

**Vocational Aspirations and Japanese Women:
The Case of a Junior College**

Yukiko Inoue, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Educational Research
College of Professional Studies
UNIVERSITY OF GUAM
UOG Station, Mangilao, Guam 96923 USA
Phone: 1-671-735-2447 • Fax: 1-671-734-3651
E-mail: yinoue@uog.edu

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Abstract

With the end of high growth in the Japanese economy, the women of Japan face a new challenge. Many of them have to be breadwinners as well as homemakers. The purpose of this study was to analyze and to synthesize the life course plans of contemporary Japanese women 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 would also like to achieve a sense of self-worth through working outside home and earning her own income. Findings and their implications, including the educational importance of the present study, are discussed.

Although the number of female students in Japanese institutions of higher learning is increasing (Imada, 1998), the majority of women who undertake higher education go to two-year institutions of higher education but more than 90% of college men go to four-year institutions in Japan (Teichler, 1997). The junior college system of Japan absorbs 21% of all postsecondary enrolment and is predominantly for women (Hayhoe, 1995). Starobin (2002) notes:

Japanese junior colleges have long been perceived by Japanese society as preparatory institutions for young women pursuing marriage. Under influences of American higher education systems during the immediate post-World War II era, Japanese junior colleges have successfully attracted eighteen-year-old females and provided them with a terminal liberal arts education.... During the past four decades, the percentage of female students enrolment in junior colleges has consistently been above 90%. The popularity of junior colleges has continued to surge among the increasing numbers of high school female graduates (p. 493 & p. 496).

Historically, persistent vestiges of the Confucian norm that requires a woman to obey her father, husband, and son have created particular difficulties for women in East Asia, especially in Japan (Hayhoe, 1995). With this norm, the mission of Japanese junior colleges was to provide two-year ‘general education’ for women pursuing successful marriage (Starobin, 2002): “general education for women was aimed not at internalising universal values, but rather at obtaining knowledge and attitudes pertinent to the gender roles assigned to women” (Amano, 1997, p. 217). It should be noted, however, that before the Japan’s educational reform of 1945, Japanese teachers were encouraged to abandon their Confucian teaching styles and to adopt Western teaching methods; Japanese junior colleges, in recent years, have earned a reputation over special training colleges that focused on vocational education and employment (Starobin, 2002).

The Japanese law with respect to equal opportunity did not come into force until 1986, and it has still not had a great effect on the situation of working women. The 1986 law was revised in 1997: thus more than ten years after the initial legislation had been introduced, Japan finally had equal opportunity law that meets international standards in this field (Hamaguchi, 2003). The revised law prohibits discrimination at all stages of employment management and practice—from recruitment, through employment, until retirement. There are fundamental differences between American and Japanese equal opportunity laws. In addition to its provisions regarding discrimination against women, the U.S. law also has provisions regarding discrimination based on race, color, religion, and national origin: the Japanese law covers only women (Hamaguchi, 2003).

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). Being single and employed is quite different from being a mother of three children and employed

(Liao, 1995). Life events also affect the occupational careers of male workers, but females are more likely than males to lose promotion as a result of such events (NIEVR, 1989). The problems of female occupational careers are centered on entrance to, and retirement from, the labor market, and these transfers (and other occupational changes) are strongly influenced by major life events such as marriage and childbirth. In addition, “The lifetime employment system in Japan is largely confined to men. Most female workers are in tenuous positions and they quit their job when they get married or at most when they have their first baby” (Habu, 2000, p. 56).

Method

The purpose of the present study was to analyze and to synthesize the life course plans of contemporary Japanese women from 800-word essays written by Tokiwa Junior College female students (N = 69), who enrolled in the Communication and Human Relations course during the spring semester of 2002. This study focused on women’s occupational aspiration and gender awareness in the context of the distinct culture of Japan. Tokiwa Junior College is located in Mito, which is the administrative capital of Ibaraki prefecture in Japan. The college consists of four departments (i.e., liberal arts, management information, early childhood education, and science of living), and has an emphasis on practical education with a view to producing professionals (such as librarians, dieticians, nurses, and kindergarten teachers). The women in this sample were between the ages of 18 and 20 (the common average age of Japanese students in a liberal arts program). One of the faculty members at Tokiwa Junior College collected the essays from the faculty’s classes, and this essay assignment was part of the career guidance and counselling for female students.

Findings and Discussion

The occupations mentioned by the women in their essays were categorised as follows—secretary, librarian, teacher, and ‘other’ (such as social worker, photographer, and computer processor). Students at Tokiwa Junior College are able to acquire three kinds of certificates (i.e., librarian, data processing, and advanced secretarial work). The women's occupational aspirations for this sample are reflected in the major they choose for study.

Table 1. Educational, occupational, and marriage aspirations

	Frequency (N = 69)	Percentage
Education		
Associate degree	64	92.8
Bachelor's degree or beyond	3	4.3
Technical training school	2	2.9
Occupation		
Secretary	15	21.7
Librarian	21	30.4
Teacher	3	4.3
Other	10	14.5
Do not know	20	29.0
Marriage		
Early 20s	13	18.8
Mid 20s	18	26.1
Late 20s	21	30.4
After 30s	2	2.9
No answer	15	21.7

Occupational aspiration and life course plans

As can be seen in Table 1, the most frequently occurring occupational category was “librarian” (n = 21, or 30%), and the second most frequent was “secretary” (n = 15, or 22%).

