interaction with their partner, the time that the last interaction with their partner began, the approximate length of the last interaction, and the approximate length of the *total* interaction with their partner that day. Expressions of amae in the last interaction were measured by four items, which were each rated on a 5-point Likert scale anchored with *Very little* (1) and *A great deal* (5). These questions were, “How much did you request amae from your partner?” “How much amae did your partner provide for you?” “How much did your partner request amae from you?” and “How much amae did you provide for your partner?” The variable assessing how much the partner requested amae did not significantly contribute to variance in any dependent variable over and above the other amae variables, and was therefore dropped from the following analyses. Finally, Part A assessed perceived conflict with one item (“How much conflict did you experience with

your partner?") and the motivation to seek intimacy with one item ("How much did you try to maintain or increase closeness?"). Both items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale anchored with *Very little* (1) and *A great deal* (5).

*Diary record: Part B.* In this section, participants were asked to describe "how you felt in your relationship today." If participants did not interact with their partner that day, they were instructed to skip Part A and proceed to Part B. Thus, participants were to complete at least Part B every day. Three questions asked participants how they felt in their relationship today, regardless of whether they had interacted with their partner: "How much intimacy did you experience in your relationship today?" (anchored 1 = *Very little*, 5 = *A great deal*), "How satisfied do you feel in your relationship today?" (anchored 1 = *Not at all satisfied*, 5 = *Very satisfied*), and "How committed do you feel to your relationship today?" (anchored 1 = *Not at all committed*, 5 = *Very committed*). It was explained to participants during the intake session and reiterated in the information sheet that *intimacy* referred to how emotionally close a participant felt to his or her partner; it did not have to be sexual or experienced only through conversation. Because intimacy, satisfaction, and commitment were highly related to each other ( $\alpha = .88$  and  $.86$  for women and men, respectively), we standardized each of these three variables across days and individuals, then summed them together for each day to form a single index of daily feelings of relationship quality.

## Results

### *Data Analytic Strategy*

In this hierarchically nested data set, daily diary responses were nested within person, and each person's responses were nested within dyad. As such, there were three

sources of interdependence in the data: an individual's own day-to-day responses were interdependent, such that scores on Day 1 may be related to scores on Day 2; an individual's day-to-day responses were interdependent with his or her partner's day-to-day responses, such that an individual's responses on Day 1 may be related to his or her partner's responses on Day 1; and a participant's responses on the intake scales were interdependent with his or her partner's responses on these scales (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). We used multilevel modeling to control for this interdependence, following Campbell and Kashy's (2002) procedures for using PROC MIXED in SAS. Actor and partner effects were examined for each day that both partners provided data. Gender of the participant was effect coded (1 for men, -1 for women) and all continuous variables were centered on the grand mean prior to analysis. Means and standard deviations for continuous variables across days and individuals are reported in Table 1. On the whole, there were no significant gender differences in the aggregated means, nor was there any evidence of gender asymmetry in the extent of amae requested, received, or provided when within-person and within-dyad interdependence was accounted for in a multilevel analysis. Correlations between average daily variables are presented separately for men and women in Table 2.

*Descriptive details of the interaction.* Out of a maximum of 840 observations (60 participants\*14 diary observations each), there were 425 completed records for the last interaction with one's partner (Part A), and 760 completed records of feelings about the relationship today (Part B). Of the diaries completed, then, 56% contained information on both the extent of amae experienced in the last interaction and on relationship quality that day. These observations formed the basis of most of the following regression analyses.

Details of the nature of the last interaction are described in Table 3. Female and male participants highly agreed on the nature of the last interaction,  $\chi^2(1, N = 417) = 3.51, p = .74$ . Additionally, women reported that 61% of last interactions began between 9pm – 12am, and 10% between 6-9pm, whereas men reported that 50% and 14% of last interactions began at these respective times,  $\chi^2(1, N = 415) = 5.47, p = .36$ . Women reported that 40% lasted more than 6 hours (only 10% lasted 10-30 minutes); the respective figures for men were 43% and 7%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 415) = 4.73, p = .45$ . For *total* length of all interactions that day, women reported that 50% of interactions lasted more than 6 hours, and only 8% were 10-30 minutes in total length; the respective figures for men were 48% and 6%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 411) = 5.25, p = .39$ . Overall, then, men and women did not significantly differ in their descriptive details of their last interaction.

