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Gender Differences in Aspirations for Career and Marriage among Japanese Young Adults: Evidence from a Large National University in Japan

By Yukiko Inoue-Smith¹

Abstract

This study examined the ways in which Japanese young people think about their future careers, focusing on their occupational aspirations and attitudes toward marriage. The data were collected using a questionnaire that consisted of short essay items providing information derived from undergraduate students (510 men; 433 women) at a large national university in Japan. The results indicated that men concern themselves more with work life, whereas women concern themselves more with marriage life. Although one's college days are important times for developing one's future career, many lacked clear initial occupational aspirations. The results especially indicated a need to educate both male and female students on ways of supporting female students in their decisions on how to participate in the workforce.

Key Words: Career Aspiration, Marriage Prospect, Japanese College Students, Gender Roles, Career Education

Introduction

It is no longer sufficient to provide career guidance to help students make a career choice at the time of graduation. This is because even if they make a career choice and graduate from school, they would not necessarily continue to work at a single place of employment. (Shimomura, 2008, p. 140)

While Japanese society was once characterized by its stability and growth, as Ishida (2009) has observed, it is now known to suffer from uneven transitions from school to work, loss of job security, and anxiety over future employment, along with a falling birth rate that is highly associated with delays in marriage and beginning a family. Gaining employment in well-known companies has long been viewed in Japan as a symbol of future success for college graduates. But in the recessions following the burst of Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s, as Japan has suffered slow and even negative growth coupled with price deflation, college graduates' searches for highly desirable employment (even for those who graduated from famous colleges) have become increasingly difficult.

Furthermore, "while traditional Japanese employment practices such as lifelong employment, the seniority-based promotion system, and the exclusive hiring of new graduates still apply to the core segment of the labor force, it is no longer the norm" (Fukahori, 2009, p. 7);

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for that reason, “individual youths are being held increasingly more accountable for their abilities and drive to make a successful entry into the labor market” (p. 7). This is greatly because of the technological revolution, such that “almost all jobs these days are undergoing changes like never before, and all freshmen and upperclassmen will need the ongoing support of career counselors” (Alssid, 2012, p. 3). The use of the information highway has created a large increase in the number of part-time workers and NEETs (those who are Not currently involved in Employment, Education, and Training) as well.

As a consequence, “there is an increasing need to strengthen self-understanding and work ethic among young adults. One strategy is to provide career education programs at the university level, which an increasing number of universities have been introducing” (Moriyama, 2008, p. 255). Effective career education “instills in students the recognition that they are independent and contributing members in society, as financial, social, and spiritual independence is obtained. Gaining independence from one’s parents is a major part of this process” (p. 257). Career education, in essence, should provide “adequate career and occupational-related information, deepens an individual’s self-understanding, and supports social independence, while fostering the skills and attitudes necessary to actively choose a career path” (Moriyama, 2008, p. 257).

Purpose of the Study

With the end of Japan’s high economic growth and stability, the women of Japan face a new challenge. Many of them will have to be breadwinners as well as homemakers. The men of Japan also have to rethink the ways in which they can participate more in housework and child rearing typically done by women so that women are able to combine work and home.

Focusing on young people’s vocational motivation and career exploration, the current study seeks to contribute to the quality of life experienced by Japanese men and women by assessing how and to what extent undergraduate men and women in Japan select career goals, marriage goals, and lifelong goals that support one another, and thus, to achieve success in their lives. Because Japan is not alone in facing a changing labor economy as well as a massive transformation in the ways people work and think about their ‘work-life’ balance, the results will be of interest not only to Japanese educators and counselors specializing in career planning, but also to their colleagues in many other cultures, including those of the western Pacific.

The present paper is divided into the following sections: the conceptual background and significance of the study; method and data source; research findings; and summary and discussion, including limitations of the current study and directions for future research.

Background and Significance

School to Work Transition

As mentioned earlier, once the Japanese economy went into prolonged and deep stagnation, college graduates began experiencing increased difficulty in obtaining good jobs, and the number of job-hopping, part-time, young workers is increasing. In 2003, for instance, approximately 28% of people who graduated from two-year colleges and four-year universities became members of such job-hopping part-time workers in Japan (Yachi, 2005).

