

Perceptions of Gender Roles Among Japanese and American Students

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Abstract

Men and women play different roles in society. Japan is often stereotyped as a very male-oriented society that believes women belong in the home and not in the workplace. America, as well, has a history of very similar treatment of gender roles. Today, both of these nations are seeing a shift toward equality between the genders.

This study explores questions about how university students perceive their gender roles; what is the difference in these perceptions between Japan and America; and further, what factors, such as media and family life, influence university students' perceptions of their own gender roles. A survey was conducted among 34 American and 32 Japanese students, and their responses analyzed. The findings suggest that student perceptions of their own gender roles align with general trends observed in the literature review I conducted, in that men and women in both Japan and the U.S. appear to support sharing childcare and housework between men and women, and respondents support the pursuit of higher education for women in both countries.

1. Significance of the Study

One of the most obvious social differences I observed while studying abroad in Japan was gender roles and values, where Japan appears to have clearly defined gender roles. This has made me reflect on my own culture as well, where I always believed that gender roles are much more vague. I wish to determine what Japanese and American people think of their own gender roles.

2. Research Questions

1. What are the expected gender roles as perceived by American and Japanese students, and how do they feel about these expected roles?
2. What factors, such as media or family life, affect students' perceived gender roles?

3. Background Research

First I will provide some explanation of how gender roles have changed over the years in Japan in America. I will do so by explaining Japan's past gender role trends; the differences in the university and junior college rates between Japan and the U.S.; Japan's education of women; and some factors that can influence gender roles, such as family and the media.

3.1 Japan's Past Gender Roles

Before the Meiji Restoration in 1868, women were not allowed a formal, as it was only for men. After the Meiji Restoration, co-educational schools were opened, as well as women's private schools. Women were beginning to get a chance at a formal education. However, this education often came in the form of creating a "good wife, wise mother." In other words, they were primarily taught the art of tea, the art of flower arrangement, and how to properly take care of a household (Hendry, 2003).

In 1946, during the Allied Occupation Era after World War Two, the Fundamental Law of Education was enacted. This established a new education system, making co-educational schools standard, as well as providing equal opportunity to education for men and women. In 1947, a new constitution was put in place for Japan, which established equal work opportunities for men and women, provided women's suffrage, and ensured there would be no gender discrimination under the law (Hendry, 2003).

3.2 Japan's Junior College Enrollment Rates

Junior college enrollment rates in Japan in 1954 were only at 3%, and peaked around 1995 at 25%. From then enrollment rates have dropped steadily, reaching 13% in 2005 (Statistics Bureau, 2006). One reason for this is that in Japan, junior colleges are largely meant for women, providing them the traditional "good wife, wise mother" education.

As for Japan's university enrollment rates, in 1954 women were at 5% and men 13%. By 2005 women's rates had increased to 37% and men's had increased to 51% (Statistics Bureau, 2006). Japan's societal movement towards gender equality, as well as

women's determination to enter the workforce, began a shift among women from enrolling in junior colleges to enrolling in universities.

3.3 Women's Education in Japan

Until about 1965, the focus of women's education was still "good wife, wise mother." The purpose of educating women was to teach them how to efficiently help their husbands, how to best educate their children, and how to perform everyday household chores (Hendry, 2003). In the workplace, women were often hired as secretaries and office ladies. Companies did not want to keep women as full time employees, regardless of their educational attainment, and often encouraged women to quit after marriage. Today, there is still much inequality between the educational and work opportunities between men and women, but there is a trend moving towards gender equality (北村, 2008).

3.4 Japan and America's Modern Junior College and University Enrollment Rates

Junior college rates in the U.S. are much higher in the U.S. than Japan, and not much difference can be seen in the rates between American males and females. One reason for this is that in the U.S. men and women can receive the same education at a junior college, and easily transfer to a university if so desired. In Japan, on the other hand, mostly women enroll in junior college, and it is very difficult to transfer from a junior college to a university. As for university enrollment rates, there is some difference between men and women in both Japan and the U.S., but that difference is the same between the two countries (U.S. Census Bureau 2012, Statistics Bureau Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication 2003).

3.5 Japan's Household Trends

As can be seen in image 4, there is little difference between 20-24 year males and females concerning time spent on household chores. However, there is a large difference between 45-49 year old males and 45-49 year old females. This is a reflection of traditional division of roles, with men in the workplace and women doing the house work (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, 2003)

3.6 Japan's Trends in the Workforce

According to a survey conducted in 2012, there was little to no difference in the full time employment of men and women from 20 to 24 years old, or in the part time employment of men and women in the same age group. There is a difference for men and women from the ages 45 to 49, however. In this age group, women are focused on taking care of the household, and therefore are primarily either stay-at-home mothers or work part time (Takamura 2001, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication 2003).

