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JAPN 311: Social Issues in Japan

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Minorities in California have always had to go through hurdles to have their voices heard. Being ignored or looked down upon is just one of the many challenges they have to face. The racial discrimination and stigmas attached to being Hispanic in California have made it even more difficult for those children to grow up in a healthy living environment. There are many social issues that are interwoven with racial discrimination that are found in other countries such as Japan and need to be discussed. Analysis of California cities has revealed that gang violence is prevalent in areas of low socioeconomic status with Hispanics being one of the number one offenders.

The word minority in the context of this paper itself means persons of a different race that are different from the majority. In California many would believe the minority is represented by the Hispanics and African Americans. That is only partially true, but in fact according to the latest census, more than half of Californian children are Latino and one-third of the state's population are Hispanic. Why is it then that it is still presumed that Hispanics are considered a minority? In my opinion the word minority has a negative connotation of meaning lower in rank, and most people only think of Hispanics as the farm workers or those who hold the low unwanted jobs. I believe that this is a major social issue found not just in California but worldwide. This social issue of discrimination and stigmas against persons of Mexican heritage starts when they are just children. There is a cultural domination by Anglos. It is much better nowadays, but the school system in California used to punish those who spoke Spanish at any time during school. Their cultural heritage was trying to be snuffed out by the school system. Erlanger (1979) stated that "From an early age the Chicano is bombarded with the message that his language, culture, food, and habits are inferior and should be changed to conform to those of the Anglo" (p. 239). There was the general perception that persons of Mexican heritage were

seen as not having much potential in school. Although this type of behavior no longer takes place in schools, there is still not much Hispanic heritage or culture taught in the k-12 school system. They are still underrepresented in schools. In my experience the only time I was truly taught Hispanic heritage and culture was in one of my community college classes and it was not even a mandatory class. Because no one has knowledge of the Hispanic culture or heritage, they are misunderstood by the public. Even in schools today Hispanics and others are victim of peer victimization because of their social status. According to Seaton, Neblette Jr., Cole & Prinstein (2013), "Peer victimization is defined as physical, verbal or psychological abuse that occurs in or around school when adult supervision is minimal" (p.343). This peer victimization can lead to these children becoming estranged and that is dangerous. If children become estranged from their classmates at school, who then can they identify with and talk to? These children will identify with their peer group at home; their barrio (Spanish speaking neighborhood) who can understand them on the same level.

Gangs and gang violence can be found all over the world. All you need is the right factors to have one develop. In this instance, when children become estranged from their peers at school, they will then go to those whom they trust. In most cases it will be people in their neighborhood. These children will become defensive with their turf and thus violence can occur. This is the basis of how gangs and gang violence develops in California. Because of the many gangs and gang violence found in California, many more stigmas have been attached to the race. Erlanger (1979) in his article discusses how:

Studies of Chicanos and Latin Americans [in California] have placed great emphasis on machismo, or manliness, which is reputed to be a cultural trait predisposing men to an exaggerated sense of honor, hypersensitivity, intransigence, sexual promiscuity,

callousness, and cruelty toward women, physical aggression and lack of respect for human life. (p. 237)

This statement could quite possibly be true, but at the same time the issue with it is that it lumps all of the Chicano and Latin American population in one group. What people will think is these people are all violent and should not be trusted. It is like a vicious never-ending cycle. Because of the violent acts by gangs the whole population gets a bad reputation and the stigma is passed to the new generation to start all over. I believe that there is also one other contributing factor to why gang and gang violence is still prevalent today. Children who live in gang neighborhoods are more predisposed to also joining a gang themselves. Why is this? Those children have a higher likelihood of being exposed to violence. Those neighborhoods also have a high chance of not having access to community social services and lacking in community social support. Children predisposed to violence will eventually become numb to it and not think anything of it. To help in the decline of estrangement I believe that we should give more recognition to their culture and heritage and actually teach about the history, heritage, and culture of the Hispanic people. These social issues of gangs and gang violence are not just dominant in the States. These issues are found all over the world with Japan leading with the notorious Yakuza.