To control for nature of the last interaction, time that the last interaction began, and length of the last interaction in the following analyses, they were dichotomized and effect coded (nature of the interaction: 1 = spent private time together, -1 = all other categories; time that the last interaction began: 1 = after 9pm, -1 = before 9pm; length of the last interaction: 1 = length of the last interaction lasted 6 hours or longer, -1 = total length lasted less than 6 hours). Length of the total interaction was not included because it was strongly correlated with length of the last interaction ( $b = .89, t(722) = 50.84, p < .0001$ ). Because more serious couples were likely to report longer interactions than less serious couples (those who cohabit, for example, may spend more than 6 hours a day together), the following regression models also controlled for status of the relationship (1 = cohabitating or engaged, -1 = dating or other) and length of the relationship. Finally, to test Hypothesis 2 – that gender asymmetry in amae behavior will differentially influence

associations with relationship quality for men and women – gender and its interactions with the amae variables were included in all models.

*Relationship quality.* Actor's and partner's *amae* variables, along with gender, interactions of gender with the amae variables, and the control variables, were entered into a multilevel model to predict actor's relationship quality. Two actor effects were significant: actor's perceptions of receiving amae ( $b = .65, t(347) = 6.01, p < .0001$ ) and providing amae ( $b = .55, t(330) = 5.91, p < .0001$ ) were associated with actor's greater relationship quality. Two partner effects were also significant: partner's amae request ( $b = .34, t(338) = 3.18, p = .002$ ), and the interaction of gender with partner's perception of receiving amae ( $b = .22, t(341) = 2.09, p = .04$ ) were positively associated with actor's relationship quality. Analysis of this interaction revealed that partner's perception of receiving amae was related to men's relationship quality ( $b = .29, t(320) = 1.95, p = .05$ ), but not to women's ( $p = .31$ ). In sum, these results support Hypothesis 1: to the extent that actors and partners engaged in various amae behaviors, actors reported enhanced relationship quality on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, these results offered no support for Hypothesis 2: there was no evidence of traditional gender asymmetry in the requesting and providing of amae, and men and women reaped equal relationship benefits from their amae behavior. Furthermore, men reported enhanced relationship quality when their partners felt that they had received amae – a partner-pleasing orientation not traditionally associated with males.

*Conflict.* To further test Hypothesis 1 – that actor's and partner's amae behavior will be associated with actor's lower perceived conflict – the same predictor variables included in the preceding analysis were entered in a multilevel model to predict actor's



perceived conflict. One actor effect was significant: actor's perceptions of receiving amae was negatively related to conflict ( $b = -.32, t(348) = 3.56, p < .001$ ). In parallel, one partner effect was significant: the interaction of gender with partner's perception of receiving amae ( $b = -.23, t(351) = 2.58, p = .01$ ). Analysis of this interaction revealed that partner's perception of receiving amae was significantly associated with men's perception of lower conflict ( $b = -.31, t(322) = 2.54, p = .01$ ) but not with women's perception of conflict ( $p = .26$ ). Overall, these results further buttress Hypothesis 1: men and women perceived less conflict when they felt that they had received amae. Again, there was no support for Hypothesis 2: rather than demonstrating traditional gender asymmetry, with women instead of men reporting lower conflict when their partners perceived receiving amae, we found the reverse. Therefore, it appears to be in men's best relationship interests – both in terms of lower conflict and higher relationship quality – to ensure that their female partners receive amae.

*Motivation to seek closeness.* According to Hypothesis 3, the need to seek closeness will mediate the association of amae behavior with relationship quality and conflict. In line with Baron and Kenny's (1986) steps for testing mediation, it was first necessary to demonstrate that the independent variable (actor's amae behavior) predicted the mediator (actor's need to maintain or increase closeness). Accordingly, the same predictor variables as in the preceding analysis were entered into a multilevel model with the need to maintain or increase closeness as the dependent variable. Actor effects for requesting amae ( $b = .16, t(350) = 2.74, p = .01$ ) and providing amae to one's partner ( $b = .28, t(337) = 5.58, p < .0001$ ) were significant. The latter effect was qualified by a significant interaction with gender ( $b = .13, t(338) = 2.58, p = .01$ ); decomposition of this

interaction revealed that providing amae to one's partner was more strongly related to men's need to increase or maintain intimacy ( $b = .41, t(273) = 5.28, p < .0001$ ) than to women's need ( $b = .15, t(327) = 2.37, p = .02$ ).