3.7 America's Trends at Home and in the Workplace

From 1965 to 2011 there was a large shift in the roles of men and women in the U.S. In those 50 years, women's roles began to move from house work to entering the workforce; while men began helping with household chores and taking a bigger role in the household (Parker, 2013).

3.8 Influential Factors for Gender Roles

Parents' roles in the household are the first gender roles children observe, and continue to observe as they grow up. Therefore, parents' gender roles create a framework understanding of gender roles for children. This plays into the household chores assigned to children as well, with girls helping their mothers to cook and clean, and boys helping their fathers with the harder labor. Toys as well have influence on gender roles, with action figures creating an image of the ideal male for boys, and dolls doing the same for girls (Lindsey, 2010).

Media has significant influence as well. In the U.S., children's television shows have primarily males as the protagonists (Smith, 2000). They also reflect socially accepted jobs meant for males and females, such as men working at a company and women working at home (Lindsey, 2010). As for Japan, home dramas promote the stereotypical family model, with men leaving for work every day and women taking care of the house, as well as the appropriate way for men and women to act in society. Television commercials also reflect gender roles expected by society in both Japan and

the U.S., often showing women in the household and men in the workplace (Valaskivi, 2000).

4. The Research

32 Japanese and 34 American university students answered my online survey, for a total of 66 respondents. There were 12 American women, 18 Japanese women, 22 American men, and 14 Japanese men.

5. Survey Results and Analysis

Please note: Graphs and charts for the below statistical data can be found in the enclosed Japanese paper or the PowerPoint.

5.1 Research Question 1

From here I will explain the results related to research question 1, “What are the expected gender roles as perceived by American and Japanese students, and how do they feel about these expected roles?”

First, I will explain the results for the questions concerning women’s gender roles. To the first question, “Marriage is more important than work,” Japanese respondents mostly disagreed. There were some men and women who agreed, however, showing a persistence of traditional values. Almost all of the American respondents, on the other hand, disagreed with this opinion.

There were many Japanese men and women who agreed the statement of “Women should have as many work hours as men,” but there was also a significant amount who disagreed. This would appear to reflect that the traditional way of thinking about women in the household and men in the work place is still present among both men and women in Japan. American respondents almost all agreed with this statement.

In Japan, all of the respondents disagreed with the statement “Women should only work part time.” Although not everyone in Japan agrees that women should work as much as men, they would appear to no longer believe that women only belong in part time work. In America almost 100% of respondents disagreed with this statement, continuing the trend of expecting gender equality in the workplace.

In both Japan and America many men and women agree that higher education is important for women, reflecting an increased importance being placed on the presence of educated women.

Japanese and American respondents both disagree that women should only be housewives, continuing the trend of women attaining higher education and entering the workforce. However, in Japan about 21% of men agreed with this opinion. It could be said that this shows that there is still a persistence of traditional thinking among Japanese men today.

As for housework, many Japanese men and women disagreed that women should do all of the housework. However, about 21% of men agreed, again reflecting a persistence of traditional thinking in Japan. 100% of American respondents, on the other hand, disagreed with this statement. In both countries, men and women both agreed that housework should be shared equally.

In Japan, women disagreed with the traditional idea of women being the primary child care-givers, while most men agreed with the idea. In America, most men and 100% of women disagreed. 20% of American men did agree, however, possibly reflecting a continued traditional way of thinking among American men.

Next, in both Japan and America, men and women both agree that child care-giving should be shared equally between men and women. As women begin attaining higher education and entering the workforce, men are expected to take a more active role in raising children.

Concerning the statement "Marriage is more important than work for men," almost 100% of women and about 60% of men in Japan disagree. About 40% of men did agree, possibly showing a shift in men's role from the workplace to house work. In America almost all men and women disagreed, reflecting that as a man marriage is not a top priority.

Many men and women in Japan agree with the statement "Men should strive for higher education." There were a significant number of men and women who agreed, however, possibly reflecting a trend that although higher education is important for men, it is not necessary. In America almost all men and women agreed with this statement, reflecting that as a man higher education is necessary.

In both Japan and America, men and women disagree that men should just work part time. This reflects the role of men as breadwinners in the family. Similarly, almost 100% of men and women in both countries disagree with the statements that “Men should be house-husbands” and “Men should do all of the housework,” continuing the trend of thinking of men as breadwinners, not house care-takers. For the latter statement, there were about 20% of men who agreed, however possibly showing a rising expectation of men to take a stronger role in house work.

