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ABSTRACT

It has been documented that at the age of 20, Japanese women have not yet discovered the realities of the adult world. With the end of high growth in the Japanese economy, women of Japan have to face a new challenge. They frequently have to be not only a homemaker but also a breadwinner. Life course is a pathway along which people live, and life course plans are important to successfully choose occupational careers. A study analyzed and synthesized Japanese women's life course plans from essays written by 69 junior college students. A typical woman of this sample would like to marry in her 20s and combine work and home. She would also like to achieve a sense of self worth, earning her own income. Findings, however, are consistent with the notion that women have been historically identified with the domestic domain of home and family. In future research, triangulation might be beneficial for a better understanding of contemporary Japanese adult women's life course plans and aspirations. (Contains a table and 23 references.) (BT)

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Contemporary Portraits of Japanese Adult Women:
Life Course Plans and Junior Colleges

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Contemporary Portraits of Japanese Adult Women: Life Course Plans and Junior Colleges

Abstract

It has been documented that at the age of 20, Japanese women have not yet discovered the realities of the adult world. With the end of high growth in the Japanese economy, women of Japan have to face a new challenge. They frequently have to be not only a homemaker but also a breadwinner. Life course is a pathway along which people live, and life course plans are important to successfully choose occupational careers. The purpose of this study was to analyze and synthesize Japanese women's life course plans from essays written by junior college students. A typical woman of this sample would like to marry in her 20s and combine work and home. She also would like to achieve a sense of self-worth, earning her own income. The findings, however, are consistent with the notion that women have been historically identified with the domestic domain of home and family. Findings and their implications were discussed.

Contemporary Portraits of Japanese Adult Women: Life Course Plans and Junior Colleges

The number of female students in Japanese institutions of higher learning is increasing, as noted by Imada (1998), especially as the transition from elite to mass higher education in Japan. The United States has higher participation rates for women than for men in higher learning and women are more likely than men to complete bachelor's degrees (Bank, 1995). Furthermore, educational aspirations of American women have changed with dramatic increases in the number of women aspiring to graduate degrees (Adelman, 1992; Roos & Jones, 1993). In Japan, the majority of women go to two-year institutions of higher education, whereas more than 90% of college men go to four-year institutions (Teichler, 1997). The junior college system of Japan absorbs 21% of all post-secondary enrollment and is predominately for women (Hayhoe, 1995). Graduate education in Japan has been undertaken on a very small scale, and graduate schools are currently being expanded, principally in the national universities (Arimoto, 1997).

Historically, persistent vestiges of a Confucian norm requiring that a woman obey her father, husband, and son have created particular difficulties for women in East Asia, especially in Japan (Hayhoe, 1995). Generally speaking, American women are more career-oriented, while Japanese women are more home-oriented. This tendency of Japanese women has not changed greatly even after getting a college education. Of 735 Japanese undergraduate women, who answered a survey questionnaire on occupational and status aspirations, 529 (72%) said that they were willing, even eager, to quit their full-time job when they got married, or had a child (Inoue, 1991). In reality, it would be extremely difficult for women to be re-employed on a full-time basis once they left their job to rear their family. American women, who have a desire for both family and career, tend not to give up either one of them. By contrast, Japanese women, who have a desire for both family and career, tend to give up one of them.

Review of the Literature

Educational and Social Aspiration

Throughout American social history, one of the strongest beliefs has been that the more education people have, the better their chances for economic and occupational attainment are. The educational structure in the United States is so closely intertwined with the occupational structure that it is almost impossible to discuss one without discussing the other (Woelfel, cited in Inoue, 1999). The direct correlation between educational attainment (the higher the degree attained by the person) and labor outcome (the greater the person's earning and occupational status and prestige) has been established (Hadden, 1996; Robles, 1997). People go to college because they wish to improve their occupational status and social status eventually. It should be further emphasized that aspiration, or ambition, is not necessarily a determinant of the future attainment but is potentially useful for the following major reasons (Gottfredson & Becker, cited in Rojewski, 1996): 1) academic and social status aspirations of adolescents and young adults tend to represent the orientation to their particular educational and occupational attainment; 2) educational aspirations of adolescents and young adults on occupational aspiration tend to have direct bearing on their eventual occupational attainment; and 3) academic and social status aspirations of adolescents and young adults tend to play an active and important role in determining whether they pursue or ignore educational opportunities available to them.

