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Cultures Represented in Everyday life: Japanese and American Values and Culture

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GH 401, Honors Independent Study

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Abstract

Culture is an important factor in a country because of how it displays the values of the people within it. Japan is a homogenous society that has been around since 600 B.C., the culture created since early in age. While only having been officially founded in 1776, America has also grown to have a culture of its own, heavily due to it being a vast melting pot of a country. Both countries hold aspects of culture and their values within society that are similar and different. This paper examines parts of everyday life that the culture and values of the two countries are shown: family life, school life, and work life. While both countries began with different family structures, Japan and America's family structure in the modern day is most commonly the nuclear family. Japan is a collectivist society, opting for everyone to have a hive mind, while America is an individualistic society, encouraging people to have their own thoughts and actions. These opposing societal views represent themselves in each country's school and work culture, causing little shared values. Family, school, and work are all things that people partake in every day, unknowingly continuing their country's culture.

Keywords: *Family, School, Work, Culture, individualistic, collectivist, Japanese*

Cultures Represented in Everyday life: Japanese and American Values and Culture

Family structure and the household is a direct look into the citizens of different countries and their beliefs amongst the country. What will be looked at in this paper is the different family lives of citizens in Japan and America, noting both the similarities and differences between the two countries' social structures. It is important that we recognize other countries and their culture in relation to our own, in order to grow and accommodate these differences. It is also beneficial to discuss both countries' family and household structures because, many times, we assume our personal experiences are the experiences of those around us as well. Availability heuristic, the overestimation of something occurring because it occurs for yourself, causes us to become "blind," or unaware, of other situations happening in our own country at a possible high rate also (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

In America's past, the most common and thought of family structure for the average household was the nuclear family, containing a husband, wife, and children. "Nuclear families live by themselves independent from their families of orientation, is thought to be particularly well adopted to the needs of the American economy" (Sussman, 1959). A husband must be the only one to work while the wife is the one taking care of the household chores and the children's needs (Cogswell, 392). Anything straying from this definition is no longer considered a nuclear family structure. Even if it is a husband and husband with a child or a wife and a wife with a child, both are not considered to be part of the nuclear family structure. This family structure is still common among the American family, however, because of aspects that allow for change—divorce, affairs, deaths, people from around the world settling in America, the changing of thoughts as time passes, etc—it is now also common for a variety of family types to be seen (Pew Research Center). The variety of family types that are common in America, are those such

as single parent households, families where both parents work, and generational families where multiple generations live in the same house (Cogswell, 392).

Meanwhile, for most Americans, Japan's family and household social structure might be unknown. There is little or talk or representation of Japanese families in America, but the most common type displayed in Japan itself is the *Ie* Japanese family system. An *Ie* Japanese family system was the traditional name for the type of Japanese family where it was "designed to continue over generations, under which an inherent family homestead, family name, and business are passed on from father to the eldest son along a paternal line that can stretch for generations" (Sakata). It is both a family structure and a social expectation, coming from a patriarchal stance, expecting the father to be head of the household, the mother to be in charge of the money that the father makes and the kids, and the son to be next in line to be the head of the household. However, much like America, the traditional family structure has begun to change over time, now the nuclear family being most common among Japanese households.

Although, the Japanese government is still in accommodation to the old family structure because of the *Koseki*, which is the "registration system that documents the identity of the Japanese" that is a "house-hold or family register, it constitutes the most important document for Japanese citizens" (White, 252). An issue with the *Koseki* is that it requires you to put someone down as the head of household, but does, typically, not allow women or foreigners to put down their name, forcing conformity to the *Ie* family system, at least by documentation. There is also a punishment to those that "are deviant" from the system in which they will not get certain "economic, administrative, and social effects" (White, 253).

These family structures reveal the different countries to be different but technically the same in nature. In the past, while America's common family structure was nuclear family and

Japan's common family structure was the *Ie* family system, both family structures followed similar thought processes. Both nuclear and *Ie* family have the idea of a family being a husband, wife, and children, with the husband being the breadwinner for the family and the mother taking care of the children. The smaller details are where the countries differ, Japan having a specific structure of head of household along with the mother being the one in charge of all the money that is brought into the house by the father working, while America had the idea that while the wife was responsible for the house chores and children it was expected for husbands to still take part in certain aspects of raising the children. Meanwhile, an old proverb in Japan is written in English along the lines of "a good husband is healthy and absent" which comes from the old traditional idea of the *Ie* family system where in order to be a good husband they should be healthy, so they are able to go to work, and absent, meaning they are away from the house because they are working so much.

