Life-span Developmental and Socio-Cultural Approach toward Japanese Women/Mothers. Conceptions and Realities of Japanese Women/Mothers.

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Japanese women and mothers have been very much interested and famous for the close tie with child and warm devoted love for child among many researches from cultural and developmental view points. Recent discussions on the construals of self have also evoked strong interest in interdependent relationships among Japanese which are typically reflected in mother-child relationships. However, recent drastic social changes in Japan including industrial structure, international status, population/demographic conditions have brought the striking impact upon the life and psychological states of Japanese women. In this paper, re-examinations will be made whether well-known characteristics of Japanese women/mothers still exist by presenting recent empirical data on parents' feeling on child/child-care, reasoning of having child, sex-role attitudes, the nature of self-esteem and so on. Discussions will be made concerning the conceptions and realities of women/mothers in socio-cultural contexts.

Key words: Japanese women, mothers, sex-role attitudes, social changes, interdependence.

Introduction

Since Caudill's comparative researches (1969) on mother-child relationships, Japanese mothers have been widely famous for the close tie with children among the researchers in developmental and cross-cultural psychology.

Caudill et al. observed Japanese mothers tended to stay near the baby longer than American mothers. They often stayed near the baby even while the baby slept, while American mothers used to leave and do their own work during baby's sleeping. As another example, they also recognized popular co-sleepings of mother and child among Japanese family.

Based on those observational data, Caudill et al. pointed out physical closeness and child-centeredness as the characteristics of Japanese mother-child relationships. Furthermore, they conclusively argued that the physical closeness naturally caused psychological closeness between mother and child just like "oneness".

Caudill's conclusions were easily accepted by Japanese, since the pictures seemed to coincide well with the general views/conceptions (not the realities) of Japanese mothers, which were characterized as warm affectionate, tender-hearted, self sacrificing towards their own children (Yamamura 1971). Caudill's findings were also very much interested among foreign researchers, because the novel pictures of Japanese mother-child relationships would strongly appeal to their intellectual curiosity from cross-cultural and developmental perspectives.

Stimulated by Caudill's works, many cross-cultural researches have been carried out to clarify Japanese mother-child relationships/interactions and to also examine their influences upon a child's development. They have basically confirmed Caudill's conclusions by empirical data; the stronger bonds between Japanese mother-child in strange situation, the sensitive empathetic communication styles between mother and child and indirect control strategies appealing feelings were more distinctly identified among Japanese samples compared to Western counterparts. The findings were frequently interpreted in terms of a psychologically closeness between mother and child (Azuma et al. 1981, Miyake 1990, Takahashi 1986). Thus, the propositions that Japanese mother and child are closely interdependent just like <oneness> have been widely known and taken for granted.
This might be partly true. Psychological close ties are still apparently recognized in various domains. Co-sleeping arrangement of mother and child is frequently observed (Inagaki, K. et al. 1985) suggesting dominance of mother-child over husband-wife relationships or child-centeredness. The mothers’ strong concerns and eager involvement in the education of their children (so-called “educational mama”), and indirect control strategies may possibly reflect the strong bond between mother and child described as “oneness” (Conroy et al. 1980, Lewis, C. 1995).

However, we have to firmly keep in mind that close ties or the undifferentiated relationships are not necessarily attributed only to the mothers, but also to all the Japanese. Harmony or psychologically close relationships are assumed to be the general characteristics of Japanese on which Markus and Kitayama described as “Interdependence” (1991). It is never to be overemphasized as unique to only mothers, rather, it should be properly recognized as Japanese in general.

Conceptions and Realities of Japanese Mother/woman

The pictures of Japanese mothers described by cross-cultural researches since Caudill, however, do not necessarily represent the reality of Japanese mothers/women today. Rather, the pictures represent cultural conceptions or ideology on mother/woman in Japanese society, which have been deeply rooted in long historical and political backgrounds. We have to definitely recognize the gaps between the conceptions and realities of mother/woman in a Japanese society.