The fact that many young people who want to work are not actually searching for full-time jobs is a social problem now in Japan: “while the term ‘NEET’ originated in the United Kingdom, where it describes recent school graduates aged 16-18, the Japanese NEET includes such people as the ‘non-seekers’ and the ‘discouraged’ among the 15-34 year-old jobless single

people” (Genda, 2005, p. 3). As evidenced by the NEET phenomenon, recent years have seen an increase in what the Japanese refer to as ‘moratorium syndrome,’ such that significant numbers of college men do not want to become employed after graduation and do not want to get married, either. These men consider working full time and supporting a wife and children to be huge responsibilities. Such men usually target part-time jobs, choose to get married later, and may choose not have any children (Morotomi, 2007). These young men often express wishes to stay at their parents’ homes as long as possible, which is also a social problem now in Japan.

One factor contributing to the tendency of women marrying later in Japan is that there are many men who cannot easily get married, given their limitations of income. It is so difficult for many young men to propose marriage on the base of their incomes alone, given the cost of living for a family, and such men prefer to marry a woman who is willing to continue with work even after marriage. Yet, such men are unattractive to many young women who want to stop working after marriage and be entirely supported financially. In the absence of a proposal from a man who will agree to this arrangement, these women in Japan stay single and keep working; thus the better to choose their own lifestyles and devote all the money they earn to their own livings only.

Career Journey of a Lifetime

The terms ‘job,’ ‘occupation,’ and ‘career’ are used interchangeably but have distinctly different meanings. A job is work for which the person earns pay, especially for making a living. An occupation is a wide category of jobs with similar characteristics and is connected to a person’s vocational mission in life (e.g., educator, scientist, or physician). The term ‘career’ came from the Latin word *carrus*, and this refers to something that will continue for many years based on one’s vocation in life. One’s career is a lifetime journey of building and making good use of knowledge, skills, and experience. Therefore, it is very much connected to the sum total of all events in one’s family and social lives as impacted by, and affecting, one’s work life, and both the process and the achievement of the person’s journey through life (Omiya, 2009).

“Although many students struggle with career-related issues in college, comparatively few engage the career services offered by their academic institutions for help with these difficulties; in addition, there is little research on the factors influencing students’ decisions to engage in counseling for career-related issues” (Wyndolyn, Vogel, & Armstrong, 2009, p. 408). Career counseling in Japanese public schools is not common. This is because government funding is required for the schools to hire certified career counselors; and so, many Japanese students in secondary education, and even in higher education, do not know how to prepare for their future occupations, beyond the requirements of their courses and degree programs.

Yachi (2005) recommends cooperative efforts among the government, industries, universities and parents. Industries can participate in these efforts by providing internships and trial employment systems, in addition to providing potential students with detailed information about the industrial world. There are often differences between parents and their high school-aged children, in terms of how to choose an occupation, and parallel differences in terms of choosing the company in which to seek employment, on graduation from college. Given that lifelong job security with one company in Japan is a thing of the past, it is more important than ever that college graduates choose companies of their employment that will provide good matches for their interests, abilities, and career plans—a process their parents should respect.

Career Development Center

Why have programs in 'career development' (also called 'career design') become so important to college and university curricula in Japan? One reason is that Japanese high schools do not provide enough career counseling or coaching other than vocational guidance, so higher education has to provide students with career development education (Kurabe, 2011; Miura, Sakairi, Miyaji & Nakayama, 2013; Sawada, 2011). To explain the necessity of changing from career 'guidance' to career 'education,' Shimomura (2008), for instance, offers the following: "it is no longer sufficient to provide in-school career guidance for students. This is because students not only need to make a career choice at the time of graduation, but they also need to think broadly about their future careers and professional lives in general" (p. 140).

Kimura (2012) describes other two reasons: 1) the economic bubble in Japan burst and a cooling down of the economy began, at the same time that foreign companies began entering Japanese markets in increasing proportions, and globalization of industries increased; and 2) college education usually takes four years and is longer than high school, which means that college students have time to think about their future careers as transitions from college life to adult life. For all of these reasons, career education for college students increasingly attracts people's attention in Japan. Japanese people have finally realized that nothing guarantees new graduates that they will be employed at the same company until retirement. Traditional Japanese labor practices, especially the lifetime employment system, have diminished tremendously; instead, Japanese companies have begun to rely on the merit system and to dismiss employees.

Among private universities in Japan, Hosei University was the first to establish a career development center. Kaminishi (2007), who has been involved for student career support at Hosei University for many years, defines 'career' as the concept of not only occupational career but also life career. Kaminishi emphasizes educating students for enhanced basic skills in the areas of communication, action, critical thinking, and team work as a member of society.