Because previous analyses established that requesting amae was not significantly related to relationship quality or conflict, this left only actor's provision of amae as a plausible independent variable in the mediational model (see Figure 1). Moreover, because providing amae was not related to conflict, only relationship quality was tested as a dependent variable. Results had already demonstrated that the independent variable (actor's provision of amae) was related to the mediator (actor's need to maintain or increase intimacy) and to the dependent variable (actor's relationship quality), therefore it remained to be tested whether the mediator was related to the dependent variable when controlling for the independent variable. As such, actor's and partner's need to maintain or increase intimacy, actor's and partner's provision of amae, gender, interactions of gender with the actor and partner effects, and the control variables were entered in a multilevel model to predict actor's relationship quality. The actor effect of need to maintain or increase intimacy was significant ( $b = .56, t(333) = 5.67, p < .0001$ ).

The final step for testing mediation demonstrated that the association of the independent variable with the dependent variable dropped from  $b = .97 (t(313) = 11.73, p < .0001)$  to  $b = .73 (t(346) = 7.99, p < .0001)$  when the mediator was included in the model (partner effects and the control variables were included as covariates in these multilevel models). The Sobel test of mediation was significant, ( $Z = 4.88, p < .0001$ ), thereby lending support to Hypothesis 3: the association of actor's provision of amae

with actor's relationship quality was partially mediated by actor's motivation to seek intimacy.

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the influence of amae in Japanese romantic relationships. Results indicated that this influence was positive: when actors and partners engaged in amae behavior, they rated their relationship quality as higher and conflict as lower than when they engaged less in such behavior. To our knowledge, this is the first study that demonstrates the positive influence of amae in the day-to-day relationship perceptions of Japanese couples. Next, we discuss the specific associations of actor's and partner's amae behavior – requesting, perceptions of receiving, and provision of amae – with relationship quality, conflict, and motivation to seek intimacy.

First, actors reported greater relationship quality when their partners requested amae, which may signal to the actor that the relationship is close. When actors themselves requested amae, they reported greater need to maintain or increase closeness, supporting claims that amae requests are often motivated by affective, non-instrumental desires to seek emotional proximity with close others (Niiya et al., 2006).

Second, whereas actor's amae request was not directly related to his or her own relationship quality or conflict, the perception that he or she had *received* amae was significantly related to both. Perceiving that one has received amae may lead one to feel unconditionally loved, indulged, cared for, and close with one's partner – feelings that are central to the concept of amae (Doi, 1973). Furthermore, men reported greater relationship quality and less conflict to the extent that their partners perceived receiving amae, suggesting that men may bask in the reflected glow of women's amae satisfaction.

It is also noteworthy that perceptions of receiving amae was the only amae variable related to perceiving less conflict. Feeling indulged may satisfy one's intimacy goals, and remove any potential for conflict with a partner who does not adequately provide amae.

Third, providing amae to one's partner was related to greater relationship quality and to the need to increase or maintain intimacy (particularly for men), suggesting that it may function as a vehicle for demonstrating one's love and devotion to one's partner. Providing amae signals that the relationship is intimate and the partner is loved unconditionally (Doi, 1973) – a point not lost on the recipient, who will likely feel happier in the relationship when provided with amae. Although providing amae usually follows from a partner's amae request, some actors may proactively offer amae to increase intimacy with a partner (Lebra, 1976). Importantly, the present findings suggested that actors provided amae to partners – even if they did not request it – at least in part to maintain or increase intimacy, which in turn was associated with greater intimacy, satisfaction, and commitment.

#### *Gender Asymmetry in Amae*

We did not find any evidence of traditional gender asymmetry in amae behavior: men were not any more likely to request and perceive receiving amae, and women were not any more likely to provide amae. Moreover, there was no evidence that requesting and receiving amae was more strongly associated with men's than with women's relationship quality, nor was providing amae associated with women's *lower* relationship quality, as found elsewhere (Onishi & Gjerde, 2002). If anything, partner effects were more strongly associated with men's relationship quality and perceptions of conflict, suggesting that women's perceptions of receiving amae had a stronger impact on men

than vice versa. Furthermore, the association of providing amae with the need to increase or maintain intimacy was stronger for men than for women. It appears, then, that the men in this sample were aware that providing their female partners with amae would bring the couple closer together, and produce relational dividends for both partners. Thus, not only was there no evidence of traditional role-taking behavior, with women more eager to please their partners than vice versa – even at the expense of women’s own need satisfaction – but the present results suggested that it was the men who were particularly attuned to their partner’s amae needs, perhaps because relationships were more intimate, satisfying, committed, and conflict-free for both partners when women felt indulged.

