

DISCIPLESHIP AND ATTACHMENT: ROTHBAUM'S PERSPECTIVE
ON SOCIOCULTURAL NURTURING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR
DISCIPLESHIP IN INDIVIDUALISTIC WESTERN CULTURES

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Why Consider Attachment?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood the costly nature of true discipleship both intellectually and experientially. His oft-quoted statement that “Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ”¹ calls Christians to abandon programmatic discipleship in order to embrace a vital relationship with their risen Lord. Bonhoeffer described the individual’s call to follow Christ as being “summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person.”² The result of this attachment being “adherence to Christ, and because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship.”³ For Bonhoeffer, the relationship between the individual and Christ was articulated in a manner strikingly similar to that used by attachment theorists.

Far from being an individualist, Bonhoeffer also understood that a disciple’s attachment to Christ represented being grafted into community through mutual attachment to Christ. In *Life Together* Bonhoeffer commented that

What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. This is true not merely at the beginning, as though in the course of time something else were to be added to our community; it remains so for all the future and to all eternity. I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity.⁴

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 59.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 25–26.

More than half a century after Bonhoeffer's writing, Randy Frazee noted that the Church in America was far from living out theological reality as a vibrant unified community of faith. He suggested that an erosion of community resulting from pervasive individualism had infected the American church. Frazee sums up the situation with his premise "that today's church is not a community but rather a collection of individuals."⁵ A 2015 Barna Group report entitled *The State of Discipleship* provides corroboration of Frazee's suggestion, noting a distinct cultural "shift to self ... the rise of the individual as the center of everything".⁶ This shift caused the report's authors to conclude that;

If we peel back the layers, many Christians are using the Way of Jesus as a means of pursuing the Way of Self. Our discipleship efforts must prophetically respond to the "iSpirit" of the age; people must not only convert to become a disciple of Jesus but also deconvert from the religion of Self.⁷

Viewed from the perspective of attachment, American Christianity appears insecurely attached and conflicted. The question must be asked if there is a better way of understanding attachment than the perspective of American culture, and which results in a tendency for persons to overcome a self-focus and intently connect as part of a biblical community. If biblical discipleship requires biblical community, and biblical community is more generally aligned with an understanding of self and relatedness that is different than American cultural norms, then the Church must intentionally engage to assist our people to think and act along pathways more conducive to this understanding.

This article seeks to address the concerns of individualism upon discipleship as forwarded by Frazee and Barna through consideration of Rothbaum's sociocultural perspective

⁵Frazee also suggests that Americans born after World War II have never experienced any other type of society and consequently "have a hard time seeing the problem with individualism." See Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House : Willow Creek Resources, 2001), 45.

⁶This observation not only calls to question the level of attachment to Christian community, but the foundational attachment to Christ. See Barna Group, *The State of Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: The Navigators, 2015), 14.

⁷Barna Group, *The State of Discipleship*, 14.

of nurturing on the development of a person's self-concept. A brief discussion of classic attachment theory will lead into a summary of Rothbaum's perspective by describing two culturally conditioned pathways of self-concept development. A brief discussion of biblical discipleship and community will culminate in a comparison of the resulting generalized characteristics of each pathway and the character of a disciple as described in scripture. Finally, words of encouragement and practical applications for discipleship in Western individualistic cultures will be offered.

A Foundation of Nature - Classic Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, as originally articulated, suggests that the nature of the infant-caregiver relationship is of significant formative importance regarding both the development of a child's personality and the nature of future relationships in later life. Sedikides and Skowronski note that,

According to attachment theory ... the quality of infant-caregiver interactions results in mental working models ... that shape the self-concept, direct affect regulation, and organize cognition, emotion, and behavior in adolescent and adult relationships.⁸

The general acceptance of attachment theory as essential for understanding relatedness and connectedness throughout the lifespan is overwhelming. Rothbaum notes that "So compelling are the findings [of decades of attachment research] that attachment theory has reshaped developmental psychologists' understanding of what constitutes healthy relationships for humans around the world."⁹

The seminal works on attachment are found in the combined writings of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.¹⁰ Bowlby provided groundbreaking theory development in his work,

⁸Constantine Sedikides and John Skowronski, "Evolution of the Symbolic Self: Issues and Prospects," in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 605.