Public Japanese universities have also begun to create career development centers that have three main purposes (Oakayama University Career Development Center, 2010: 1) providing students with basic career education; 2) assisting students in obtaining jobs after graduation; and 3) supporting students as they formulate plans for their lives and careers.

As career development or career design education has become more and more important in Japan, the preferred approach to this education itself has changed, that is, from 'vocational' counseling to 'career' counseling. As such, current career counseling focuses not on finding one's job but on developing one's career, which is defined as the combination and the sequence of professional roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime, as previously discussed.

Japanese higher education provide especially freshmen and sophomores with career education so that they can think about, as early as possible, how to align their career plans and future goals or lifestyles. In the past, new graduates were relatively easily employed, and a college degree was enough to gain employment. The companies that hired them provided extensive training for them. But many companies cannot afford to do that anymore, and new graduates need both basic and specialized skills that can be used right after they are employed.

Method and Data Source

Research Site

Okayama University, which is located in the capital city of Okayama Prefecture in western Japan, is one of the largest national universities in Japan, consisting of eleven colleges,

ranging from medicine to law and humanities, and seven graduate schools. The University was established in 1949 and currently has approximately 2,000 faculty and staff with approximately 14,000 students, of whom approximately 3,400 are graduate students.

The University was chosen as a research site for two reasons. First, the sex ratio among the University's students is roughly 60% (male) versus 40% (female), not only in education, but with an increasing presence of female students in engineering and medicine. Second, prior to the establishment of similar centers in other public universities in Japan, the University established the Career Development Center in 2006. The Center, since 2010, has focused on career development plans, besides career placements, for students; and so, its leadership in promoting gender equality in Japanese society can be evaluated. The Center emphasizes lifelong learning for a better understanding of work as a component of life: including planning for optimum quality in each person's *life* and *work*, and happiness as a human being. This holistic focus is essential to the entire approach in use at the Center.

Data and Sample

Based on the background and significance of the study, the author of the current paper developed a questionnaire with items in a short essay format. This questionnaire was approved by Okayama University for using with a sample of undergraduate students who had taken career education seminars and workshops offered by the University's Career Development Center in the fall semester of 2012. Outcomes from the current study are to be used as part of the Center's career education program and at the same time to enhance the Center's career counseling and career coaching. Currently participation in the Center's career education program is optional, but eventually it will become a requirement for all the students enrolled at the University.

The essays addressed three specific themes. Briefly, the first focused on participants' early occupational aspirations. The second focused on participants' goals pertaining to marriage and how the participants planned to balance family life and work. The third focused on participants' ultimate career goals and how they plan to align their careers and lifestyles.

Participants were mostly freshmen and sophomores, as these groups had been strongly encouraged to take the Center's program. Their majors were varied, and included literature, law, economics, environmental sciences, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, engineering, agriculture and education. Participants completed the essay anonymously and were not required to indicate their ages; however, most undergraduate students in Japan are of the traditional college-attending age.

Findings

THEME 1

"Describe the job you want after graduation, and how you are preparing to get the job."

As seen in Table 1, among the 510 men who completed the essay, 150 (29.4%) said that they "do not know yet" or "have not decided yet," while 360 (70.6%) identified their occupational aspirations. Among the 433 women who completed the essay, 128 (29.6%) said that they "do not know yet" or "have not decided yet," while 305 (70.4%) identified their aspirations.

Occupational aspirations other than "going to graduate school" (which included those who want to continue to study rather than seeking immediate employment) were divided into seven categories: 1) 'teaching' encompasses K-12 teaching, including teaching in special private schools such as *juku* and *yobiko* (which primarily prepare students for entrance examinations, as

for admission to a university); 2) 'company/bank worker' means non-managerial office work; 3) 'government official' includes national and local government workers involved in public administration; 4) 'engineer' encompasses all kinds of engineering jobs, including mechanical engineer, electronic systems engineer, and communication engineer; 5) 'professional' encompasses typical professions, such as physician (including dentist, veterinarian, and other), attorney, certified public accountant, architect, nurse, and broker; 6) 'other' means all kinds of other jobs, such as news reporter, musician, artist, cook, farmer, and helping family business; and 7) 'work overseas' includes those who said that they want to work in foreign countries.

