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CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: JAPANESE SOCIETY

Groups: Inside/Outside

Japanese often think of themselves as a homogeneous society, with a strong sense of group and national identity and little or no ethnic or racial diversity. But such differences exist in Japan, as in all societies, as Harvard University professors Theodore Bestor and Helen Hardacre explain in this video series. Rather, what is perhaps most unique about Japanese society is its highly structured approach to managing and resolving these differences.

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Theodore Bestor :: Another important aspect of the way in which social relationships are structured in sort of the day-to-day interactions of people in Japan, is a strong consciousness of in-group versus outside-the-group boundaries. And this gets expressed in all kinds of settings.

Students are very conscious of the school they go to and the class within the school that they're part of, and that forms sort of a shell, a social shell, that people who are within the shell are expected to interact with one another rather informally and rather intensely, and interact with people outside that shell, or outside that boundary, in a more formal, more distant, perhaps more hierarchical way.

So at schools, in families, there's a clear distinction between who's a member of a family and who's not; in communities, there are clear distinctions between people who belong to the community and people who are outsiders; in companies, a very clear sense of division; in political parties; even in ethnic relations, relationships for example between Japanese and Koreans who live in Japan, the sense of insider versus outsider status.

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