⁹Fred Rothbaum, Gilda Morelli, and Natalie Rusk, "Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences," in *Advances in Culture and Psychology*, ed. Michele Gelfand, Chi-yue Chiu, and Ying-yi Hong, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153-54.

¹⁰Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby, "An Ethnological Approach to Personality Development,"

Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1, Attachment.¹¹ Throughout this text, Bowlby attempted to integrate “ethology, cybernetics, information processing, developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis ... [having the effect of] revolutioniz[ing] our thinking about a child's tie to the mother and its disruption through separation, deprivation, and bereavement.”¹² He argued that such an interdisciplinary perspective was essential to more fully understand both the immediate survival needs and the long-term developmental effects upon the child.¹³ Ultimately, Bowlby was attempting to update, integrate, and supplement the work of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, the two persons most influential to his theory.¹⁴ The bias in favor of universal applicability for both evolutionary theory and psychoanalysis blended to assert the equally universal validity of attachment as described by Bowlby and Ainsworth.¹⁵

Their observations indicated that infants in a family setting begin showing deference toward their mothers as early as three months of age.¹⁶ This attachment is facilitated using

American Psychologist 46, no. 4 (April 1991): 333–41.

¹¹John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

¹²Inge Bretherton, “The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth,” *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 5 (1991): 759.

¹³Bowlby felt integrating these perspectives would “yield the most powerful models - of both the fundamental ontogenetic processes that mediate the infant's first attachment to another human being, and the essential psychobiological mechanisms by which these processes indelibly influence the development of the organism at later points of the life.” See Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*, 7.

¹⁴Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*, 7. See also Ainsworth and Bowlby, “An Ethnological Approach to Personality Development,” 766.

¹⁵Bowlby argued that “similarities [between mammals and specifically ground-dwelling primates] are equally important, and perhaps more so than their differences.” See Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*, 61–62.

¹⁶Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*, 199.

mediating behaviors¹⁷ (signaling and approach behaviors) whose purpose is to gain proximity to a mother figure (primary caregiver).¹⁸

According to Ainsworth, natural curiosity by the child results in exploration and learning, but it also produces insecurity for the child. The child will continue to explore despite this sense of insecurity if there is confidence on her part that the caregiver is available to her when necessary.¹⁹ Over time the caregiver becomes a “secure base” from which the child departs for increasing durations to explore. The caregiver also functions as a “safe haven” into which the child can return whenever she feels threatened. Repetition of this detachment-reattachment paradigm results in increasing periods of detachment which are interpreted by the caregiver as maturation.

In his second major work on attachment, *Attachment and Loss: Separation Anxiety and Anger*, Bowlby supports the notion of attachment as fundamental to personality development, writing, “Adult personality is seen as a product of an individual's interactions with key figures during all his years of immaturity, especially of his interactions with attachment figures.”²⁰

The Sway of Nurture - Sociocultural Considerations

The assumption of classic attachment theory's universality remained virtually unopposed until late in the twentieth century when Rothbaum et. al. published *The Development of Close Relationship in Japan and the United States*.²¹ In their work, the authors suggested that

¹⁷Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*, 243–44. Bowlby offers that “Crying, smiling, and babbling, and later calling and certain gestures, are all readily classifiable as social signals, and all have as a predictable outcome increased proximity of mother to child.”

¹⁸Ibid., 244ff.

¹⁹Bretherton, “The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth,” 759.

²⁰John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Separation Anxiety and Anger*, vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 208.

²¹Fred Rothbaum et al., “The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths

the pattern of attachment described by Bowlby was far from universal, and presuming such itself represented a Western cultural bias.²² Throughout their research, a contrast is drawn between Eastern and Western cultural perspectives, typified by Japan and the United States respectively.

Rothbaum recognized that those elements of attachment theory which ensure the survival of the infant were biologically predisposed and consequently universal in nature.²³ Beyond these initial elements, he suggested that cultural nuances during the earliest interactions between infant and primary caregiver (attachment figure) create differing attachment patterns which result in substantially different personalities and natures of relatedness between the two cultural perspectives.²⁴

Using the metaphors of lenses and pathways, Rothbaum described how cultural dispositions can be understood through two lenses, “one emphasizing accommodation and one emphasizing individuation—leading to distinctive paths of development.”²⁵

The Western Pathway of Individuation

Rothbaum conceded that the path of development more typical in Western cultures is generally consistent with attachment as described by Bowlby. Children experience development “characterized by a continual tug between the desire for proximity and closeness with primary

of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension,” *Child Development* 71, no. 5 (October 2000): 1121–42.