When asked about their opinion of the ideal role for women, Japanese people mostly answered wife, career women, working mother, house care-taker, and stay-at-home mother. These answers reflect a continuation of the traditional roles of women in the household as well as more modern roles of entering the workforce. Most American respondents replied with all roles being ideal for women, reflecting a belief that women can do whatever they desire, and should be treating equally as men.

As for the ideal role for men, Japanese men answered with business man and working father; while women answered with husband, house care-taker, and working father. In other words, women expect men to marry and take an active role in house work. Americans provided various answers, but most replied business man, working father, and house care-taker. This shows that work is important as a man, but house work is becoming increasingly important for the role of being a man.

5.2 Research Question 1 Summary of Results

In Japan the traditional way of thinking of women in the home and men at work still continues today, but the thought of men at home and women at work is increasingly apparent. It could be said that in general, there is a shift in expectations towards gender equality in Japan. In America, on the other hand, there is a strong expectation of gender equality. Women are expected to working mothers, men working fathers.

5.3 Research Question 2

Next I will explain the results related to research question 2, “What factors, such as media or family life, affect students’ perceived gender roles?”.

First, I asked participants about their parents' employment status. In Japan, most replied that their fathers work full time, while their mothers work part time or not at all. This creates an image of women at home and men in the workplace.

In America most respondents replied that both their mother and father work full time, although a significant number of respondents did reply that their mother did not work.

When asked "Who was around most when you were growing up?", Japanese respondents mostly replied mother, while virtually no one replied father. This continues the image of women at home doing house work and raising children and men at work. In America a large number of respondents replied mother, but there were also many who responded with mother and father. Although the image of women at home is stronger, there was both a father figure and mother figure for many respondents.

Concerning what toys the respondents played with when they were children, many Japanese women replied cooking sets and dolls, while many men replied video games, sports gear, and action figures. Although mostly men replied action figures and mostly women replied dolls, men and women appear to have played with the same types of toys. LEGO's appear to be gender neutral in both countries.

When asked "In general, what role do you most often see on T.V. commercials," Japanese men and women responded career women, house care-taker, and stay-at-home mother. T.V. commercials appear to be pushing both traditional women's gender roles as well as the role of being a working woman. In America, most replied wife, stay-at-home mother, and house care-taker, strongly reflecting an image of traditional roles for women in America. As for men's roles in television commercials, Japanese respondents mostly answered businessman and working father, creating an image of men supporting the family financially in Japan. America, on the other hand, many respondents gave various answers. Only the image of men as house care-takers and house-husbands was absent.

In both Japan and America, men and women about half agreed and half disagreed with the statement "I believe that the roles men/ women play on T.V. shows are an accurate reflection of the roles men/women play in reality."

5.2 Research Question 2 Summary and Findings

Concerning work, in Japan and America men are expected to work, while there is an image of women at work, an image of women at home, and an image of women doing both. Television commercials appear to have a strong influence on gender role perceptions, as well as the toys people played with as children. For example, in Japan women developed a role of being the one to cook through growing up playing with cooking sets. Again, in Japan fathers do not appear to spend much time with their children, perhaps creating an image of men not having a strong presence in the household.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

In Japan there is still an expectation of traditional gender roles, but there appears to be a shift for equality in gender roles. In America there is almost no expectations of traditional gender roles, while many answers reflected an expectation of equality in the roles of men and women. Media would appear to have strong influence on the development of gender roles, such as television the respondents' expectation for the gender roles on television to accurately reflect real gender roles. In Japan, fathers appear to not be very present in the household, and therefore children do not receive much influence from their fathers, when compared to that of the mother. This image appears to contradict the expectation men have of themselves to take a more active role in the household, and there may be some connection between the two results. In America, men and women are expected to work equally, and therefore house work is also expected to be shared equally.

7. Limitations of the Study

The respondents were mostly from either Japan or California, and most were within the same age range, since they were all university students. Therefore this data cannot be generalized. Also, the reasoning behind some of the respondents' answers could not be determined, as they were not asked about it.

8. Future Studies

In Japan, men's and women's roles concerning child care are still somewhat vague, so I believe more research is necessary. Also I believe further research into influential factors, such as the internet, cinema, or education, would be beneficial. I would also like to further research the connection, if there is any, between the lack of fathers' presence in the household and men's expectation of themselves to take a more active role in the household. Finally, I would like to compare the respondents' perception of gender roles while they are in university to their perceptions in later years, perhaps 5 or so years later.

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