Thesis

In America and Japan, there are family structures and ways of life that are a representation of the culture that inhabits the countries themselves. However, the types of family structures are not as different as some may think at first glance. Although the two countries may be different in nature, both nations hold similar values in some aspects of their culture that are represented within their citizen's daily lives. The family structure is one of the biggest representations of the culture of Japan and America being similar while school life is one of the biggest representations of the culture of Japan and America opposing views.

Because America is a melting pot of a country, it becomes difficult to say exactly what the standard culture is for a family. The massive landscape of America causes different states and the citizens that inhabit those states to have unique experiences and cultural experiences. In this paper, because of this fact, I will be going off the statistical average, most reoccurring, type of

family and American school structure, however, I will often times bring in varying demographical situations that is either important to consider or a varying point of view to note.

There will be three research questions that will be asked and analyzed in this paper: what in Family structures and their households show the aspects in Japanese and American culture, how do the different Values and Culture shape Japanese and American Families, what aspects of the Japanese school system distinguishes itself from the American school system and vice versa and what are the work culture and values of Japan and America? These questions will analyze and explore the similarities and differences of Japan and America's family, school, and work.

Research Questions

What in family structures and their households show the aspects in Japanese and American culture?

In Japan, the Japanese family is called the *Ie* system, dating back to the Edo period of Japan. *Ie* is something that is physical, the people of the family themselves, and also mental, the aspects of that family such as their rank in society (Bell, 2004). During the Meiji restoration, the idea of the *Ie* family values grew in Japan, used to combat the modernization and westernization impact on traditional Japan (Ochiai, 2000). A focus on Japanese headship and succession of the *Ie* family (Ochiai, 2000). The traditional Japanese family structure is a multi-generational family household, the household containing grandparents, parents, and children (Miyazaki, 2021). Depending on the age of the members of the household, the multi-generational household can even have great-grandparents. This type of family structure often can be portrayed in Japanese media, most popular example being *Sazae-san*. *Sazae-san* is a Japanese cartoon, originally produced in the 1960s, that follows the multi-generational family of *Sazae-san* and his life.

Japan is known and regarded as an "aging society" because of the elderly population rising to be a large percent of the society's population (Kumagai, 2010). Through the years, from the Meiji period in Japan to the modern age, the Japanese family system has undergone a degree in change of many of its aspects: marriage, divorce, fertility, and the structure of the system as a whole (Kumagai, 2010). Omiai was a very important aspect in marriages, resulting in 98% of Japanese people married until the 1980s. Omiai translates to matchmaking, being the equivalent of arranged marriages (Nakano & Ohara, 2019). However, in the modern age in Japan, Omiai has been disregarded and instead Japanese people are favoring finding a relationship for love rather than just convenience.

The typical American family and its structure has changed a number of times throughout its few centuries as a country. Before gaining independence from England in 1776, the most common structure of an American family was the colonial family. The colonial family structure, often being large in number of around ten to twelve family members due to mainly the belief that children were the most important part of the family, leading to the number growing (Bardis, 1963). However, an important thing to note that also played part in the large number of children in a family during the time was because of the very high child mortality rates (Bardis, 1963). A colonial family structure positioned the father as the ultimate "ruler" of the wife and children, divorce being uncommon but still allowed for specific reasons: adultery on the woman's part, abandonment, and incorrect documentation (Bardis, 1963).

Family structure for America in the present day is difficult to say precisely due to the wide range of demographics that encompasses America, bringing different statistics. Widely known and thought to be the standard, the nuclear family. The nuclear family is when a family consists of a husband, wife, and children living together in one household. In a nuclear family,

the husband is seen as head of the house while the woman generally takes care of the house and children, still being able to work in some cases. The nuclear family structure is generalized to have a white picket fence,

Now, America is moving away from the nuclear family structure. The United States is moving from nuclear to non-nuclear meanwhile alternatively the Ie family structure is moving to a nuclear household. This is due to the changing position of the female role in society. In America, the feminism movement began a societal change. No longer having as much of a pressure to keep in the societal structure resulted in a variety of family and household structures such as being divorced, friends living together, single parent, living with their extended family, multi-generational household, a non-heteronormative family, etc. Different demographics also have a higher statistic of types of household structures. While nuclear family is still the most common family structure, these variety of family and household structures have made their way into the American life, causing the rate of nuclear families to decrease: single-parent households, extended families, living with roommates, and families that represent the LGBTQ+. Families that represent the LGBTQ+ include Husband and Husband, Wife and Wife, Nonbinary with a partner, etc. “As homosexuality became more accepted in the urban public sphere, there were fewer constraints on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people who could afford to move outside the traditional territorial concentration” (Yeros, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Japanese family’s multi-generational family structure has been on a declining rate in placement for the nuclear family. “The number of three-generation households is rapidly declining, but even in the 2010s, 16.3% of Japanese households with children under 18 years of age belonged to three-generation households” (Miyazaki, 2021). In Japan, women are now being accepted to work rather than stay at home and take care of their families. In the past, a

