

Wives' decision-making power in Japan and the U.S.*

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In Japan, it is becoming increasingly important for many people to pursue individual freedom in their marriage. People are moving away from the norm of marriage and family and choosing their own marital lifestyles. For example, some people may prefer dual-carrier marriages, while others may prefer one-breadwinner marriages. It depends on their preference. Thus, marital lifestyle can be a measure of self-realization for each person (Nonoyama 1999). Such a tendency has already been widely observed in the U.S. and other Western societies, and there is a very wide diversity in marriage and families (Hunt & Hunt 1987; Popenoe 1993). It is a commonly held belief that Japanese society imported the culture of individualism from those societies. Now individualism has spread through Japanese society to the extent that people assert their rights to decide their own lifestyles by themselves.

This study discusses individuals' freedom to decide marital lifestyles in today's Japan. It uses the survey data of Japanese married couples

and American married couples. Comparison between two societies will suggest how the meaning of marital and family life is changing for Japanese people and what will be important in the future for each spouse's well-being.

Wives in Japan

In this study, we especially focus on Japanese wives' freedom in their marital lives. This theme is related to marital decision-making power. Previous studies of Japanese marital decision-making have suggested that husbands and wives divide the decision making autonomously. Most of the wives make decisions about domestic matters (e.g., housekeeping and child-rearing) by themselves (Masuda 1965; Center for Family Issues in Hyogo 1996). If one examines only this point, it may seem that Japanese wives decide their marital lifestyle freely. However, in reality, they have only followed the norm of gender roles. In fact, decisions on matters outside of the home have not been made by wives. It has been difficult for them to interfere

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in their partners' territory. Now that more and more Japanese wives want to decide all aspects of their marital lifestyles for their self-realization, they are interested in such matters. Furthermore, the decisions left entirely to the husbands' judgments are the most basic and important for marital life when compared with the decisions made by the wives. For example, husbands decide how their families should make their livelihood. On the other hand, wives make decisions about domestic matters in accordance with their husbands' decision (The public information of Japanese government 2002).

Therefore we cannot say that many Japanese wives have decided their marital lifestyle freely in the past. In addition, compared with husbands, wives have had less enjoyable freedom. This tendency is typically indicated by the fact that 97% of Japanese wives change their family names into their husbands' family names when they marry. Changing their names causes a lot of inconvenience for the wives, but they take it for granted that they must give up their family names because of the husband-dominant norm, even though the Civil Code allows the husband to change his family name to his wife's. (Note: In Japan, one of the spouses must change his/her family name into the partner's family name when they get married.) Now that more and more wives as well as husbands are pursuing free marital lifestyles for themselves, it is becoming a big problem for wives that they cannot enjoy as much freedom in their marriage as their husbands. Consequently, this study examines the state of Japanese wives' freedom in deciding their

marital lifestyle and tries to find an image of marital lifestyles in the future by examining American wives' freedom.

Two types of wives' decision-making

As stated above, many Japanese wives have not had the freedom to realize the marital lifestyle for their self-realization. They have only been concerned in the decision-making process per the norm. Nevertheless, it is true that they have decided on the domestic matters concerned with marital life. In that sense, it may be said that they have had a kind of decision-making power.

However, such decision-making power does not result in promoting wives' self-realization because they are restricted by the norm. This tendency can be observed in not only Japan but also other societies to a greater or lesser extent, and there are a variety of studies that discuss restriction by the norm. According to Komter (1989), impact of the norm should be referred as "hidden power". Wives usually do not recognize that they are forced to make decisions about domestic matters according to the norm. Instead, they tend to think that they decide on their marital lifestyle freely (Tochenor 1999). Although such discussions originated in the Western societies, those findings are particularly true of Japanese marriage because the Japanese wives have had relatively fewer opportunities to examine the norm.