Equal Opportunity Law and Occupational Career

Although Japan is well known as a technologically advanced industrial country, it is not a land that follows the Law of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment. This Japanese law did not come into force until 1986 and still has not yet had a great effect on the situations of working women. The Law was revised in 1997 and finally, more

than ten years later, the legislation that met the international standards was established. The revised law prohibits discrimination at all stages of the employment management process and practice, from recruitment, employment until retirement. There are fundamental differences between the law of equal opportunity in America and Japan. The U.S. law covers not only discrimination against women but also discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin. The Japanese law covers only women; and, as regards the way of expressing the articles of the law, the U.S. law is more detailed and easier to comprehend, whereas the Japanese law is rather ambiguous. In recent years, more and more Japanese women have begun working in the business world, yet most are secretaries, clerical workers, and sales women.

A woman's occupational career is a series of occupations that she experiences through life. The most outstanding feature of female occupational careers is that such careers are influenced strongly by life events, such as marriage, childbirth, and child rearing (NIEVR, 1989). For women, being single and employed is quite distinct from being a mother of three children and employed (Liao, 1995). Such events also affect the occupational careers of male workers, but females are more likely than males to lose promotions because of marriage and childbirth that play the role of an important motive. The interaction between occupational careers and life events, as noted by NIEVR (1989), is not peculiar to women. This is because the problems of female occupational careers are centered on entrance to and retirement from the labor market and those transfers and other occupational changes are strongly influenced by life events.

Method

The concept of life course, or a pathway, along which a life is lived, is currently attracting much attention. Aforementioned personal events (such as graduation from school, occupation and career goals, marriage, and childbirth) are important factors in a life course. The purpose of

this study was to analyze and synthesize contemporary Japanese women's life course plans from essays written by Tokiwa Junior College students (N = 69), with the focus on women's occupational aspiration and gender awareness in a context of the distinct Japanese culture.

Tokiwa Junior College is located in Mito, which is the present administrative capital of Ibaraki prefecture. The College, consisting of four departments (liberal arts, management information, early childhood education, and science of living), gives emphasis to a practical education to become such specialists as librarians, dieticians, nurses, and kindergarten teachers. The women in this sample were assumed to be between the ages of 18 and 20 and this is normal age of Japanese students in a liberal arts program. One professor of the College agreed to serve as a contact person and collected these essays from his class during the spring semester of 2000.

Findings and Discussion

Occupational Aspiration and Life Course Plans

Basically the women of the sample mentioned four categories of occupations in their 800-word essay: secretary, librarian, teacher, and other (such as social worker, photographer, and computer processing job). One feature of Tokiwa Junior College is that students are able to acquire three kinds of certificates (that is, librarian, data processing, and advanced secretarial work), and many are planning to obtain these certificates. The women's occupational aspirations for this sample are reflected in the major they choose for study. As seen in Table 1, the most frequently occurring occupational category was "librarian" (n = 21, or 30%), and the second one was "secretary" (n = 15, or 22%). A woman stated:

I do want to work at the children's library. In a psychology course, I have learned that a person's character or personality is formed in childhood, specifically by the age of three.

It scares me a lot. I would like to encourage children to read and help them to encounter many good books in their early stages of life. That is why I want to become a librarian.

Another woman described her view:

People think that the task of a secretary or a clerk is not important. People also think that secretarial work is extremely boring. I don't think so. I am going to get an "advanced secretarial certificate" at this college and then I will work for a government agency as a secretary. This is my plan. Preparing a meeting agenda, processing a slip, and coping with visitors, for example, seem to be important. I believe that the successful function of the company very much depends on these secretarial work and skills.