²²Far from sounding accusatory, Rothbaum recognizes the potential for any researcher to exhibit tendencies toward favoring the norms of their own cultural history, noting, “If attachment research had its origin in cultures that prioritize interdependent selves, and if those cultures enjoyed the scientific dominance that the West currently enjoys, it is possible that current theories would hypothesize that qualities like proper demeanor and accommodation, rather than autonomy and exploration, are universal consequences of security.” See Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 169.

²³These behaviors include “proximity seeking, contact maintaining, separation protest, and safe haven.” See Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 163.

²⁴Fred Rothbaum et al., “The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension,” *Child Development* 71, no. 5 (October 2000): 1122.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 1123.

attachment figures on one hand and the desire for separation and exploration of the surrounding world, including new relationships, on the other hand.”²⁶ The child must mediate the desire for relatedness through closeness and proximity and a desire for learning through separation and exploration. Caregivers encourage older children to share experiences, feelings and wants to which caregivers respond by providing the child with detailed explanations for their feelings.²⁷

Security is experienced through separation and reattachment, producing a more independent view of self, separate and distinct from others, resulting in a predisposition toward autonomy. Individuals so nurtured tend to analyze the components of their world as isolated pieces.²⁸ Social relationships tend to be “governed by instrumental goals of separated selves.”²⁹

The analytical thinking of the resultant independent self also produces a tendency to view the world through a first-person, egotistical perspective.³⁰ The act of independent personal discovery results in a disposition toward discovered truth as being equally true for everyone.³¹ In fact, the assumption is often made that “what is in their head is also in the head of others.”³² Persons in community with a Western orientation learn for their own benefit rather than for the group and are encouraged to question, explore and express skepticism.³³

²⁶Fred Rothbaum et al., “The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension,” *Child Development* 71, no. 5 (October 2000): 1123.

²⁷Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 184-5.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 179.

²⁹S Kitayama, S Duffy, and Y Uchida, “Self as Cultural Mode of Being,” in *Handbook of Cultural Psychology*, ed. S Kitayama and D Cohen (New York: Guilford Press, 2007.), 140.

³⁰Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 180.

³¹*Ibid.*, 181.

³²The Western individual, having a notion of discovered truth, thus tends to view the actions of others which are inconsistent with that truth as irrational, acting in a manner contrary to a presumed identical truth in their own minds. See Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 184.

³³*Ibid.*

The Eastern Pathway of Accommodation

By contrast, the path of connection and relatedness more typical among Eastern cultures is “characterized by a continual pull toward adapting the self to fit the needs of others.”³⁴

A decade after *The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States*, Rothbaum would reaffirm this understanding, noting “In many communities, especially in East Asia, security has more to do with continuous union (than with separations and reunions), and goals of learning have more to do with accommodation (than with exploration).”³⁵

The Eastern concept of appropriate nurturing reflects an embedded identity (interdependence) in contrast to a Western individualistic (independent) identity. Japanese caregivers promote symbiotic harmony through the indulgence of the child, producing a complete dependence upon the caregiver. The child’s needs are proactively met, often before public signaling behaviors are evident from the child. The self-identity formed within the child through embedded relatedness has lasting effects, producing the “interdependent relationships of later childhood and adulthood.”³⁶

Children nurtured in an interdependent context experience secure attachment through continuous union and are more likely to develop an interdependent concept of self. The person views themselves as fundamentally a part of the greater group, and relationships function in a manner which allows the person to adjust and respond “to social contingencies.”³⁷ The person operates “embedded in interdependent contexts,” exercising the ability and concern to respond

³⁴Rothbaum et al., “The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension,” 1123.

³⁵Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 157.

³⁶Rothbaum et al., “The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension,” 1123.

