Individualism as a Solution for Gender Equality in Japanese Society in Contrast to the Social Structure in the United States
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Abstract
The purpose of the study is to investigate the idea of individualism and collectivism from interpersonal perspective of an individual, couple, group, and society in relation to gender equality. In recent years Japanese society has embraced individualism while collectivism remains embedded within the culture. This has resulted in many conflicts, especially in terms of gender inequalities. First, we suggest a closer look at the concept of individualism in Japan from androgynous perspective where everyone can be independent and self-actualized to substitute the deficits weaved into a collectivist approach to human relationships. Second, we examine how Japanese social systems or services are based on a vertical collectivistic model which can be modified into horizontal individualistic structure. These changes may diminish the gap between individualism-collectivism for individual, couple, group, and public. We will discuss individualism-collectivism concepts and the relations between cultural values and gender equality in Japan and U.S. comparatively.

Is Japanese Society based on Collectivism or Individualism?

(Triandis 1995) defines collectivism as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as separate and yet collective part of a company, family, or nation. They are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by those collectives. These individuals are willingly giving priority to the goals of collectives over their own personal goals and values. Their emphasis is on the connectedness to members of collectives. In contrast individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves independent of collectives. Individualists are mainly motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others and place a higher priority on their personal goals and values compared to the goals of others. The rationale for individualist's pattern of thinking is based on the analyses of advantages and disadvantages associated with concerns for self versus others (See Fig.1).

Fig.1: The image of collectivism and individualism

Collectivism   Individualism
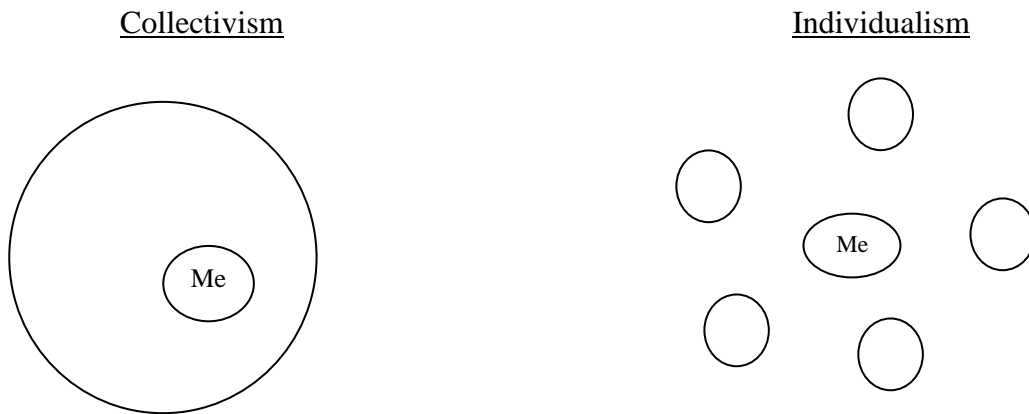
A majority of Western countries have an individualistic social structure and many Eastern countries are collectivist nations. Individualism-collectivism dimension is only one of the researched and proposed five cultural dimensions (Hofstede 1991) involving nearly 110 thousands IBM employees from 53 countries. Using variables such as values of labor, family and society Hofstede reached an overall degree of individualism-collectivism among the participating countries which showed the majority of industrial nations were individualistic societies. The industrial countries offered minimal merits to people as a group and more credit to individual accomplishments. Japan scored at a mid-point among other countries and Western countries had a high individualistic score. The United States received the highest score as the most individualistic society in the world (See Table1.)

Since the Meiji era the Japanese's individualistic score has been rising due to the increasing industrialization of Japan. Today, the Japanese society is at a crossroad of fast approaching industrialization while making an effort to maintain its agricultural social norms.

Table 1 : Individualism Ranking of Score

Ranking of Score	Country	Score
1	USA	91
2	Australia	90
3	GBR	89
4	Canada	80
4	Holland	80
22	Japan	46
53	Guatemala	6

The Japanese society may be collectivistic and eager to identify and belong to groups but, pressure to conform and change is ever present. The term "Amae" (Doi 1973) refers to the Japanese individuals who take tradition, compliance and conformity to the life ways of their seniors for granted. These Japanese individuals seek to identify themselves by association with a particular social group. Today, forming small groups and living as a couple or nuclear family has become a preferred way of life Japan. According to (Ida 1995), a sociologist, Japan continues to be a marriage-forced and yet a couple-unit society. Both of Japanese wives and husbands have Amae each other. For instance, a Japanese wife may not appreciate economic support from her husbands and similarly, a Japanese husband may not recognize his wife's efforts in making the house a pleasant environment and attending to child care. The traditional idea of husband and wife forming a unit of two individuals has been devalued and vanishing.