One woman stated:

I 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. 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 in the following terms:

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, I believe that the successful function of the company very much depends on these secretarial work skills.

The majority of the women in the present study ($n = 47$, or 68%) said that they “would not quit their full-time job, even though they became married, or had a child.” This finding is likely to be a reflection of the increase in the number of Japanese women who would like to pursue occupational careers, even though there is still great pressure to marry and to fulfill social obligations as a wife and a mother. This finding might also be an indication that one income is not enough to maintain a household as high growth in the Japanese economy diminishes. The women of Japan face a new challenge. Many of them have to be breadwinners as well as homemakers.

Several women in this sample stated that combining their full-time jobs and household chores would be very difficult for them, even though the recent amendments to the equal opportunity laws had opened career opportunities to Japanese women, and even though the government had declared its intention to realize a society of equality and cooperation between men and women. In this context, one woman observed:

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 hope that the government will take action to improve the situation of working women. I think 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 in the workplace is a thing 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 touched upon gender discrimination in the workplace in Japan. These women said that the determining factor for women's achievement in the workplace continued to be the understanding and cooperation of men at home and at work. This reflects the finding by Bianchi (1996) that American women in the late 1990s continued to perform more household tasks than men while balancing care-giving and 'bread-earning' roles. Cross-sectional research by Knoke and Ishio (1998) found that women's disadvantages in job training increased after controlling for the theoretically important variables of human capital, occupation, industry, organization, and family-stage. They concluded that the gender gap in company job training remains robust and tenacious.

In this context, a woman in the present study observed:

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.

According to Lefrançois (1999), people work for various reasons—including economic (making a living), social (interaction with others), and psychological (self-esteem). The women in the present sample were primarily attempting to achieve a sense of self-worth, or self-satisfaction, through working and earning their own income. This supports the notion of Ryker (1992) 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 might reflect the differential socialization of men and women in Western industrialized societies in which men have traditionally been the breadwinners and women have traditionally been the caregivers.

Of the 69 women, 18 (26%) said that they “would like to quit their full-time job when they became married, or had a child (and to be re-employed when the child entered an elementary school, for instance).” This supports Habu (2000)’s notion that Japanese female workers quit their job when they get married or when they have their first child. Yet, as stated earlier, the majority of the women in this study said that they “would not quit their full-time job, even though they became married, or had a child.” Therefore, these essays also reveal that time has changed the situation in Japan and the view that a woman’s place is in 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 similarly becoming a historical relic.

Nevertheless, these essays reflect the fact that women have been historically identified with the domestic domain of home and family, that is, “career for men and marriage for women” (Amano, 1997, 217). Two types of life course plans were common in the women studied here:

- finish college, work full time, become married, have a child, but do not quit the job; or
- finish college, work full time, become married, have a child, and 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 become married in their 20s” (see Table 1). Specifically, the breakdown in results was as follows:

- become married in early 20s (n = 13, or 19%);
- become married in mid 20s (n = 18, or 26%); and
- become married in late 20s (n = 21, or 30%).

Junior colleges and Japanese young women

Tokiwa Junior Collage is designed to be a school for the vocational preparation of women in particular. It does appear that college experience at this institution is an opportunity for students to explore the fields of knowledge and abilities that will be relevant to enhancing their potential for a better vocational opportunity, as one 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.

Starobin (2002) maintains that Japanese junior colleges have historically gratified the needs of education for women, providing the following distinctive incentives: geographical convenience (most junior colleges are located in small communities, whereas universities are concentrated in urban areas); and appropriate length of study (two years of postsecondary education is perfect duration for young women before seeking marriage and employment). Of the women in this study, 64 (93%) did not mention any desire for higher education beyond junior college (see Table 1). This reflects the realities of life in Japan in which men pursue a bachelor's degree, whereas women pursue an associate degree. However, "It became evident that a high demand for four-year university degrees among Japanese women could not be ignored by Junior college" (Starobin, 2002, p. 498). In the present study, only three women reported ongoing 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.

I want to study abroad after finishing this college.

The remaining two women said that they would go to technical training schools (art school and English school, respectively).

Summary and conclusion

A typical woman of this study would like to combine work and home. She would also like to achieve a sense of self-worth through working outside home and earning her own income. However, the findings are also consistent with the traditional notion that has seen women historically identified with the domestic domain of home and family.

Overall, the women in this sample were content with their junior college education. Junior college is clearly suitable for the chosen life course plans of the women in this study. They want to finish college and then marry and raise a family in their 20s—preferably in their early or mid 20s. Junior colleges of this type enable them to obtain a certificate to work in their chosen areas (in a public library, for example), which, in turn, gives them a stable income.

Further research is required to expand upon the findings of this study. Interviewing and ethnographic research might be beneficial for a better understanding of contemporary Japanese young women's life course plans and the function of junior colleges. Such studies could variously adopt educational, social, and psychosocial perspectives on women's lives and aspirations.

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