These results, however, may be unique to this particular sample of highly-educated, urban, young dating couples, who may be more egalitarian in their gender role behavior than older, married, or rural Japanese participants. Indeed, Lebra (1984) and Onishi and Gjerde (2002) found gender asymmetry in married couples, who may be especially prone to traditional role-taking behavior to the extent that the wife stays at home to care for children while the husband works. These studies also detected gender asymmetry through detailed interviews and a more extensive scale, in contrast to the daily diary methodology used here.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

As with any study that utilizes measures that were developed and validated in a different cultural context, it was challenging to ensure fidelity in our translations and to establish cultural equivalence in meaning. It was also problematic to rely on a few single-item measures. In particular, the daily diary item that asked participants to rate how much they tried to maintain or increase intimacy in the last interaction with their partner may

have confounded two different motivational constructs. Maintenance and attainment motives are linked to prevention- and promotion-focused concerns, respectively (Higgins, 1997). Future research would do well to examine the separate associations of maintaining and increasing intimacy with amae behavior and with relationship quality.

Although we did gauge the general context of the amae behaviors by asking participants to report the nature of the last interaction, we did not ask participants to provide qualitative descriptions of the actual amae behaviors per se. We wanted to keep the diary to a relatively short length to encourage daily completion and to reduce attrition. Such additional information, however, could shed light on the specific amae behaviors that are most associated with intimacy motivation, relationship quality, and conflict.

Furthermore, we did not include text messaging, instant messaging, or usage of social networking sites in the definition of *interaction*, even though these may be popular vehicles through which couples communicate in Japan, especially in light of the indirect communication often favored here (Lebra, 1976). On the other hand, that we limited interactions to direct exchanges, either face-to-face or (more rarely) over the telephone, allowed for the influence of nonverbal communication cues such as tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions, which may be pivotal to the expression of amae in Japanese relationships (Doi, 1973). Future research may help to determine the relative weight that modern communication technology versus traditional verbal exchanges contribute to amae behavior specifically and to relationship quality more generally, in Japanese and in other cultural contexts.

These results raise several additional questions. For one, how accurate are people at detecting a partner's amae request or provision of amae? One's partner may report

providing amae, but it is possible that one may not consciously perceive it. Alternatively, one may feel that one has received amae, even if the partner has not reported providing it. Research in the West that has used a quasi-signal detection paradigm to examine perceived partner responsiveness in relationships may be of use here (e.g., Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003). For example, it is possible that a “miss” – when an actor does not perceive receiving amae even though the partner has reported providing it – may still boost the actor’s relationship quality through the undetected influence of the partner’s responsiveness.

Future research might also devote greater attention to the motivations underlying amae behavior. Not all individuals engage in amae to the same extent (Behrens, 2004); accordingly, the link found here between amae behavior and the need to enhance closeness may reflect individual differences in the strength of intimacy goals. It may also reflect the influence of attachment styles, such that secure or anxious styles encourage amae behaviors in order to enhance emotional proximity with partners, whereas avoidant styles discourage amae in order to maintain interpersonal distance.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Overall, these findings are the first to demonstrate that feelings of amae on a day-to-day basis are associated with greater relationship quality, perceptions of less conflict, and increased motivation to enhance closeness in a romantic relationship. The concept of amae is often portrayed as unique and automatic within Japanese culture, but there is growing recognition that the cultural ideology of amae needs to be teased apart from its actual experience in the daily lives of Japanese citizens (Gjerde, 2001). Empirical studies such as the present one seek to take additional steps toward this end.

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Table 1

*Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for continuous variables across days and individuals*

	Men	Women
Amae requested	3.33 (1.35)	3.43 (1.37)
Amae received	3.51 (1.31)	3.57 (1.28)
Amae provided	3.62 (1.29)	3.38 (1.26)
Need for closeness	3.91 (1.26)	3.88 (1.15)
Perceived conflict	2.71 (1.36)	2.91 (1.37)
Intimacy	3.16 (1.36)	3.34 (1.28)
Satisfaction	3.21 (1.26)	3.22 (1.23)
Commitment	3.19 (1.36)	3.18 (1.16)