Japanese mothers/women have been elaborately and intensively socialized to adjust well to Japanese cultural norms for long period (Wakita, H. 1985, Kashiwagi, K. 1993). The well-known characteristics of Japanese mothers/women; tender-hearted, modest, devoted, deeply and closely connected with their children, may be just products of such a long intensive socialization to be “female”, to be “good” mother/woman in the Japanese history. This may be really a “good” example of human development, deeply embedded in historical, socio-cultural contexts (Scarr, S. 1979).

Japanese mothers/women, however, are nowadays certainly moving from their previous states. There have been several noticeable trends that Japanese mothers/women have been strongly motivated to pursue self-identity, not as mother/wife, but as an individual person. They are inevitably confronted with the drastic social changes, and then consequently are pursued to change their life-course together with their personal identity.

This will be epoch-making changes in Japanese women. And, this is just another “good” example of human development as Scarr clearly stated.

We, Japanese, are in the midst of drastic social changes that have never been experienced before. In particular, demographic changes characterized by the longer life-span and decreases in the number of children, along with the rapid increase in higher education had brought great impacts upon women's lives and psychological states, together with their lives and personal identities.

Researchers’ viewpoint determining their research focus on developmental processes

Developmental psychological researches have so far been intensively focused on mother-child relationships and maternal variables such as child rearing practices, opinions/attitudes on child-rearings, and so on. Their research concerns have been mainly to identify the factors which are significantly related to the child development. In such perspectives, mothers are likely treated only as one of the environmental factors for child development, and then, in return, mother's own internal psychological states have been almost ignored unconsciously and sometimes consciously. This is not the case of mothers, but for both parents including fathers, who have never been examined in their own rights. Their psychological states and their own development have been so far scarcely examined by developmental psychology. In other words, mothers are certainly considered and assumed just as one of the environmental factors or stimulations for child development.

Such approaches may be possibly caused by several factors. They are partly caused and facilitated by the dominant traditions of psychology as science based on objective-neutral observations excluding subjective-valued judgment. Also, classic views on
development that mainly focus on the progressive changes occurred from infancy until adult would naturally exclude the developmental problems in adult especially the mothers. In addition, such strong concerns on child development may be facilitated by the researchers’ positions/roles taken in child’s developmental processes. The researchers, especially Japanese male researchers, who are usually apart from daily child-care and thus less experience in child-care, are easily inclined to take objective “scientific” stance, and become naturally insensitive to the caregiver’s side. In other words, previous researches could been mainly based on “objective” observations without the caregiver’s viewpoint because of the researcher’s poor experiences on child-care and a lack of sensitive empathy on caregiver’s inner psychological problems.

It would not be a coincidence that recent researches on mother’s psychological states have been mainly done by female researchers. They have been usually engaged in daily child-care, and then unable to consider their caregivers (mothers) inner states from life-span perspectives as being their own serious problems. Thus, recent approaches towards mothers/women are primarily based on gender and future time perspectives, which can unveil the hidden aspects of Japanese mother/woman and mother-child relationships that have never been pointed out in previous researches.

**Strong anxiety on child-care among Japanese mothers and their correlates**

Very recently, critical views on previous approaches towards mothers have been increasingly strong (Burman E. 1994, Kashiwagi 1993, Kashiwagi et al. 1995), and empirical examinations have been actively done from gender perspectives and meaningful evidences have been gradually accumulated.

Epoch-making researches have made a series of study on mother’s feelings in child-care by several researchers. Ohinata (1988) examined mothers of three generations regarding the feelings toward child-care, and found significant differences between the three generation groups. Positive feelings such as “child-care is enjoyable” “child-care is my live-worth” were strongly observed in older generation groups, while, negative feelings such as “be irritated by child-care” “be unconfident in child-care” were stronger in mothers of younger generations. Similar results were repeatedly identified by other studies (Kashiwagi et al. 1994).

Those evidences clearly showed mother’s feelings toward child not to be universally constant and innately furnished in females, but were rather extensively determined by the situational factors surrounding mother, child and family, which are strikingly different between generations in Japan.

This could be exactly assumed as the conterevidences to the traditional views on motherhood. Furthermore, this has presented new perspectives and approaches focusing on important aspects not only of motherhood, but also of the development of women and family in a social context.