Japanese multi-generational family's wife would be expected to stay at home to take care of the house, the children, and the grandparent's percent (Miyazaki, 2021). Now, with the wife being able to go out and work as well, the grandparents will often not live with the family and instead go to a nursing home or hire professional help. This caused the family structure to form a nuclear family structure. A wife can still work in a multi-generational household, however, the likelihood of a mother working in a multi-generational household is decreased by fifty percent (Miyazaki, 2021). The decline of the multi-generational household in comparison to the rise of the nuclear family structure is striking. "Between 2000 and 2019, the number of three-generation households decreased by almost half, from 4.8 million to 2.6 million, and the average household size declined from 2.75 to 2.39" (Miyazaki, 2021). Both countries have the same most common family structure, but they came to that family structure in opposing ways, as well as are still heading in the opposite direction.

Both Japan and America are also moving towards marriage for love rather than obligation. The modern American family structure leans towards for love now rather than out of necessity like in American family history. The positions of the family members "ruling" over the household is also often more balanced between the husband and wife, sometimes even involving older children in some of the decisions for the household issues (Bardis, 1963). A reason for this shift from the colonial American family to the modern American family structure largely being due to the feminist movement that ensured the progression of the American society, giving women rights that had been kept for them for many years. They are seen as being able to not just be a person to make children and take care of the family, women are now seen as capable as working and even still having a family, although not quite as large as a colonial family.

A very important value in Japanese culture of the family is politeness. This value is presented largely in the Japanese language itself through aspects such as particles, word choice, and honorifics. Honorifics are add-ons to the beginning or ending of certain words that show either relationship, rank, gender or status (Akamatsu, 2011). A quick example of an honorific is the suffix honorific, ‘san／さん’. ‘san／さん’ is the most common honorific, used for those that are strangers or don’t have a close relationship with the speaker, the default honorific. When speaking the Japanese language and you want to be disrespectful, the simplest form is to drop the honorific on their name. This means that you think so little of them that the listener does not deserve the slightest amount of respect. However, the honorific can also be dropped when the speaker and listener are very close as well. In a relationship, you can either add a honorific at the end that indicates you think they are cute, which would be the honorific ‘chan／－ちゃん’, or you can drop the honorific entirely. Dropping the honorific entirely when you are in a relationship or even a close friendship shows that you are able to be informal with each other, more than just using the informal forms of words. Family members do not use honorifics in general. The only time a family member will sometimes refer to another family member with a honorific is if it is a parent is talking to their child who are young in age. Adults in Japan will use ‘chan／－ちゃん’ and ‘kun／－くん’ to children even before the children start speaking words. They do this because it allows children naturally acquire the words into their own vocabulary without having to be taught the honorifics (Burdelski, 2013). Since their parents are speaking to them using ‘chan／－ちゃん’ and ‘kun／－くん’, many young children will think that ‘chan／－ちゃん’ and ‘kun／－くん’ are part of their own name. Children may become confused and when introducing

themselves, they add the ‘chan/－ちゃん’ and ‘kun/－くん’ honorific titles to their own name.

An example of this is when I studied abroad in Japan for four months in the fall of 2023 and stayed with a Japanese host family. The Host family was a husband, wife, and three children. They were a nuclear family type that reflects the new common type of family structure in Japan rather than the old type of family structure Japan once had. Their youngest was three years old and whenever he referred to himself, instead of just saying I, he said his own name with ‘kun/－くん’ attached to the end of it.

What aspects of the Japanese school system distinguishes itself from the American school system and vice versa?

Young Japanese school systems have the highest differentiation from young American school systems. In Japan, Japanese teachers choose to not discipline the students, instead leaving it to their peers to scold the students that may be misbehaving. Managing the classroom through modeling, reminding, and instructing, rather than through threats, punishment, or rewards (Peak, 1991). This allows the children to desire and have the ability to cooperate on their own initiative. The ‘rules’ are enforced by their peers rather than an authority figure.

