

BLOOD TYPE DISCRIMINATION IN JAPAN



A central tenet of much sociological thought is that the meanings objects have are imbued by humans and not inherent to the object—part of the interactionist theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 3. Similarly, in Chapter 7, we highlighted that while gender and ethnicity have biological components, the values attached to particular classes of gender and race are not a result of these but are inherently *social* constructs. As such, the ascribed meanings can and do vary across cultures.

Japanese society has attributed great social value to particular blood types. In 1930, social psychologist Tokeji Furukawa (1930) argued that particular blood types (A, B, O and AB) reflected the personalities of those who carried them—from being serious and earnest to aggressive and rude. Despite a body of research that sought to demonstrate this link – a “science” known as *ketsueki-gata* – there is substantial evidence that blood type is not linked with personality (Rogers and Glendon 2003). Nonetheless, the myth of blood type having substantive effects on personality has persisted in Japanese culture (Nuwer 2011).

Nuwer (2011) discusses the ways in which blood type permeates Japanese culture. She discusses examples of businesses, such as Mitsubishi Electronics, organising some teams by blood type because of the supposed personality traits ascribed to these, while the way subjects are taught in Japanese schools is sometimes tailored toward pupils’ blood type. The fact that women’s magazines’ horoscopes include blood type alongside the zodiac signs more familiar in the West might be an indication that many recognize the lack of scientific rigour behind the claims, but it still demonstrates how widespread the idea is. Indeed, books by non-academics that argue personality is determined by blood type continue to sell well.

However, there are pernicious components to such thinking. One of the white supremacist beliefs of the Nazis, for example, was the notion of racial purity, and this was believed to include blood type. Highlighting the absurdity of such beliefs, Charles Drew was an African American scientist who did pioneering work to advance blood transfusion techniques in the 1950s, but was not allowed himself to give blood to or receive blood from white people. And while the blood type belief system in Japan has tended to avoid this level of prejudice, Yoshino (1992) demonstrates that ideas around blood type and personality have helped consolidate a particular conceptualization of Japanese race. He

highlights how, prior to World War II, blood type theory was used to argue that the Japanese and Koreans were of different races. Yet blood type debates in more contemporary Japan are focussed more on individual character traits and not ethnic differences. Even so, Yoshino criticizes the popular discussion of blood type and personality as one that supports genetic determinism and reproduces a perception among Japanese people that they have a “racially exclusive possession of particular cultural characteristics”.

Further Reading

Rogers, M. & Glendon, A.I. (2003). Blood type and personality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34, 1099-1112.
Yoshino, K. (1992). *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry*. London: Routledge.

References

Furukawa, T. (1930). A study of temperament and blood-groups. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1(4), 494-509.
Nuwer, R. (2011). You are what you bleed: In Japan and other east Asian countries some believe blood type dictates personality. *Scientific American*, 15th February. Available online: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/you-are-what-you-bleed-in-japan-and-other-east-asian-countries-some-believe-blood-type-dictates-personality/>. Accessed 6th November 2017.
Rogers, M. & Glendon, A.I. (2003). Blood type and personality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34, 1099-1112.
Yoshino, K. (1992). *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry*. London: Routledge.