³⁷Kitayama, Duffy, and Uchida, “Self as Cultural Mode of Being,” 140.

according to relationships.³⁸ A pattern of social awareness forms, allowing individuals “to adjust or accommodate themselves to others’ expectations and to demands from the environment.”³⁹

An interdependent concept of self results in more holistic thinking and a tendency to view the world through a third-person perspective, and with the ability to adopt multiple viewpoints.⁴⁰ Learning about one’s self is mediated through others, placing a primary emphasis on understanding “what others see and know to be true.”⁴¹

Young children in interdependent communities are responsible for integrating themselves into activities, often through intergenerational modeling.⁴² Caregivers “use talk of memories to teach moral lessons, to resolve conflicts between the child and significant others, and to establish the child’s proper place in his or her social world.”⁴³

Attachment and Coping

Longevity in community is a significant component of discipleship. A person’s ability to cope with frustrations, failures, and disappointments significantly impacts the potential for transformation through long term sanctification.

While individuals may become enculturated and form secure attachments differently, the majority of individuals from both Western and Eastern cultures experience and develop according to secure attachment pathways.⁴⁴ For those securely attached, Rothbaum notes that

³⁸Kitayama, Duffy, and Uchida, “Self as Cultural Mode of Being,” 163.

³⁹Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 179.

⁴⁰Ibid., 180.

⁴¹Ibid., 181.

⁴²Ibid., 184.

⁴³Ibid., 185.

⁴⁴Insecure attachment is experienced by approximately 40% of all individuals. Only secure attachment situations are considered in this article for brevity and to ensure the broadest possible utility.

“What is common across cultures is that secure children are likely to constructively cope because of the validation they receive from attachment figures. What differs is the nature of validation.”⁴⁵

Western independent selves find reassurance from attachment figures who assure them that they are individuals of worth.

Reconnecting with a sensitive and responsive attachment figure, or an internalized representation of such a figure, affirms children’s self-esteem and efficacy, and provides the ‘emotional fuel’ – the felt security and alleviation of distress – they need to continue to explore the environment.⁴⁶

Coping solutions are discovered through exploration which changes the situation and reduces stressors in the environment, with an emphasis on changing the world to fit the individual.⁴⁷ The individual “acts independently and seeks to change the world to satisfy goals and standards desired by self.”⁴⁸

In contrast, Eastern interdependent selves find reassurance from attachment figures who assure them that they can regain or maintain relationships by correcting their behavior.⁴⁹ The cultural inclination toward learning through accommodation and holistic thinking results in “coping that is accepting of external constraints, considerate of others’ emotions, and seeks to improve self.”⁵⁰ Emphasis is placed upon changing oneself to fit the world, seeking to attain “goals and standards mandated by external forces.”⁵¹

⁴⁵Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 188.

⁴⁶Ibid., 189.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 190.

⁴⁹The term described is “saving face.” It is the role of the attachment figure to assure the individual that “saving face” is possible.

⁵⁰Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 189.

⁵¹Ibid., 190.

Change-based coping, the primary method of independent selves, is occasionally required of interdependent selves as well.⁵² In these instances, Eastern interdependence tends to produce considerations toward the larger context, others' feelings, and a willingness to wait for change to occur. This reflects the Eastern preference for acceptance-based coping by seeking emotional calm through moderating emotional extremes. Tolerance of others and seeking alternative perspective also results in greater levels of compassion for others with whom they are in community.⁵³

Biblical Discipleship and Community

At the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, He called individuals as disciples to follow Him, to attach to Him, directly and personally.⁵⁴ This call to discipleship not only marked a new relationship between Jesus and the disciple but also a new relationship interpersonally between the disciples as a small community. Jesus' intentional plan for His disciples was that they would realize a deep and abiding relationship with each other as well as with Himself.⁵⁵ This interdependent relationship was later expanded to include aspects of relatedness toward all men. Jesus, responding to a question regarding the Greatest Commandment, said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love

⁵²Rothbaum later states that independent selves tend to find themselves in situations that require exploration and analytical thinking. Conversely, interdependent selves tend to find themselves in situations that call for accommodation and holistic thinking. The implication is unclear whether these are actual necessities resulting from the overarching culture, or perceived requirements by individuals so disposed. See Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, "Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences," 192.