Thus, it is difficult to distinguish between decision making inducted by such hidden power and decision making to realize one's free preference. However, as mentioned above,

recently more and more Japanese people have started to internalize individualistic thought to the extent that they refuse to sacrifice themselves for the group, others or the norm. Those individualistic people tend to pursue marital lifestyles for their self-realization. They may be interested in choosing a certain lifestyle for their well-being, and they may say, "If I am happy, other family members must be happy" (Scanzoni & Szinovacz 1980; Scanzoni 2000). Consequently, we will see increasing numbers of the decisions that are free from the norm.

Data

In order to consider what is important for Japanese wives to decide their marital lifestyles freely, we use the data from two surveys. One is a survey administrated in Japan in 2002 to 1,000 married couples in which husbands were born between 1961 and 1970. All respondents lived in Matsue, a small local city. Respondents were selected by random sampling using the registry of voters. The same questionnaire was sent by mail to each husband and wife and the answers were also collected by mail. Valid cases were 258 couples.

The other survey was administrated in 2004 to 75 American couples in which husbands were born between 1961 and 1970. Respondents lived in Alachua county and Marion County, Florida. They were selected by random sampling. In this survey, the method of computer assisted telephone interviewing was used. Husbands and wives were both interviewed by phone. Valid cases were 75 couples. Questions were almost the same as

those on the Japanese survey.

Evaluating wives' decision-making power

To evaluate the Japanese and American wives' freedom to decide their marital lifestyles, an index to see the extent of wives' realized preference was used. This index deals with the answers to the questions asking wives how they realize their preference in marital decision-making regarding the following 10 items: house and living circumstances, sharing domestic chores, child-rearing policies, their work, their free time, husbands' work, their husbands' free time, savings and debts, the family's schedules, and over-all marital lifestyle. For the wives' responses to each item, between 1 and 5 points were given. The more wives reported that they could realize their preference, the higher the points that were given. By summing up the points for each item, the extent of wives' realized preference was measured.

As far as Japanese wives were concerned, the difference between the two types of decision-making (i.e., decision-making forced by the norm and decision-making for self-realization) should be considered because these two types are mixed in Japan. As a result, a different index was designed. This index estimates how wives regard individual freedom as important. It is also an index to estimate their freedom from the norm. This index is based on wives' responses to the following opinions: "self-realization is important for a happy life", "although it causes a confrontation between you and the other person, saying the right thing is important", "pursuing your own lifestyle is

more important than following (or obeying) customs and traditions”, and “individuals should be independent, not leaning on others, even family members”. For each item, between 1 and 5 points were given. The more respondents agreed with each opinion, the higher the points that were given. After summing up the points of each item for all wives, the wives were divided into two groups on the basis of the median ($M=15.00$). The group in which the total score is below the median is regarded as “not individualistic”, while the group in which the total score is more than the median is regarded as “individualistic”.

In this research, American wives are assumed to be much more individualistic than Japanese wives who are relatively free from the norm. Therefore, this index was prepared just for the Japanese data, and then the American data is referred to in order to estimate the future of Japanese marriages.

Results

The mean score of Japanese wives' realized preference in the “individualistic” group was 33.04 while that of the “not individualistic” group was 34.16. There was no significant difference between the two groups ($t=1.625$). However, each group can be distinguished by the terms of the variables having significant effect on the extent of wives' realized preference.

Using the extent of wives' realized preference as a dependent variable, regression analysis was performed. Independent variables were as follows: 1) sympathy for husband/wife.

This variable was taken from the responses to the items “taking your partner's perspective into consideration” and “respecting your partner's needs outside the family”. Each item was scored from 1 point for “not at all important” to 5 points for “very important”, and the points were totaled. 2) Awareness of depending on husband's/wife's care. This variable consisted of the responses to the questions asking how they depend on their partners in terms of “your daily life”, “your emotional well-being”, “nursing other family members”, “relationships with neighbors” and “your over-all family life”. Each item was scored from 1 point for least to 5 points for greatest, and the points were totaled. 3) Performing the expressive role. This variable was determined by the responses to “you spend a lot of time and effort doing housework” and “you're concerned about keeping a good atmosphere among family members”, which were scored between 1 and 5 points, and the points were totaled. 4) Husband's attitude toward gender roles. This variable consisted of the husbands' responses to three items: “husbands should decide all important matters in the family”, “wives should restrain themselves in any situation” and “wives should value housekeeping above everything else”. Each item was scored between 1 point and 5 points, and the scores were summed. 5) Balance of income. This variable was calculated by taking husband's annual income from the wife's. 6) Balance of educational career. This variable was calculated by taking years husband went to school from years wife went to school. 7) Presence of children. This was