The Japanese society is a homogenous community, operating on the belief that you should blend into the crowd, this is displayed in their school systems through the school uniforms and the rules they enforce every day to keep this societal standard. Hair must be kept in a low ponytail for girls and cut above the tip of their ears if you are a boy. No unnatural hair colors are allowed, some schools even require students to dye their hair black if they have an unnatural, although natural for the student, hair color. This contrasts with the American school system that, while some private schools may have a school uniform, is less strict. Instead,

American schools often encourage students to be unique and stand out. School dress codes are usually in place to keep children what is deemed appropriate, no midriff, skirt too short, etc., rather than having them be a group.

The two cultures have different timelines for the children when it is encouraged for them to become independent from their parents and their families. In Japan, people are encouraged from a young age to be independent and self-reliant. A documentary, titled 'Old Enough,' produced by Netflix, highlighted the fact that children walk to and from school by themselves, sometimes in a group of other children. The same independence to possibly go to a store or walk around the neighborhood. However, this independence is not freely given but instead first taught by the parents. The family will go through the routine of showing the children the way, interacting with the neighbors along the way, so they can freely go but safely. In Japan, you will often see school children, identified by their school uniforms, walking on the sidewalk to their school by themselves or with classmates, no adults in sight. That is not the case for American students.

In American culture, it is often encouraged for children to become independent when they hit their teenage years, specifically high school. In high school, a large part of their milestones occurs: puberty (if not already reached), begin able to get their driver's license, preparing for college, etc. For many Americans, this is the most opportunity they have had to explore the world and themselves. The first taste of independence for Americans are when they get their driver's license and a car, or they are able to use their parent's car. This is their first taste of independence, or freedom, because most have not been able to freely go out on their own and not have to rely on their parents or a friend to come get them. Unlike with Japan, like previously

discussed, where children are able to walk to the local stores and businesses as they please, with their parent's permission.

If an American does not get a driver's license, then the next most common place of getting independence is going to college. Most American Universities require first year students to live on campus in a dorm, this allows the students to have an experience living away from home and developing their own identity. This cultural aspect is different in Japan because Japanese Universities do not have this rule. In fact, most Japanese college students choose to live at home and instead just commute to their university every day. I have personal experience with this because I, like I previously mentioned, studied abroad in Japan for four months in the fall of 2023 and stayed with a Japanese host family. The university provided the host family, and it was a twenty-minute walk to the train station, a forty-minute train ride from my station to Ikebukuro train station, and then a fifteen-minute walk from the Ikebukuro train station to my university. It was an hour and fifteen-minute one way trip every day, which is about the average commute time of most Japanese college students. Commuters are not as common in America. Most American students live on campus or in a university provided apartment still within the area of the university.

Trust is an aspect of the homogenous country, allowing children to walk freely because the community is watching out for one another. Many neighborhoods in America, landscape and structure of them, don't allow children to walk by themselves even if Americans wanted to start having their children be more self-reliant from those young in age. America has a higher crime rate in comparison to Japan, who has one of the lowest crime rates in the world. "The low crime rate in Japan may be due to the following factors: (1) a highly organized and efficient police system; (2) a highly efficient court system; and (3) strict gun control" (Chang, 1988). This

higher crime rate causes American's to be less willing to send their children out by themselves as oftentimes even adults can be hesitant to leave by themselves in certain circumstances.

How is work culture and values reflected in Japan and America?

Japan has a heavy work life culture. For many people in Japan, they begin to go to work right out of high school. There is a national time for hiring new student candidates, March 1st. The students apply during their junior year, one year before their senior year, in which interviews and screenings start. Many Japanese companies don't care about college education, they prefer to train the new hires themselves. The thought process of Japanese companies is that they can take "regular employees without necessarily any specific skills and are trained during life by the employer to meet the changing needs for the firm" (Tsuda, 1974).

Once hired, it is most common to stay at that company until you retire. This is because of the Japan's lifetime employment. Lifetime employment is what it sounds like, working in the same place for your entire life. It is when a worker "commits himself to lifetime employment with a single employer who endeavors to provide him with lifetime job security, subject to ordinary good behavior, until retirement, usually at the age of 55" (Tsuda, 1974). Lifetime employment rewards those who stay at the same job for longer, resulting in less changeover for jobs. Lifetime employment is also beneficial for Japan and the work force culture because "Japan is the only non-Western society to have attained a high level of industrialization and is the society with the highest economic growth rate in the postwar period" (Marsh & Mannari, 1971). Life-time employment also has the factor of seniority-based pay. Seniority-based pay is when there is a "rather steep increases of wages according to levels, and the steepness of the seniority ladder is higher for those with higher education" (Tsuda, 1974). Seniority-based pay has those senior in age and years at the company change your payment. "If such a society has not undercut

that set of reciprocal rights and obligations between employer and employee that is institutionalized in the lifetime-commitment system” (Marsh & Mannari, 1971).