Table 1: Participants' Early Occupational Aspirations

Category	Men (n = 510)	Women (n = 433)
Teaching	118 (23.1%)	141(32.6%)
Company/bank employee	77(15.1%)	60(13.9%)
Government official	34(6.7%)	32(7.4%)
Engineer	45(8.8%)	3(0.7%)
Professional	23(4.5%)	27(6.2%)
Other	38(7.5%)	32(7.4%)
Work overseas	8(1.6%)	4(0.9%)
Go to graduate school	17(3.3%)	6(1.4%)
Do not know	150(29.4%)	128(29.6%)

Because many male participants were majoring in education, it is unsurprising that 118 (23.1% of the total sample) aspired to become teachers, mostly at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. By the same token, many female participants were majoring in education, and 141 (32.6% of the total sample) aspired to be teachers. As mentioned by some participants in the essay, public school teachers are government workers; once employed, their work lives are relatively stable. This may encourage men and women in this sample to become teachers. People's aspirations are shifting away from teaching and toward occupations that are associated with higher average income (e.g., accounting and computer programming) (Steingrimsdottir, 2013). However, quite a few participants commented that teaching is indeed demanding but is worthwhile and that they would like to challenge their ability to shape the future.

77 (15.1%) men wanted employment in prominent large companies. In the past, if a man was employed by a well-known company, he would have few problems supporting himself and his wife and children. Situations have changed, but this perception has not disappeared entirely. It is understandable that the male participants want reliable income at a certain level. The female participants (60 or 13.9%) also said that they want to work at prominent large companies that provide their employees with higher salaries than most small- and medium-sized companies do. For some women, this may involve a desire to find potential husbands at these companies, so that they can eventually quit their jobs, become full-time housewives and totally depend on their husbands financially.

17 (3.3%) men and 6 (1.4%) women said that they would like to enter graduate programs and eventually pursue doctorates. This may seem like a surprisingly small number, but it is understandable, given that, in general, doctoral programs offer no guarantees of future success. Besides, a doctoral student in Japan usually is assigned to a professor of the program he or she entered, not to the program itself. This means that he or she has to choose a dissertation topic that

the professor is interested in and that successfully defending his or her dissertation will very much depend on the professor's opinion. Although this situation shows some signs of change, the problem remains. Only 8 (1.6%) men and 4 (0.9%) women said that they would like to "work overseas," (not only work in America or European countries, but also in other Asian countries, such as China, Korea, Singapore, and so on). 23 (4.5%) men and 27 (6.7%) women desired typical professional occupations, such as doctors, lawyers, CPAs, and so on.

As preparations for the participants' early/initial occupational attainments, based on their essays, what they are doing include activities listed below, besides taking university courses:

- "attending seminars or workshops outside the university"
- "learning Asian languages such as Korean, Chinese, and Thai"
- "reading the company website and published materials regarding the company"
- "not missing to participate in the company tour each time available"
- "availing oneself of the career advising provided by the university's career center"
- "attending English café and talking with people in English as often as possible"
- "consulting with persons who work for the job for my future plans"
- "focusing on maintaining a healthy diet to be health for both mind and body"

THEME 2

"Do you plan to get married in the foreseeable future? If so, do you have plans for balancing the demands of career and homemaker after your marriage? (for women); If so, do you have plans for participating in housework and child rearing after you get married and have a baby? (for men)"

Men's Responses

325 (63.7% of the total male sample) said that they "do not plan to get married in the foreseeable future," and most of them did not mention anything about resolving the demands of careers and child rearing. Several students wrote as follows:

"I am only 18 years old. My own marriage is a distant prospect, and I am not even thinking about it. Before that, I want to get a stable job and establish myself."

The male participants who planned "to go to graduate school" or "to work overseas" said that they "do not think of marriage" at this stage. Among 185 (36.3%) men who planned "to get married in the foreseeable future" (and one man said that he is currently married), 59 (11.6%) said that they would like "to have traditional wives," endorsing statements like,

"If I marry, I will want my wife to quit her job and stay at home for housekeeping. I will work very hard to support my wife and children—and so, I want my wife to stay at home and do all the household things including child rearing."

On the other hand, 62 (12.2%) men said that they would like "to have wives who have their own full time jobs." Interestingly enough, the proportion of men in this sample who want their wives "to stay at home" (11.6%) once they are married is similar to the proportion of men who want wives who will "continue to work" (12.2%) once they are married.