The concept of individualism is found strongly in the American culture, while Japan is more of a group-oriented culture. In Japan you join clubs all through your school years, and after graduating from college you will more than likely become an office worker in a company. That company becomes your new group. You associate yourself with the company; not as an individual. For example, when you introduce yourself in Japan you would say “I work for so and so’s company” not “I work as a financial analyst”. A group identity is an important social aspect and social issue in Japan. Those people, who do not fit in the norm, the minorities, poor

and disadvantaged, and bosozoku, become the unwanted trash of society. It is the same situation as Hispanic children that become estranged. The yakuza offer themselves as a surrogate family for the unwanted. Wanting to become part of a group; those people who have nowhere else to go find support and family in the yakuza. The reason why people join gangs here in America and in Japan are the same, but that is the end of the similarities. The yakuza play a large role in the running of Japan. They will involve themselves in almost anything if it will provide some sort of benefit. They are the criminal underworld entrepreneurs getting involved in such things as:

[Seizing] control of hospitals, English schools, amusement halls, and fortune-telling parlors. They bought into real-estate, video games, trucking, waste disposal, and security services. They manufactured or distributed counterfeit Japanese stamps and bills, U.S. dollars, Cartier watches, and even brand-name food products. (Dubro, Kaplan, 2003, p. 117)

They are also involved in what you would normally associate with crime syndicates: drug dealing, illegal gambling dens, money lending, and smuggling. One large difference between the crime organization in Japan and America is their public standing. Crime organizations and gangs in the states have little or no public standing and must remain hidden from the public. The crime syndicates in Japan are public spectacles. They can call a televised press conference to talk to the people of Japan. The yakuza have a powerful control over the inner working of politics in Japan. They help specific parties get elected by funding, campaigning and supporting specific candidates. Of course the yakuza will get some type of compensation in return.

Although the yakuza are not law abiding citizens by a long stretch, they still do acts of kindness in their communities when it is needed. An example is the yakuza being one of the first organizations to help in the aftermath of the 1995 Kobe earthquake with giving out supplies that

were much needed. Because I have no firsthand experience with the yakuza, I understand that I cannot completely grasp the social issues that revolve around them in Japan, but I can get a viewpoint or perspective from one of my peers who is a foreign exchange student coming from Japan.

Through group discussions with my peers I was able to get opinions, viewpoints and perspectives of the interpretation on my view on the social issues of gangs here in California and in Japan. The one thing that my peers all universally agreed with was that the issue of gangs and gang violence is a universal social issue. Specifically, they believe that the area and social background people have contribute greatly to reasons why children and teenagers join gangs. They also all agreed that being a minority also plays a significant role in the joining of gangs, whether it is here or in Japan. Since Oscar grew up in Mexico and immigrated to California, he was able to give me firsthand knowledge of the way Hispanics and Latinos are treated in society. He greatly agreed with my statement that there is a lack of knowledge for the culture and heritage of the Mexican people. He believes that if it was taught more readily in the k-12 school system, things might be different. Some knowledge is better than no knowledge. It is better to get the knowledge from the teachers at school than from conversations of random people who may not even have the correct information. He concurred with me that in the past children would be punished for speaking Spanish in schools. He was also able to tell me that the teachers still look down on students who speak Spanish in schools. That was something that I did not know and was very eye opening. What he told me could also be a contributing factor as to why Hispanic children don't trust the schools and why they take refuge in their neighborhoods. Chyvonne agreed with me on how discrimination plays a role on estranging young children in schools, but she also had other opinions that could contribute to children's estrangement. She

believes that peer pressure is also a big contributor as to why children became estranged, and she also believes that the discrimination and peer pressure is found not just in the schools. There are also outside factors that can affect children at a young age. Through the group discussion I was able to grasp the concept of the social issues more clearly, and also my peers were able to help me in finding what some solutions to the problems of gangs and gang violence can be.

In our discussion we all came to the conclusion that the core of the situation is that all of these children just wanted to belong to something. Because Satomi is from Japan, she has a better understanding of the Yakuza than I do. She agreed wholeheartedly that Japan is more of a group-oriented society, and if you are not part of some group you become an outcast. It is the same situation in Japan, where those outcasts just want to belong to some group. In everyone's hearts they want to have some type of belonging. Judith is doing her essay on the k-12 school system, and while we were discussing her topic, I could not help but see some correlations from the issues in her paper to some of my own issues. One thing we discussed was the dropout issues for her topic. Many of those dropouts become gang members. I believe that if we could make children more comfortable in school they would be less likely to find comfort in something that is a bad influence. It is seemingly the same issue in Japan. Although I know little of the workings of the school system in Japan, I believe they need to be more opened to people who are a little different from the norm. They should make those people feel more welcome. The basis of everything starts when you are a child, so changes must at least start in the schools. I believe it is the fundamental solution to decrease gangs from starting up.

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