Japanese collectivism and gender inequality

The Japanese social structure based on collectivism may have contributed to gender inequality in employment and decision making process. For instance, a married woman applies for a full-time job. But, because the collectivist structure features the couple-unit in a traditional wife-and-husband gender role defined as the husband or man is at work and wife or woman stays at home, the woman gets paid less than a man for a comparable job

performance. This rationale excludes if all other possibilities such unemployed or disabled husband. The couple-unit perspective in a collectivist social structure leaved no regards or explanation for gender inequalities. Consequently, Japanese wage gap between sexes has remained very large showing no signs for improvement. Table-2 highlights the wage gap statistics among males and females from 5-countries (Ministery of Health,Labour and Welfare in Japan 2006a).

Table2:   Wages and Gender Gap

Country	Wages and Gender Gap	Year
Korea	63.9	2002
United Kingdom	76.8	2004
Netherlands	80.5	2004
Australia	86.4	2004
Japan	65.9	2005

Note: Male wage=100

Similarly, it is difficult for Japanese married women with children to work full-time because in Japan employees must work late at night and safety concerns are prohibitive. In addition, working mothers choose to work part-time due to family other responsibilities such as taking care of their husbands' dependent relatives. Consequently, collectivism–based on couple-unit society encourages women to give up economic independence which in turn explains why divorce rate in Japan is very low. The Japanese men in a couple-unit society are forced to work for a long time, which creates family conflicts with a heavier burden on the women. Often an individual or couple who is highly in favor of equal rights at home and the society is unable to enjoy the couple-unit social structure or benefit from security and stability merits offered to couples. Ironically, in Japan, the more husbands and wives feel responsibility for family life, the less they enjoy family lives.

Empirical Review of Research: The Merit of Androgyny

According to empirical studies on gender stereotypes at the personal level, the

Japanese couple-unit society seems undesirable for working women. The Japanese social structure effects male and female personality from masculinity "agency" and femininity "communion" perspective(Bakan 1990, Dohi & Hirokawa 2004). The masculine self-extended factors include: self-assertiveness, activeness, brevity, leadership, and strong decision making among others. The femininity components are human-relational factors, such as sensitiveness to others, cooperativeness, being cheerful and devoted, just to name a few. An individual should have both of masculinity "agency" and femininity "communion", because they are the most important two factors for individual to be healthy, happy, and self-actualized (Helgeson 1994 Hirokawa & Dohi 2007) . The androgynous people focus on masculinity and femininity in accordance to the necessities of social events. Weather people get married or not, they should not be sex-typed, but viewed from androgynous viewpoints.

Hirokawa, Dohi, Yamada, and Miyata (2000) empirically studied about 50 university students who were sex-typed or assessed androgynously by self-reported questionnaire. Students in dyads were asked to take five minutes and discuss any thing they like. The result showed androgynous couples had an easier time to discuss their experience, had a healthier attitude toward the student of an opposite sex when the video taped sessions were analyzed. Research hypothesis was supported when individual students expressed a healthier attitude with agency and communion and their sense of masculinity and femininity as individuals rather than a couple. In other words, even masculine male and feminine female make a couple, they are different from androgynous individuals. Masculine males and feminine females can be androgynous when they meet together. In contrast, an androgynous individual can be androgynous by himself or herself.

Recent individuation in Japanese family

Recently Japanese family seems to have become socially individualistic. In reality, the

divorce rate in Japan has been gradually increasing; people are getting married at a later age; and more men and women are remaining single. The birth rate in Japan is decreasing due in part to young people not getting married or to marrying much later in life. The age at first marriage in 1970 was 24.2 years for women and 26.9 for men and in 2005, the age for marriage has reached 28.0 years for women and 29.8 years for men (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan   2006b). Table3 shows statistical data from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR) in Japan (2008) and compares the total fertility rate from eight countries.