Table 1: Regression analysis on Japanese couple data

	The extent of realizing preference (Japanese wives)	
	not individualistic	individualistic
W : sympathy for husband	.168	.116
W : awareness of depending on husband's care	.203*	.259**
W : performing the expressive role	.216*	.303**
H : attitude toward gender roles	-.074	-.272**
H : sympathy for wife	-.017	-.046
H : awareness of depending on wife's care	.014	-.243*
H : performing the expressive role	.144	-.046
the balance of income (W-H)	-.132	-.031
the balance of educational career (W-H)	.124	-.154
presence of children	.024	-.276**
R ²	.169	.297
F	2.011*	3.545**

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

W : the variable taken from wives' response.

H : the variable taken from husbands' response.

a dummy variable. One point was given if the couple had children and no points were given if the couple had no child.

As Table 1 shows, with regard to Japanese wives, their awareness of depending on husbands' care and performing the expressive role are important so they can realize their preference, whether they are individualistic or not. However, in the case of individualistic Japanese wives, the husbands' attitudes also have an important effect on wives' freedom to decide marital lifestyle. It seems to be important that husbands do not adhere to gender roles and also that husbands do not think they depend heavily on their wives' care.

How about American couples? The mean score of the extent of wives' realized preference is 35.33. Table 2 shows the result of regression analysis using the extent of wives' realized preference as a dependent variable. For wives

in the U.S., only husbands' attitudes have a significant effect. Here it is noteworthy that “husbands' attitude” is related to their understanding and consideration of their wives.

In both the Japanese couple data and the American couple data, socioeconomic resources did not have a significant effect on wives' freedom to decide marital lifestyle. Previous studies have presented the resource theory, a theory that such resources (and other intangible resources) increase marital decision-making power (Blood & Wolfe 1960; Burr 1973). This theory is related to the exchange theory in which rationality such as balance and “give and take” is emphasized (Shehan & Lee 1989). It has been suggested that Japanese wives, who are gradually becoming conscious of self-realization, have to make an effort to “give” expressive support to their husbands in order to “take” the chance to realize their

Table 2: Regression analysis on American couple data

	The extent of realizing preference (American wives)
W : sympathy for husband	.076
W : awareness of depending on husband's care	-.063
W : performing the expressive role	.278
H : attitude toward gender roles	.370*
H : sympathy for wife	.334*
H : awareness of depending on wife's care	.056
H : performing the expressive role	.151
the balance of income (W-H)	.099
the balance of educational career (W-H)	-.012
presence of children	-.103
R ²	.404
F	2.372*

**p<.01, *p<.05

W : the variable taken from wives' response.

H : the variable taken from husbands' response.

preference. However, another factor, which does not result from "give and take", seems to be important for wives' decision-making power for their self-realization. That factor is husbands' attitude. We can typically see this tendency in the data of American couples. As the wife becomes individualistic, the husband's sympathy for his wife and his attitude toward gender roles becomes important to increasing the wife's decision-making power.

Discussion

The above results suggest that the husbands' understanding becomes important for the wives' freedom in their marriages. In short, as wives seek the freedom to decide marital lifestyle based on their independent preferences, their husbands' understanding and consideration becomes increasingly necessary. Individualism and freedom need the

cooperation of both partners. Here we can see the future meaning of marriage for Japanese wives. To promote the well-being of wives in the future, it will become more important to think about how the wives can obtain their husbands' understanding and consideration of them.

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