Nevertheless, 20 of the 69 women (29%) said that they "have no idea what kind of occupation to pursue," supporting the observation by Board (1988): "At the age of 20, Japanese women have not yet discovered the realities of the adult world and respond only to a vague conception of what they are and should be" (p. 5). Women are still waiting for something external to transform their lives (Dowling, 1982). This results in a fear of independence called the Cinderella complex. In Japan, women have no real power in the male-oriented society but are relatively free of the pressures that men endure. Women seem to be quite content to remain economically dependent on, and subservient to, their spouses, as described by a woman:

I have no idea what kind of job is good for me. I really want to know what kind of job I should have. Honestly, I do not know. I want to marry as soon as possible instead. They say that work and marriage are the most important things in life. Marriage is most important to me. To become a wife and a mother is my dream. This is the happiest thing for women, I think. Also, if I have a husband, I do not have to work.

Another woman explains,

Life course plans? I am only 18 years old. Honestly speaking, I have never thought of that. But I have learned that a college education should be a "space" and "time" for us students to find out who we are and where we are going. That is why I am here in this college. With this essay as a momentum, I will begin to think about my life course plans.

American college women tend to be more mature than their Japanese counterparts. But career-minded women are increasing in Japan and colleges and universities are likely to change their curriculums to accommodate the needs for more career-oriented courses on management, business, and information sciences (Matsui, 1995). Furthermore, Japanese institutions of higher education have to provide females with a curriculum, which links more directly to the labor market because of the severe shortage of young workers that is now forcing business firms to treat female college graduates as part of the regular work force (Arimoto, 1997).

The majority of the women ($n = 47$, or 68%) said that they "would not quit their full-time job, even though they got married, or had a child." This finding, perhaps, is an indication of the increase of Japanese women who would like to pursue occupational careers (not just working for living), even though there is still the great pressure to marry and to fulfill social obligations as a wife and a mother. At the same time, this finding may be an indication that one income is not enough to maintain a household as the high growth in the Japanese economy is diminishing. Several women in this sample stated that combining their full-time jobs and household chores would be very difficult for them, even though the Law of Equal Opportunity opened career opportunities to Japanese women and the government declared its intention to realize a society of equality and cooperation between men and women. A woman indicated:

I want to have a child, if possible, two, but I am afraid. Because I know it will be extremely difficult for me to maintain work and family. I do hope that the government will take action

to improve the situation of working women. The advancement of the childcare-leave system for women, and the enhancement of public nurseries and nursing homes are the most urgent matters on the agenda of the government.

Delaat (1999) has argued that although most undergraduate men and women seem to believe that gender discrimination at the workplace and its causes are things of the past and that gender inequality has been solved, there is substantial evidence that women continue to lag behind their male counterparts in the workplace of today. Many women in this sample, more or less, touched upon gender discrimination at the workplace in Japan. These women also said that for women's continuing achievement at the workplace, the determinate factor was men's understanding and cooperation at home and at work. This reflects the finding by Bianchi (1996) that American women of the late 1990s continue to perform more household tasks than men, balancing care giving and bread earning roles. A cross-sectional research by Knoke and Ishio (1998) found that the women's job training disadvantages widened after controlling for theoretically important human capital, occupational, industrial, organizational, and family-stage variables, and they concluded that the gender gap in company job training remains far more robust and tenacious. Similarly, a woman said:

I can tell that gender discrimination exists in all of the following stages of the employment management process: recruitment and selection, placement, promotion, wages, job content, training and education, and retirement. In particular, I think that the area of training and education at the workplace is significantly different between male and female workers.

This influences women's opportunities for promotion.

People work, according to Lefrançois (1999), for economical (making a living), social (interaction with others), and psychological (self-esteem) purposes. It seems that the women in

this sample are willing to achieve a sense of self-worth, or self-satisfaction, through working and earning their own income. This supports the theorized notion by Ryker (cited in Dio, 1996) that female college students tend to place a higher value on equality and self-respect, whereas male college students tend to place a higher value on a comfortable life and social recognition. As maintained by Dio (1996), these gender differences may reflect the differential socialization of men and women in western industrialized societies where men have traditionally been the breadwinners and women have traditionally been the caregivers.