⁵³Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, "Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences," 192. Rothbaum defines compassion as "nonjudgement of, and empathy for, others."

⁵⁴Mt 4:18-22. This practice stands in contrast to the cultural norm that disciples sought out and petitioned their masters for permission to become one of their disciples.

⁵⁵See Jn 17. Also see Mk 10:43-45 as one example of Jesus' multifaceted instruction regarding independent and interdependent relativity.

your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.⁵⁶

Jesus' response encapsulated the appropriate context for a disciple's life; the living out of a love relationship with both God and with others.⁵⁷ Jesus gave His final instruction of mission and relatedness to His assembled disciples just prior to His ascension, stating:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.⁵⁸

Jesus' instruction to His disciples encompasses the making of disciples among all people groups, intentionally bringing them into the life of the community of faith, and comprehensively instructing them to become obedient to all Christ's teachings. Implicit in this command is an understanding that the new convert will become a disciple as Jesus envisioned: both a personal follower and a vital part of the joined community of followers. The Greek word translated as the church (ekklesia) is a gathering of the called-out ones. It is this community of faith that Paul refers to as Christ's Body.⁵⁹ "Biblical community is the life of Christ on earth today."⁶⁰ To be separated from a faith community is to be outside of Christ on this earth today, and to be outside the context of vital community to which believers are called.

⁵⁶Mt 22:37-40, ESV.

⁵⁷When asked to clarify who qualifies as a neighbor, Jesus used a parable to remove objections to considering anyone a neighbor. See Lk 10:29-37.

⁵⁸Mt 28:18b-20, ESV.

⁵⁹See Rom 12:5, 1 Cor 12:27 and Eph 4:12.

⁶⁰Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House: Willow Creek Resources, 2001), 22.

Comparing Outcomes

The scriptures are replete with expectations for both conduct and attitude which God has for His children. He has moved them from spiritual death into His life,⁶¹ and from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ.⁶² Christians are individuals whom together in community form the Body of Christ. In Paul's letter to the church at Galatia, he presents a list of attributes consistent with those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."⁶³

As a means of comparison,⁶⁴ consider Rothbaum's list of attributes of the independent self: unique, autonomous, self-asserting, promotion of individual goals, views the world through her own eyes (first person), project outward, tends toward egocentrism, confuses thoughts with objective reality, empathizes by projecting herself onto others, and seeks to change the world around them to fulfill personal goals and standards.⁶⁵

Finally, Rothbaum also lists attributes of the interdependent self: values belonging, fitting in and maintaining harmony, shows self-restraint, promotes others' goals, views the world from a third-person perspective (outside in), enters others' situations, and seeks to change herself to align with others.⁶⁶

⁶¹Eph 2:1-10.

⁶²Col 1:13.

⁶³Gal 5:22-3, ESV.

⁶⁴This encouragement for comparison is not intended to demonize either cultural orientation. Cases can be made that attributes from both lists, based on context, are explicitly or implicitly commanded or rebuked of Christians in scripture. Additionally, while individuals tend to operate predominantly within one cultural context or the other, they can also shift orientations at times according to the situation at hand.

⁶⁵Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, "Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences," 155-56.

⁶⁶Ibid., 156.

How Should We Respond

Harold Senkbeil sounded a clarion call for action before the release of Barna's *The State of Discipleship* warning that the church's adoption of expressive individualism "threatens - like a tsunami - to engulf and submerge (the church) in a sea of subjective self-interest."⁶⁷ As a prescriptive to combat this individualism, Senkbeil suggests that the Church make an intentionally and immediate return to biblical community.⁶⁸

For many churches, small group formation is considered the necessary response to individualism and the resulting lack of community. A majority of these efforts appear to end in frustration or development of something related to socialization and less than true biblical community. Barna's research indicates that the majority of Christians who express an interest in discipleship actually prefer options which afford them privacy and isolation.⁶⁹ For those who push past a predisposition toward isolationism, Stetzer and Geiger note that most do so for simple self-interest without concern for the needs of others or the group. When their self-interests are met, disconnection from the group often results.⁷⁰ Simple socialization is not an answer.