111 (21.8%) men said that if both (the husband and the wife) have careers, they “will definitely participate in the housekeeping,” so that their wives are able to balance the demands of careers and childrearing tasks. They discussed this prospect in the following ways:

- “The time of ‘men at work and women at home’ is over and both have to work” (which can be interpreted as a historic shift in Japanese attitudes, reflecting modern economic realities)
- “Both of my parents are working full time, so I want my wife not to give up her job” (which can be interpreted as a constructive response to personal models of gender equality)
- “Two incomes are necessary nowadays to maintain a better quality of life” (which can be interpreted as a realistic response to the high cost of living and to unstable employment)

Women’s Responses

167 (38.6% of the total female sample) said that they “do not plan to get married in the foreseeable future,” and most of them did not mention anything about the demands of careers and childrearing tasks. Among 266 (61.4%) who planned “to get married in the foreseeable future,” 131 (30.3%) expressed that they would like “to combine work and family life,” as represented by a woman who wrote as follows:

“Just as my mother did not give up her career after marrying and even becoming a mother, I want to do the same. I will definitely find ways to continue to work and develop my career, which will eventually provide me with satisfaction in myself. It is not all about the money. I need both emotional satisfaction through my family life and intellectual fulfillment through my career. That is why helping each other in order to balance the demands of careers and child rearing especially is so important for husband and wife.”

In contrast, 135 (31.2%) women would like “to become traditional wives,” as represented by a woman who wrote as follows:

“There is no way to combine work and home. Family is more important than career for me, and I will quit working after marrying, even though I may have to work after my child enters elementary school or so. Meanwhile, I want to enjoy being a full-time housewife. I believe managing the household is a worthwhile focus for a wife.”

THEME 3

“Describe your ultimate career goals, including the social status and lifestyle you hope to have in the future.”

Most of the participants, who answered the previous theme by saying that they “do not plan or envision their marriage in the near future,” also did not write anything in response to this theme, which focused on the ultimate career goals and lifestyles. In total, 340 (66.7%) men and 170 (39.3%) women did not write anything regarding their career goals or lifestyles they desire.

170 (33.3%) men and 263 (60.7%) women did answer, but most of them described the kind of family life they want to have or what kind of relationship they want to develop with their future life partners. In addition to that, a few participants wrote that they “want to be rich” or “want to succeed at work.” Most answers were similar to one of the following three types:

1. “I want to build a happy family with my husband/wife”
2. “I want to grow with my husband/wife as persons through our marriage and parenting”
3. “I want to share compatible priorities or directions in life with my husband/wife”

Therefore, the answers to this theme were divided into three categories, and the resulting frequencies were as follows (Table 2): “sharing the same priorities and directions” (80 or 15.7% of the entire male sample; 142 or 32.8% of the entire female sample); “building up a happy family” (41 or 8% for men; 23 or 5.3% for women); and “growing together as persons” (39 or 7.9% for men; 92 or 21.2% for women). And, 5 men (1% of the sample) specifically said the following: “I want to marry a beautiful woman.”

Table 2: A Gender Comparison of Aspired Lifestyles

	Men (n = 510)	Women (n = 433)
Grow together as persons	39 (7.6%)	92 (21.2%)
Same direction	80 (15.7%)	142 (32.8)
Have happy family	41(8.0%)	23 (5.3%)
None	340 (66.7%)	173 (40.0%)
Have a beautiful wife	5(1.0%)	

In a word, the above results imply that at this stage it is difficult or almost impossible for such young men and women to envision their ultimate career goals, but it is relatively easy for them to envision marriage and a particular type of relationship with their future spouse.

Summary and Discussion

Early/Initial Occupational Aspirations

Japanese college students are mostly of traditional age, young enough that many cannot clearly picture their future lives in the workforce. Even though it may seem that they lack serious early occupational aspirations, it may be that these young people want to enjoy the transition from student life to adult life. This can be something of a struggle, as many students wrote:

“I know that I have to do something (get employed, continue to study, or whatever) after graduation, but I don’t know what I really want. I don’t even want to think about it.”

Erikson (1980), whose research contributed to the understanding of how adult identities form, and Levinson (1978), whose important work focused on positive development and the ‘seasons’ in an adult’s life, greatly influenced the social sciences of human development.