The detailed analysis have been carried out to identify the determinants of mother’s anxiety in child-care. A series of study by Makino (1981, 1982, 1988) revealed that mothers’ isolated situations would be significant factors causing negative feelings on child-care. The mothers who are totally depended from their husbands (child’s fathers) for all the housework and then have to manage all the responsibility of child-care by themselves, and the mothers who have few opportunities to frankly talk with other persons, tend to suffer from anxiety and negative feelings towards their child and child-care. The mothers who have no job and are mainly engaged in housework/child-care are prone to be isolated and are frequently suffering negative feelings in their daily life (Nagahisa 1995).

These data suggest that Japanese mothers are not satisfied with their daily life, and rather they seem to be suffering more tensions and frustration caused by their life and child-care. Japanese mothers are not happy in doing housework/child-care which are totally depended from their spouses, and are socially expected as female roles in both implicit and explicit ways. Also, the findings ironically suggest the importance of mother’s detachment from the child and of involvement in an other person/work for the child and the mother, although attachment has been predominantly given much attention from the “traditional” researchers for a long time. Mother’s care and close
tie with the child have been particularly emphasized as the best and exclusive importance and mother role has been traditionally viewed as the female's primary role.

Such traditional views on female role, however, are critically to be challenged by these evidences. Previous researches focusing on mother-child relationships and child's attachment to mother would be insufficient, instead, examinations on the detachment processes between mother and child would be extremely needed in order to fully understand the developmental processes not only of a child, but also of the mothers (Negayama, K. 1997).

Recent cross-cultural data have unveiled stronger and more frequent anxiety among Japanese mothers than American counterparts (Kameyama, et al. 1995). Similar pictures have been repeatedly reported by several national surveys (Nihon-joshikyoiku-kai 1995, Sorifu 1997).

The results could be well interpreted in relation to the differences in social contexts, in particular, mother's child-care situations. Not a few surveys have reported that Japanese fathers were hardly involved in child-care, namely, "fatherless" situations widely observed among Japanese families. This would be obviously caused by the traditional views on gender role characterized by high degree of division of labor according to sex. As a matter of fact, very few Japanese fathers agreed to the opinion that child-care is much more important than profession (Sorifu 1987).

On the other hand, not a few mothers are consciously or unconsciously trapped by the norm and expectations based on traditional female role. The norm would be reflected in the widely known Japanese phrase "myth of the 3-year-old". "By mother's hands until three" has strongly restricted women's lives for a long time, and has gradually caused frustration and negative feelings in the mothers (Kazui in press).

The division of labor strongly connected to gender has gradually unveiled the problems and defects in family life and the psychological development of family members. Mother's strong anxiety connected to "fatherless" situations, "empty nest" syndrome among middle-aged mothers, increasing divorce among middle-aged couples, might be fragmental phenomena caused by the defection of the division of labor in Japanese society. Japanese "myth of the 3-year-old" also seemed to lose its fitness under the drastic social changes.

Are Japanese mothers really bound to their children just as "oneness"?

For a long time Japanese mothers have been described as devoted and of close tie with their children just as "oneness", which has been assumed without doubt as unique to the mothers. Is this really true? Are Japanese mothers bound to their children so closely just as "oneness"?

As already described, Japanese women have been intensively socialized to adjust to the gender role characterized by a strict division of labor by sex. As a result, Japanese women have been inevitably forced to restrict their lives and activities in housework and child-care, and then tended to find their happiness and fulfillment in a family life. Their strong and close ties with children would not be innately furnished only in woman. Rather, they might be natural consequences of such long socialized experiences in Japanese history (Wakita 1985).

We have no definite evidence yet to answer the question whether "oneness" is innate and unique to mothers. So far, researches have been mainly done only on mother-child relationships without comparisons to father-child relationships and father's feeling toward child.

In order to examine the problem, the following investigations have been carried out (Kashiwagi et al. 1994). Mothers and fathers were independently asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning the feelings of both parents on child and child-care. As a result, three factors were identified: positive feelings (such as "child-care is enjoyable" "my child is lovely and valuable to me"), negative feelings (such as "be irritated caused by child" "be unconfident in child-care" "think if a child wouldn't be"), and the feeling "oneness" (such as "a child is part of my own body") (TABLE 1).