Those concerned with the Christless Christianity found within much of the modern Western church must consider the impact of the over-arching culture of Western individualism which contextualizes experiences and thinking of adherents. This cultural perspective exerts a strong yet largely unrecognized influence upon the contextual lens through which contemporary disciples understand themselves and their relatedness to others. In many instances, it may well be

⁶⁷Harold Senkbeil, "Engaging Our Culture Faithfully," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 4 (September 1, 2014): 297.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 306-11.

⁶⁹Barna Group, *The State of Discipleship*, 14.

⁷⁰Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 8.

that the lens by which discipleship is viewed is more significant upon outcomes than the actual merit of programming and opportunities themselves.

Words of Encouragement

The most hopeful aspect of these considerations is that the ultimate power of change within the Christian is not individual or cultural, but Divine.⁷¹ Paul's list of characteristic attributes in the second chapter of Galatians details the gifts of the Spirit and not the products of the individual Christian's efforts.

Those concerned with discipleship must be encouraged to grapple with the overarching culture of Western individualism. Being raised within a Western orientation and living in a Western culture causes many to assume an individualistic reality, losing sight of the sociocultural effects of nurturing. We must engage in ministries which provide opportunities to build interdependence through a culture of unity in our faith community. In so doing, we more closely embody our Savior's final prayer for us today.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.⁷²

Third, we can be encouraged and connect with people from either cultural perspective because both perspectives value aspects of connectedness. Research indicates that "the desire for close relationships is strong in the United States as well as Japan."⁷³ A cultural orientation toward individualism does not obliterate a fundamental need for community as an aspect of the *imago*

⁷¹Eph 3:20-1.

⁷²Jn 17:20-23, ESV.

⁷³Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, "Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences," 163.

Dei.⁷⁴ The God who is Himself in perpetual community created individuals who find their greatest fulfillment in relationships with Him and each other. Pushing past superficial socialization and pressing upon biblical participation (*koinonia*) is vital if the faith community is to provide enduring biblical connectedness to meet this fundamental need.

Rothbaum's critique presents Western individualism as a product of an inherently conflicted paradigm, subconsciously balancing closeness and proximity against a desire for separation and exploration.⁷⁵ Rothbaum considers these desires "complementary in that separation fosters and is fostered by closeness, but they are also 'antithetical' in that they cannot operate simultaneously."⁷⁶ Living life from a Western context results in constant internal conflict. Our people need to be taught and shown a pathway of enduring connectedness which is better than that fostered by Western individualism.

Fourth, we can be encouraged that Western individualism, or any generalized culture for that matter, is not monolithic. Local cultures have unique histories, dominant attributes, and potentiality for change. American individualism is a unique form of individualism, developed through the ruggedness required for survival in the American experiment. Emerson and Smith note that

Many American values – freedom, individualism, independence, equality of opportunity, privacy and like – derive largely from the confluence of evangelical Protestant Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy, within the context of conditions encountered in the new world.⁷⁷

⁷⁴Gn 1:26a.

⁷⁵Rothbaum presents four major hypotheses based upon the two paths, each affecting a different stage of development. In the adult stage, it is hypothesized that Western development presents itself as a trust issue which facilitates the abandoning of committed relationships. See Rothbaum et al., "The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension," 1124.

⁷⁶Rothbaum et al., "The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension," 1123.

⁷⁷Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), 2.

The individual nuances of localized culture, whether national or regional, speak to the flexibility and changeability of culture over time. Persons are not mechanistically trapped within a given cultural context of relatedness. Transformation is possible, and persons can shift their dominant cultural context. Rothbaum notes,

We believe that when most situations in a culture afford opportunities for initiating exploration and asserting the self, attachment is likely to be linked with types of learning that build on these opportunities. By contrast, when most situations in a culture require adjustment of the self and accommodating to others and to the context, attachment is likely to be linked with different types of learning. ... People construct situations and settings to fit their default orientations, and people are in turn constructed by their situations and settings.⁷⁸

The church needs to intentionally construct situations and settings which provide opportunities for contemporary disciples to make adjustments of themselves and accommodate others. A primary biblical attribute of a Christian is to assume a posture of “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”⁷⁹ The culture of individualism considers such a suggestion to be ridiculous. The church needs to model appropriate responses representing a safe place of embeddedness for those who obediently make themselves vulnerable, in opposition to the overarching culture, by assuming a posture of submission.