An ideal in Japan is to strive and find their ikigai/いきがい. Ikigai/いきがい is a Japanese word that does not have an exact translation, however, it can best be said to translate as "that which most makes one's life seem worth living" or someone's purpose of life (Mathews, 1996). It is the belief that you enjoy something and are good at it, so you choose to work in that area. You enjoy what you do for work, resulting in doing that work instead of retiring (Marsh & Mannari, 1971). Okinawa, a prefecture in Japan, is a place in Japan that best implements this thought process. While Japan as a country is considered a blue spot country, meaning that they have the highest health and age of their people, Okinawa is the biggest blue spot in the world. There are many examples of people working far into old age because they like what they do. One example is a 101-year-old fisherman in Okinawa. Even at his age, every day he wakes up and gets on his boat to catch fish to feed his family. He still does his work at his age because he says that he enjoys what he does, and he is good at it. In Okinawa, there is no such thing as retirement, because most people enjoy what they do and want to do it until they die. While this goes against the rigorous work life culture that Japan also has, it creates an interesting juxtaposition in the culture. However, it also does not mean that the two concepts in Japan's work life culture cannot coincide. Sometimes even if the work might be a cause for stress and hard work, they continue at it because it is their ikigai/いきがい. This type of system of work causes Japan to see work as enjoyable despite the struggles it may cause and the long hours.

American culture sees work and personal life as two different things. Work for money, often doing work that is seen as unenjoyable to themselves. However, the American work culture can be dependent on the social class of the American society. Middle class society tends to

encourage and strive for “self-autonomy” in work vs working class households tend to strive for security in their work (Kalleberg & Marsden, 2019). This is because middle to upper class have had the luxury of having a stable home and money not being something they have to worry too much about. However, in lower middle class to working class often struggle with money, whether it be groceries or just not being able to afford to do repairs on the house. This causes the parents to not want their children to ever be subjected to these hardships when they are an adult so they think a high paying job would be the route to avoid that fate. The idea of either going after your passion or working for money. This is very different than the idea of Japanese *ikigai*/ *いきがい*.

Conclusion

While Japan and America seem at face value to have different cultures, in reality they have certain aspects of their culture that steam from the same values. Their family structure types both evolved into nuclear families. While other families are prevalent, Nuclear is the most common type. However, while Japan and America may have commonalities in some culture aspects, they are still very different societies. Japan being a collectivist society and America being a individualistic society causes countering values in other aspects. Family, school, and work are all things that people partake in every day, unknowingly continuing their country’s culture. Both countries are constantly evolving because of the rapidly changing society and modernization within them. It is important to recognize these two seemingly very different countries as what they are, similar and different depending on a variety of factors.

What can be taken from this research is the understanding that Japan might be headed towards more western influence in the future. As we saw with the family structure, Japan has shifted to the nuclear family rather than what is called the traditional Japanese family, multi-

generational family. Japan closed its borders for a long time in its pre-Meiji era because it was afraid of colonization and wanted to keep its traditional ideals. However, once Japan finally decided to open its borders, due to fear of being left behind in modernization compared to the rest of the world, it slowly began to take on western ideas and culture.

The same could be said for America taking parts of Japanese culture. Years ago, you would not be able to find many things from Japan in the United States: food, clothing, media, etc. However, it has now become very popularized in the United States, taking parts of the culture and becoming very interested in Japan as a whole. Tourism in Japan is on a steady rise from American Tourists.

Something that was difficult when researching the two different countries and the aspects of their culture was relevancy in the articles or books. Many articles and books that I found when talking about specifically the Japanese school system were outdated, since they were ten to twenty years old, thus they were not very relevant to the current Japanese school system. The American school system had plenty of recent articles and books so it was something that should be noted.

Another thing that was difficult when conducting my research for the questions that I choose was because America has a high demographical population, unlike Japan which is very homogenous. Having high demographics and diverse population is great for America, but not great for trying to get a firm commonality amongst them. Often times, the statistics would be very skewed across the board on how American families go about family, work, and school. An example is that for family structure, different demographics have different family structures that are most common. I felt bad about disregarding a large portion of the United States, but I understood that I just had to look at the United States as a whole. I just had to let go of trying to

mention each aspect of cultures in the United States and instead just take what was statistically the most common of the country.

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