Concerning positive feelings, mothers and fathers were equal, however, as for negative feelings, mothers were significantly higher than fathers. Altogether, mothers seemed to be ambivalent in their feelings toward children. This was different from fathers
who never felt such conflict while enjoying their life with children. Mothers were deeply concerned with their children; they loved children very much and also thought child was valuable, at the same time, they were sometimes irritated by children, and tended to regret their having children, because they were unable to ignore their strong concerns for their own lives, not as a mother, not as a wife, but as an individual person.

**TABLE 1** Feelings towards Child/Child-care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive Feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(e.g. enjoyable, significant.)</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.91</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.55)</td>
<td>(0.60)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Negative Feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(e.g. irritated, anxious.)</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>&gt; 1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
<td>(0.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Feeling “Oneness”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g. as a part of mine child and I as one body)</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>&lt; 2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.78)</td>
<td>(0.85)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(Kashiwagi & Wakamatsu 1994)

As for the 3rd feeling “oneness”, the results were surprisingly opposite to the naive expectations that mother and child were connected as “oneness”. The scores of “oneness” were significantly higher in fathers than in mothers. Mothers were unlikely to feel their children as being a part of their own body, namely “oneness” compared to fathers.

How could we understand such results? This would be considered as the inevitable consequences of the recent social changes in Japan. Under the drastic changes of populational conditions, namely, longer lifespan and less number of child, they have had to look for their own life as more worthy than child and child-care from the future time perspectives. Now, considerations for children and also considerations for self would certainly co-exist in mother’s mind. Both needs are strong, but their directions are really opposite; one for the others, (outside), the another for herself. (inside). And, they sometimes come into collision. Here, a child would be seen by the mother not as a part of herself, just as “oneness”, but as an outsider, who prevents mother from doing something based on her strong consideration for herself.

This is quite different from the mothers in older generations. They could be totally satisfied with their life. They never had any doubts about their life and never had any needs for seeking their own life, because they had enough children (say, 5 or 6 children) to fully fill up their short span of life.

Now, why can fathers feel their child as “oneness”? The results would be possibly interpreted as follows; The daily child-care experiences would provide the care-givers some frustration and conflict between their love for the child and their own desire to live for themselves. In the case that a person would be less involved in daily child-care, she/he would not suffer from such conflict, and then she/he would be naturally prone to enjoy the child with positive feelings and easily see the child as “oneness”.

The interpretations were clearly supported by comparing the scores of “oneness” in 2 father groups differing in the length of time they were engaged in daily child-care (FIGURE 1).

![FIGURE 1](image)

Previous researches done in the U.S. revealed that sex differences in the response to the young were not necessarily stable across lifespan and cultures, rather, considerably variable according to the experiences, socialization and situational factors (Berman P.W. 1980). The detailed comparative investigations on mothers and fathers for their feelings on their children were hardly done so far. Among them, Field (1978) compared the behaviors toward babies in primary mothers, primary fathers and secondary fathers and found the experiences of daily child-care would change caregiver’s behaviors despite of sex of caregivers. This suggested the feelings on child could also change according to the experiences of child-care, which were clearly proved in the present study.
The changing pictures of Japanese mothers/women in social contexts

Japanese mothers had been socialized to be "good mothers", and then they had to find their satisfactions in children and child-care as mothers. Recent drastic changes, however, have persuaded Japanese women not to feel secure on previous lifestyle, rather to seek for their own life, not as mothers/wives, but as an individual person, since they are unable to complete their long lives satisfactorily just as mothers/wives, due to a longer lifespan and less children.

Thus, recent population problems have definitely changed the women's lives and their psychological well-beings. Because of such epoch-making changes for Japanese women, recent population problems have been referred as "population revolution".

There are many evidences showing that Japanese women have increasingly shifted their lives from the traditional female role to a more individualistic one.