Erikson's and Levinson's influences appear in statements like the following: "the developmental task of the 20s is to build an entry life structure for early adulthood" (Roberts & Newton, 1987, p. 155), and "becoming independent of parents and forming an occupational dream are seen as two central issues during this period of life" (Gooden & Toye, 1984, p. 945). These psychologists' theories can be applied to the results of the current study. In evidence of a possible crisis at the age represented in this sample (pre-adulthood to adulthood), almost 30% of both men and women express *no* clearly formed plans or aspirations for a particular type of occupational life. It may be that they are hoping to reach a decision during their four years of college.

Many young people throughout Japan lack clear occupational aspirations and may not even know how to form them (Genda, 2005; Adachi; 2006). This provides one justification for Japanese universities beginning to add career education programs to their curricula, realizing that career coaching is also necessary to support students in identifying and choosing among their career options so that they are able to fully participate in the workforce. In some ways, the results of the current study support the argument by Staff, Harris, Sabates, and Briddell (2010):

Youth with higher career aspirations tend to have higher job prestige and wages in adulthood...However, absent from most research is the substantial number of youth who do not report any occupational aspirations or do not know the types of job they would like to hold as adults. Nearly 10% of students in 1992 reported not knowing what job they wanted to hold at age 30. (p. 1)

Perspectives on Marriage and Lifestyle *Marriage*

"Until recently, there have been very few public agencies in Japan providing support for those who have failed in the school-to-work transition. This is because, after World War II, Japanese youth faced few problems in finding stable employment after graduation from schools" (Hori, 2005, p. 8). But the number of young part-time workers in Japan is increasing, which leads to delays in marriage and having children, which, in turn, have led to declining birth rates.

Furthermore, as the findings of the current study indicate, the significance of marriage itself has changed in Japan, especially for young people. Many men and women in this sample have indicated that for them, getting married or having children is an option, but not mandatory. Whether to marry or remain single has become a matter of individual preference or choice.

The main factor in Japanese women's decision to get married used to be financial security. The female participants in the current study are highly educated, and for that reason, in comparison with women whose educational attainments ended with graduation from high school, they can better afford to maintain their freedom and autonomy, by virtue of their own careers.

Although "the social situation for men has changed very little in the past 20 years" (Iwao, 1996, ¶9), drastically changed new lifestyles for women are normally acceptable, as emphasized by Iwao: "whereas for women marrying later is essentially a matter of choice, for men it is more a reflection of a woman's reluctance than a situation of their own making" (¶9). In the current study, 38.6% of the total women of the sample do not plan to get married in the foreseeable future. Women delaying marriage creates a problem for many men trying to find wives in Japan.

It should be also emphasized that the attitudes of many women in the current study still reflect a focus on marriage and homemaking. These women plan to work full time for only a few years, then quit the full-time jobs and devote themselves full time to managing a household and raising a family. This conservative attitude may continue to be viable, given that many men in

this sample want to marry women who are willing to be full-time housewives. This practice, indeed, is very ‘traditional’ in Japan, and it will not be changed easily or quickly.

Lifestyle

The overall results of the current study, as they pertain to lifestyle perspectives, clearly support the conclusions by the Pew Research Center (2012) in Washington DC: “for men (n = 703) and women (n = 610) of ages 18 to 34, being a good parent and having a successful marriage continue to rank significantly higher on their list of priorities than being successful in a high-paying job or career” (¶3). Many of the undergraduate men and women in the current study likewise desire to have successful marriages and close relationships in which they can grow with their spouses as persons and as members of the community. This is a healthy perspective on young adulthood that is consistent with Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development.

It is vital that young adults develop close, committed relationships with other people, specifically, both by finding a partner and by developing good working relationships; and such success leads to healthy intimacy and mutual support, while failure results in loneliness and isolation (Lefrançois, 1999). The men and women in this sample also desire to grow in the same directions as their life partners. This can be interpreted to mean that if both have careers, they will share the responsibilities involved in housework and child rearing, and provide their partners with support and encouragement as they contribute to their professions and to society.

Again, according to the data analyzed by the Pew Research Center, two-thirds (66%) of women ages 18 to 34 rated ‘career’ as one of the most important things on their list of life priorities, compared with 59% of the same age group of men, illustrating the fact that in the United States young women surpass young men in career aspirations. The economies of Japan and America are often compared in many ways, but Japan does lag far behind America in terms of social attitudes toward gender equality both ‘at work’ and ‘at home.’ The results of the current study confirmed that, in Japan, women having a career is a relatively new phenomenon, and that many Japanese women lack any real goal or ambition in terms of what they actually want to do after they graduate college. There may be an imbalance in the job market in Japan, such that for female workers, there are not very many inspiring job opportunities or clear paths to promotion.