Table 2

*Correlations among men's and women's average daily amae behavior, need for closeness, conflict, and relationship quality*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Amae requested	<b>.41***</b>	.79***	.67***	.59***	-.05	.59***
2. Amae received	0.73***	<b>.40***</b>	.55***	.51***	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.64***
3. Amae provided	.65***	.67***	<b>.41***</b>	.58***	-.08	.55***
4. Need for closeness	.54***	.50***	.71***	<b>.27***</b>	-.18**	.62***
5. Conflict	-.21**	-.23***	-.09	-.11	<b>.18*</b>	-.25***
6. Relationship quality	.65***	.70***	.74***	.66***	-.33***	<b>.56***</b>

*Note.* Men's data is presented below the diagonal, and women's data is presented above the diagonal. Correlations along the diagonal are between dyad members.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

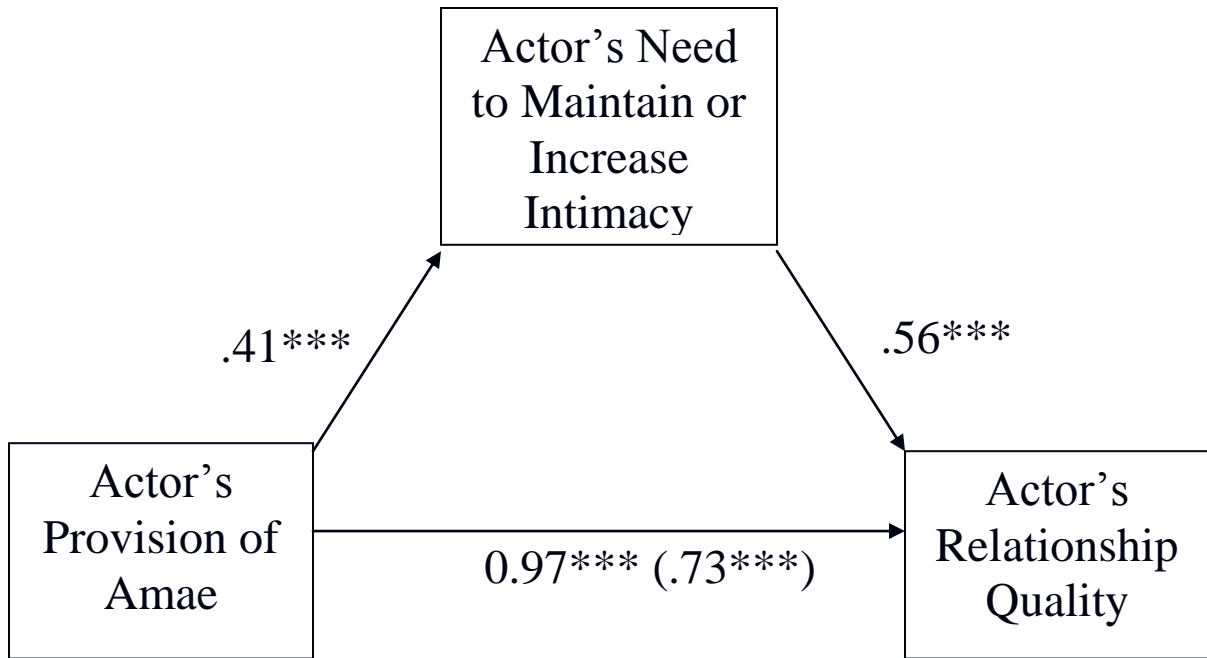
Table 3

*Descriptive information about the nature of the last interaction.*

Nature of the Interaction	Percentage of Interactions	
	Females	Males
Spending private time together at one of the partner's residences (or shared residence if partners live together)	50 %	47%
Going to a specific place together for pleasure or entertainment (restaurant, movie theatre, bar, travel, etc.)	18 %	20%
Studying, eating, or meeting together at the university campus	12 %	15%
Socializing together with friends or family	6 %	4 %
Talking on the phone	3 %	4 %
Engaging in sports or physical recreation	2 %	1 %
Other	9 %	7 %

## Figure Captions

Figure 1. *Testing actor's need to maintain or increase intimacy as a mediator of the actor effect of provision of amae on actor's relationship quality. Note: The coefficient in parentheses refers to the association between actor's provision of amae and actor's relationship quality after actor's need to maintain or increase intimacy was introduced into the model. The Sobel test indicated that the decrease in this coefficient was significant ( $Z = 4.88, p < .0001$ ).*



\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .0001$