Based on extensive data on lifestyle and opinion in young mothers, Yamamoto and others identified several groups differing their lifestyle and relationships with the child. They clarified the meanings of child for mothers as closely connected with their lifestyle. The mothers who had job and wanted to live independently tended to see their children as independent individuals, on the other hands, the mothers who wished to be a "good" daughter and/or totally enjoyed their life as housewives were likely to see their children as their pleasure and life worth.

Influences of higher education upon women/mothers

In addition to the above, the role of education would be much more to be considered. Previous research found significant Japan-U.S. differences in maternal variables such as communication style, mother-child interaction pattern, control strategies, opinions on childrearing practices, expectations for child, and so on (Azuma et al. 1981). At the same time, however, they observed wide individual differences among Japanese samples, and the differences were significantly connected with mothers' educational levels. Namely, higher the mothers' education was, they tended to shift from traditional attitudes/behaviors towards Western ones. This meant higher education would promote women to leave from Japanese characteristics and then to approach toward Western individualistic way of thinking and behaviors.

Similar trends were recognized regarding the feelings toward the child; mothers' feeling "oneness", traditional Japanese mothers' feelings, were significantly stronger in mothers of lower educational levels (Figure 2).

Opinions on gender role and egalitarian attitudes were also reportedly closely related to educational levels in women. Such changes in Japanese women have to be seriously considered, since the educational levels in Japanese women have been rapidly and increasingly higher during in the past decades.

For a long time, I have been wondering cross-cultural comparisons tending to fall into several subtle mistakes. One was to overemphasize the differences between the cultures, rather than to overlooking the similarities across the cultures. This would be probably caused by the strong impressions of the differences which easily appeal to researcher's curiosity. The 2nd one would be to overlook the differences and changes within one culture and tend to easily generalize without careful considerations on sub-culture. This kind of mistakes has sometimes been done regarding Japanese mothers/women. I have been frequently uncomfortable to hear "oneness" as being still too much referred as the essential characteristic of Japanese mothers. We should not remain at same previous understanding of Japanese mothers/women, since time has certainly been changing.

The changes are also reflected that self-esteem has been significantly related to masculinity, not to femininity among Japanese women (Okazaki et al. 1994,
This suggests Japanese women can not retain highly their self esteem by being traditionally feminine (tender, obedient, cute, devoting and so on) today. Rather, their self-esteem would be maintained by their confidence in themselves as active, with leadership independent, intellectual, and so on (masculine).

Value of a child under “population revolution”

The great differences in meanings/value of child were found to be in the mothers’ reasoning on their decision to have children (Kashiwagi et al. in preparation). Two kinds of reasoning were identified: traditional (such as having a child is natural once married, to take after the family name or to keep the family grave) and personal/conditional (desire to experience pregnancy and give birth as a woman, fully enjoying life with the spouse and moving on, my life was settled in terms of hobby, taking lessons, traveling and others). The reasons for having a child were significantly changed. Traditional reasons were less supported in younger groups, who strongly agreed personal and conditional reasons. The reason “I wanted to experience pregnancy and give birth as a woman.” frequently observed in younger generation would be particularly interesting in the sense that we can never see here any concerns for others, i.e., for her husband, nor for family. We can recognize only a strong interest and concern in the mother’s own experience.

Such phenomenon could be easily understood: recent progress in medical technology made people control the number and the time of birth quite easily and securely. This had naturally caused the change in the value of a child.

Before, a child was assumed to be given from God, or someone who is beyond human power and knowledge. Nowadays, a child is under the parental control, their decisions and actions. In a word, a child is to become a human product. Under the situations, mothers are naturally and easily to consider many alternatives and to make their decision of having a child as a choice among many alternatives based on their own will.

The population revolution itself would be the natural consequences of people’s decisions under the highly progress of medical technology, and would become the very situations where women had to and tended to think on how to live, not as a mother, not as a wife, but as an individual person. Accordingly, personal/conditional reasons would be quite natural and rational consequences. This might be the new desire or new motivation which the population revolution eventually had given to the current generation.

