
SOCIALIZATION

13. OBEYING RULES

I arrived at Narita Airport, the main international entry point for Japan on the outskirts of Tokyo, at two o'clock in the afternoon. While waiting for a bus to downtown Tokyo, I noticed a Japanese teacher with a group of about 40 teenage school-girls wearing white blouses and blue skirts. The teacher turned, stopped the students in the middle of the teeming airport terminal, softly made a brief announcement, and then disappeared into the crowd. The students formed five rows, dropped their bags by their feet, and stood quietly in place. Twenty minutes later, at their teacher's command, the girls melted into two columns and filed off behind him without a word to each other.

I had seen that kind of discipline in the United States—on the playing field and in the army, but not in adolescents on a field trip. In a similar situation in Nice, France, just the year before, I had watched American students either drift off in search of refreshments or stretch out on top of their luggage to catch some sorely needed sleep.

My first reaction was to conclude that the Japanese teacher had either terrified his students with some kind of threat or managed to convince them that, like God, he could see their every move even if they could not see his. Both of these assumptions were completely wrong. Japanese child-rearing practices do not condone corporal punishment, and the Japanese do not believe in an all-knowing, judgmental God figure like that which exists for Judeo-Christians. In Japan, allegiance to two, and sometimes three faiths, is common. A family might celebrate a child's maturity with a Shinto rite, a daughter's marriage in a Christian wedding, and the death of a loved one with a Buddhist funeral. As Yasuo Furuya, a Christian pastor and professor of religious studies, explained, "Japanese cannot understand why Europeans and Americans have to stick with one religion. If there are so many good religions around, why choose only one? . . . There's no god who is above all beings, no god who created the universe. . . . In Japan everything starts from man. How other people think of you, talk about you, that is more important than God."



Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Why was the writer so impressed by the behavior of the schoolgirls at the Narita Airport near Tokyo? Have you ever seen American teenagers behave like that on a field trip? If so, when and where? If not, why do you suppose not?
2. What did the writer think at first was the cause of the students' behavior? Do you think these assumptions were logical? Explain.
3. How do the Japanese view corporal punishment for children? How do American parents feel about corporal punishment for children? Where does our notion of what is the proper treatment of children come from?
4. Why is it so difficult for Americans to understand the Japanese perspective toward organized religion? How do you feel about the Japanese approach to religion?
5. What do religious beliefs have to do with obeying rules?