It was not surprising but 18 of the 69 women (26%) said that they "would like to quit their full-time job when they got married, or had a child (and to be re-employed when the child entered an elementary school, for instance)." These essays reveal that time has changed the situation in Japan and the view that a woman's place is her kitchen is becoming a historical relic. The trend that "female workers are expected to quit and marry after working a few years" (Amano, 1997, p. 227) is also becoming a historical relic. These essays, nevertheless, reflect the fact that women have been historically identified with the domestic domain of home and family. Two types of life course plans are common for the women of this study. 1) finish college, work full time, get married, and have a child but do not quit the job; and 2) finish college, work full time, get married, have a child, then quit the job and find a job later on. The majority (n = 52, or 75%) of this sample said that they "would like to get married in their 20s"; specifically, early 20s (n = 13, or 19%), mid 20s (n = 18, or 26%), and late 20s (n = 21, or 30%).

Junior Colleges and Japanese Women

College experience is a lengthy, often fragmented process that occurs at various stages in an American individual's life. Japanese people usually go on to college soon after finishing high school. What is the purpose of a college education in America society? The earliest education

leaders were clear in their preference that colleges were meant to be schools for the highest vocations. Many advocate that a college education should provide students with vocational training, whereas many give higher priority to other goals, such as the intellectual or personal development of students. College education should be the process toward achieving identity and actualizing potentiality, as emphasized in Erikson's theory of development (Lefrançois, 1999); thus college education should be a stage of pulling up old roots and setting down new ones.

Two-year institutions of high learning (sometimes called "technical colleges," "vocational colleges," or "community colleges") offer instruction to meet the needs of the sponsoring community. It does appear that college experience at Tokiwa Junior Collage is an opportunity for students to explore the fields of knowledge, which will be relevant to them and which will enhance their potential for a better vocational opportunity. Certainly, this college is meant to be a school for vocational preparation for women especially. A woman noted:

I have chosen Tokiwa Junior College because employment opportunities for graduates of this college are fairly favorable. Furthermore, a four-year education is too long for me.

Junior college is just perfect. I can enjoy campus life and get skills for my job.

As the cost of American education rises, less developed countries have become increasingly aware that they can fill their needs for technically qualified students thorough shorter programs offered in American community colleges. Today, two-year colleges in the United States have become more international in both population and program. In Japan, two-year colleges have historically gratified the needs of education for women. Surprisingly enough, 64 of the women (93%) did not mention their desire for higher education beyond junior college, reflecting the realities of Japan that men pursue a bachelor's degree, whereas women pursue an associate degree. Only three women noted their continuing educational aspirations: "I am going to transfer

to a four-year university," "I am planning to pursue a graduate degree, at least a master's degree," and "I want to study abroad after finishing this college." The remaining two women said they would go to technical training schools (art school, and English school, respectively).

Summary and Conclusion

Life course is a pathway along which people live, and life course plans are important to choose occupational careers successfully. Overall, the women in this sample are content with a junior college education. This is because junior college is suitable for the Japanese women's life course plans. They want to finish college and then marry and raise family in their 20s, if possible in their early or mid 20s. This is also because they are able to get a certificate to work (at a public library, for instance) which, in turn, gives them a stable income. The women in this sample know that graduates of junior colleges are in great demand. Japanese companies traditionally prefer to hire young adults and this is especially true for young women. The essays of women revealed that Japan's economy was restructured from a manufacture-based economy to a technology and information based economy. The women of the sample live in a post-industrial society, and many of them desire for a certificate of data processing for computer technology.

A typical woman of the study would like to combine work and home. She also would like to achieve a sense of self-worth through working outside home and earning her own income. It does appear, however, that the findings are consistent with the notion that women have been historically identified with the domestic domain of home and family. Further research is necessary to expand upon the findings of this study. Triangulation (using multiple sources of data, such as observation and interview) might be beneficial for a better understanding of contemporary Japanese adult women's life course plans and aspirations from educational, social, and psychosocial perspectives in women's lifespan theories eventually.

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Table 1. Frequency and Percentage for Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Marriage (N = 69)

	Frequency	Percentage
Occupation		
Secretary	15	21.7
Librarian	21	30.4
Teacher	3	4.3
Other	10	14.5
Do not know	20	29.0
Education		
Associate degree	64	92.8
Bachelor's degree or beyond	3	4.3
Technical training school	2	2.9
Marriage		
Early 20s	13	18.8
Mid 20s	18	26.1
Late 20s	21	30.4
After 30	2	2.9
Not stated	15	21.7



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