The Changes in Gender and Egalitarian Sex Role Attitudes among Japanese Women

The recent changes of sex role values were reportedly apparent among Japanese women. In 1972, Japanese mothers ranked “mother” as the highest role among other roles, followed by wife, woman (female) and person (Smith and Schooler). The authors concluded that the role of mother was the central role for Japanese women, however, they also predicted a potential change in Japanese women’s values toward being more individualistic and less traditional.

Their predictions were certainly confirmed by Suzuki’s data of 1986.; % of role selection were fairly different from Smith and Schooler’s ones.; The traditional roles of mother and wife were clearly decreasing, while, the role selections of woman and person were steadily increasing.

From those data, we can conclude that contemporary Japanese women have been increasingly becoming more individualistic and more egalitarian since 1972. The changes were already described as reflecting the mother’s feelings on child, not necessarily as “oneness”, but the reasons why mothers decide to have children, their value of a child, and so on.

Gender differences in sex role attitudes in Japanese society

There are obviously wide individual differences of role selections among Japanese women reflecting ambivalent sex role attitudes of traditionalism and egalitarianism. This would be “sex role chaos” (Suzuki) in Japanese society. However, much more important and serious matters than such chaos are the significant differences between men and women regarding sex role attitudes. A lot of researches have repeatedly reported the gender differences showing that men are much more traditional and less egalitar-
ian than women regardless of age, region and socio-economic groups (Somuchō 1996, Watanabe 1993, Wakamatsu et al. 1994).

The gaps on sex role attitudes and egalitarianism are naturally reflected in bigger dissatisfaction with family life among women. National surveys regarding satisfaction with family life and work place have repeatedly reported women more strongly feel inequality in family life at all age levels. The satisfactions with marriage are also reported significantly lower in women (wives) compared to men (husbands) regardless of age (Kashiwagi et al. 1995). Such a situation would make it quite a serious and unhappy situation for the Japanese.

The high degree of division of labor according to sex in Japanese families has been frequently considered as a “well-balanced relationship”, however, it has gradually lost its efficiency and unveiled the difficulties. Women’s (wives’) dissatisfaction with the family life would be an adverse reactions to unequal situations in family life and to men’s traditional sex-role attitudes. This could seem quiet but strong objections from women to the Japanese family structure on the highly division of labor by sex, which has provided inequality for a long time among family members.

The meanings of “interdependence”

This is not only limited to the matter of marriage and family, but also deeply connected with the meanings of “interdependence”. Everyone basically agreed with the opinions that Japanese society and person-relationships could be characterized by “Interdepencence”, as Hazel and Kitayama augued.

However, it could be fairly recognized the meanings and effects of “interdependence” are not necessarily homogeneous to everyone in Japanese society. Rather, they are extremely different according to the positions a person stands at. Interdepencence in Japanese society has been closely connected with the traditional belief of gender, sex-segregation, and then “interdependence” might not be symmetrical and equal between men and women.

The unsymmetrical and unequal pictures of interdependence can be most typically observed in Japanese family. A family is usually described and defined as a group characterized with “interdependence” among the family members. It would be ideal, however, it is not the reality.

There are two kinds of members among the family in terms of the role/position of caring and interdependence; one is the person who is expected and used to take the role to take care of others. Usually, women are expected to take the role of carers (caretakers) as wives and mothers. The 2nd is the person who usually stays at the position where care can be given. Usually, men stand at this position. Frequently, Japanese wives see their husband as “another boy”. Thus, men and women really stand on different, unsymmetrical positions in family lives in terms of care and interdependence.

Previous data on women's dissatisfaction with their family life really reflect the inequality in interdependent relationships in Japanese family. The effects of “interdependence” definitely depend on the positions person stands at. They are different between men and women, because they usually stand at different positions in terms of caring and consideration for others. Women who used to take care of others (children and husband) are unlikely to enjoy positive effects from “interdependence”. Rather, they are more frequently prone to suffer from negative effects of “interdependence”, tension and difficulty in social relationships (Shigarami). Women are reporting greater difficulty in social relationships, in particular, caused by their family life (Akiyama 1997).

Thus, sub-cultures exist in Japanese society where men and women live in different cultures in terms of “interdependence”.

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