Career Education in College

Career education (learning for real life after school) should not begin at the college level. As part of informal career education, students can “engage in structured, practical activities from the first and sixth grades, including listening to talks from adults they encounter in their everyday lives, getting to know themselves, thinking about the reasons why people work, and starting to think about life plans” (Chiba, 2009, p. 5). Chiba also notes that “what is important in career education is that it encourages young people to find a job soon after graduating and allows them to find an appropriate role in society and work within it productively and continuously” (p. 7). “Although the rate of female labor force participation by education level shows that the participation rate of university-educated women is higher than that for other women, it is still lower than that of women in Western industrialized countries” (Genda, 2005, p. 15). The degree to which Japanese women receive such support in developing their own careers will certainly have important consequences for the Japanese economy and its prospects for recovery.

The participants’ essays serve as a reminder that career development, like all aspects of human development, is a lifelong issue, unfolding in four essential stages noted by Kimura (2012): 1) career development prior to formal schooling, at home (pre-school days); 2) career

development at school (K-12 school days); 3) career development in college; and 4) career development as professionals. Designing curricula in career education should “connect with the individual’s level of career development at that stage in life” (Kimura & Kikuchi, 2010, p. 3).

In order to maximize benefits from career education in the college level, Wyndolyn’s (2009) two suggestions can be applied. First, career counselors should conduct outreach programs for college students, educating them on the benefits and positive changes that can occur with the use of career development centers. Second, during freshman orientation, while students’ parents are still present on campus, it may be beneficial to offer classes that teach both the students and their parents about the benefits of career counseling and career coaching.

In Japan, as Fujita (2011) has observed, “since it has always been assumed that young people will move from full time study to full time work, there has never been, and still is not, a particularly developed support system for young people who take any other path” (p. 32). As pointed out by Fujita, American young people experience a wide range of short-term activities between leaving particular schools and obtaining full-time permanent positions, including participating in vocational training programs that promote employment, returning to student status, taking part-time jobs, or being employed full time in temporary positions. These are examples of roads or passages less-traveled by Japanese people. Japanese companies tend to hire only new or very recent graduates from high school or college, and for many, such a strict hiring system may actually complicate the process of moving from school to employment.

Many gender differences in job choices are strongly influenced by normative social expectations (Chow & Ngo, 2002), and these expectations are changing in Japan. Also, Japanese people no longer uniformly assume that marriage is the primary determinant and guarantee of a woman’s social status. Although less rapidly than in other developed countries, Japan is certainly shifting to a two-income model of marriage. And “gender variation in the association between expectations and attainments may be better understood by incorporating the considerable role of adults such as parents, teachers, and career counselors in guiding female and male students’ educational and occupational pursuits” (Mello, 2008, p. 1079). It is necessary for parents, teachers, and counselors to increase young Japanese women’s awareness of their options for jobs, so that they are able to make a transition to the world of career-based work, as Japanese men do.

Finally, because career education in Japan has just begun, it is important that educators and counselors resolve to provide students with empowering but ‘realistic’ perspectives on what is attainable in employment—as well as the knowledge and skills required by specific jobs.

Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to note the methodological limitations of the current study. Although the sample size was rather large, the research participants came from one university. The results may not generalize to students at other institutions in Japan. Another important limitation of the study is the reliance on essay data. Many participants, both men and women, provided responses like the following: “I don’t know what I want to do after graduation. That is a problem.” Even so, findings from the current study may provide considerable evidence regarding current trends and issues in Japanese young men’s and women’s attitudes toward work and marriage: two of the most important domains in one’s life. The findings suggest a psychosocial moratorium on career planning among young people in Japan, which is a trend much connected to issues in Japanese economy, labor practices, gender relations, technological advances, and globalization. The

evidence from Okayama University especially suggests that the time has come in Japan for both men *and* women fully and jointly to participate in planning their work lives and family lives.

A semi- or structured interview should be conducted, applying sociological and psychological perspectives to men's and women's life trajectories. Such methods may also support better understanding of why and how young men and women aspire to succeed in their careers and marriages, based in part on the premise that "occupations structure a large part of people's everyday reality and serve as a major source of personal identity and self-evaluation" (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001, p. 187). The essay instrument utilized in the present study has provided a first step toward understanding trends and issues in the occupational aspirations of Japanese young people and in career education, as discussed in the current paper.

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