Considerations for Applications

Rothbaum’s implications suggest that changing a person’s cultural orientation is accomplished by placing them within a context that embodies the desired results. To encourage greater individualism and independence, a culture that encourages and validates individual thought and practice must be created. To encourage greater accommodation and interdependency, a culture that encourages and validates relationships, teams, and deference must be created.

⁷⁸Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 156.

⁷⁹Eph 5:21.

The words we use. Words have meaning, both connotative and denotative. Thoughtful communication using the terms “we”, “us”, “our”, etc. act as primers to promote relational thinking. One highly appropriate example is the confusing nature of the English word “you.” The ability to determine whether the word is intended to be understood as second person singular or second person plural is usually a function of context. Whenever the Word is heard or read in the context of a sermon or scripture the usual understanding is second person singular.⁸⁰ In fact, the overwhelming usage in the New Testament is second person plural.⁸¹ The biblical context is predominantly community oriented. Those who present the Word before faith communities should capitalize on this fact and use appropriate verbiage to communicate the corporate context and meaning of scripture whenever appropriate.⁸²

The questions we ask. Rothbaum offers one example of moving a person, even if only momentarily, into a more holistic manner of thinking through a process which he refers to as “priming their interdependent selves.”⁸³ Simply asking what an individual has in common with other members of a group (family friends, class, etc.) causes the person to think along a path more Easterly in direction. Rather than asking people to express personal thoughts and opinions, consider having them compare or contrast their thoughts with someone else’s, or express the perspective of a biblical character.

⁸⁰This is an expected response considering the Western disposition is toward understanding the world through a first-person perspective.

⁸¹Except for the gospels and the pastoral letters, all the books of the New Testament were written to groups of people, and were intended to be read aloud to the assembled community.

⁸²Having been raised in the northern US and living for almost twenty years in the southern US, this author uses the term “Y’all” whenever appropriate to communicate that the message was intended for the community of faith.

⁸³Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, “Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences,” 180.

The things we do. To develop relatedness and community requires participation in community activities that promote relatedness. Simple considerations can have a dramatic effect. For example, the manner and frequency with which we observe communion impacts relatedness and community building. Opportunities to retell the meaning of communion and baptism, within the context of community, strengthens community.⁸⁴ Worship and singing which allows for persons to hear one another's voices and join or harmonize further promote community and relatedness. Rothbaum also suggests that memorization, repetition, and related activities are effective means of promoting accommodation.⁸⁵

The purposes of our groups. Sometimes the primary purpose of a small group needs to be building connectedness. The push to accomplish goals, disseminate information, and establish meeting timelines are very Western imperatives. Empower group leaders to meet with their groups for the primary (and dare we say exclusive) purpose of building relatedness and community.⁸⁶ Teaching opportunities should engage group activities and interactivity, focusing on relational and affective rather than exclusively cognitive objectives.

Conclusion

While the thesis of this article suggests that Rothbaum's sociocultural perspectives have implications for discipleship through community for Western cultures, the implications, in fact, extend to all cultures. Rothbaum's perspective suggests that cultural practices produce persons which personify cultural values, and that cultural values in return inform cultural practice which perpetuates cultural values. By using the examples of Japanese and American

⁸⁴It is noteworthy that the words translated "you might eat" and "you proclaim" in 1 Corinthians 11:26 are both second person plural verbs.

⁸⁵Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, "Attachment, Learning, and Coping - The Interplay of Cultural Similarities and Differences," 186.

⁸⁶This author has found it helpful to ask event organizers and group leaders to clearly articulate the purpose of their events, and quickly add that it is OK to meet to have fun. The ultimate end is not fun. Fun builds connectedness and community, community enables discipleship, and appropriate discipleship is an obedient response to the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission.

cultures, Rothbaum demonstrates that an early cultural differentiation in the pathway of development results in persons (and by extension organizations and groups) which have very different understandings of the nature of self and relatedness toward others.

The Western church has a missional responsibility to provide believers with both opportunities and context for living counter-culturally as a united community in the middle of a culture of individualism. By fully living out the attachment we have with Christ and with each other through Christ, the church can return to her declarative and redemptive ministry as the body of Christ on earth today.

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