Table3: Total Fertility Rates

| Country	Total Fertility Rate	Year
Japan	1.32	2006
France	2.00	2006
United States	2.05	2005
Norway	1.90	2006
Sweden	1.85	2006
United Kingdom	1.84	2006
Germany	1.32	2006
Italy	1.32	2005

The individualistic tendency in Japanese's lifestyle also is apparent psychologically. In the branch of developmental psychology, (Kashiwagi and Nagahisa 1999) wrote that many married couples value psychological individualism. To illustrate this view authors have pinpointed three traits: 1) couples are not "One mind, one body", i.e. living independent lifestyles; 2) couples are eager to have their own accounts to spend money in their own way; and 3) couples want to have their own private rooms. Similarly, the results of consciousness survey by (NIPSSR 2005）also indicate the psychological individuation of family. One of the questions asked was: "Are you for the opinion that even after getting married, we should keep going for our own life goal with no influenced by spouse or family?" And 84.9% of females

and 80.2% of males answered "Yes" or agreed. The next question asked: "Once getting married, is it natural for spouses to sacrifice their personality and life-course for marriage?" And 55.4% of females and only 37.5% of males responded "No" or were against the opinion. The desire for couple's individualism has resulted in increasing number of specified domestic violence probably because wives have stopped being patient or obedient and realized that their husbands are not part of themselves but another person or totally a separate individual.

Four interpersonal areas of individualism-collectivism

In order to understand the two concepts of individualism and collectivism as a mixed form in Japan one has to know the four interpersonal areas. As illustrated in Fig. 2, these four areas of individualism or collectivism divided into private and public domains. The round forms are private, and square shapes signify public domains. Furthermore every large area has 2 small areas where smaller inner private area represents the individual and the larger outer private area represents the couple. Also, the smaller public area is the group and larger area represents the society. The areas pointing to a couple and the group are more particularly targeted for becoming individualistic within the collectivist framework.

Fig.2:   Japanese Interpersonal Model
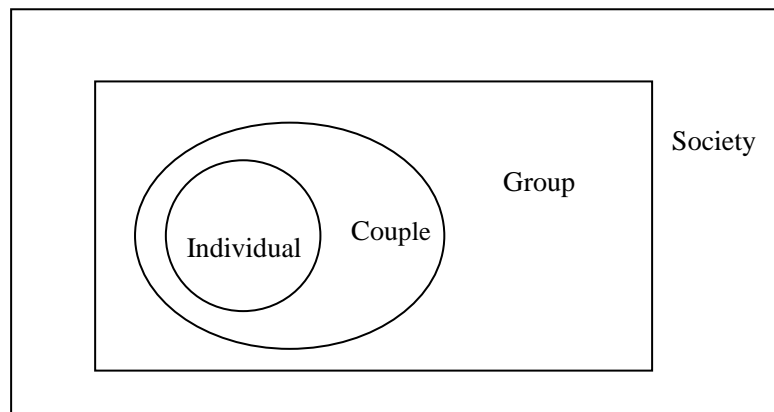
In the outer layer representing the public domain there are several social systems or labor law policies regarding pension and health care systems that remain collectivist. A few examples of these areas are: 1) the registration of individual surnames as married couples has not been approved yet; 2) income discrepancy between the sexes continues to increase; 3) day-care services are insufficient for full-time female workers; and 4) tax codes for dependent deductions discourage wives from working and earning more than about 10,000 US dollars per year. As a result, Japanese women with a successful career and economically independent are forced to choose a life style incompatible with the collectivist norms and face detrimental consequences to their marriage and family life.

Similar to the public area of the model demonstrated in Fig. 2, the individual continues to be driven by the collectivist norms. For example, young females are expected to find a high income earning future husband while young males are enticed to find a wife who does not have a high income potential but, she is beautiful, cheerful, and domesticated. In other words, the young generations of Japanese are still conforming to the traditional social order based on gender.

Meanwhile, the Japanese public is recognizing that returning to the collective society is no longer applicable to the 21st century progress and women's desire to play an active role in the world's order. For instance, in group domain the Japanese are losing interest in old fashioned human relationships and the traditional communities are collapsing. Family size is growing smaller and the number of persons per household at 2.72 is the lowest ever in 2004. The family sociologist (Ochiai, Yamane, & Miyasaka, 2007) reported Japanese patterns of social networks for childcare to be fully dependent on the mother or grandmother which prohibits women from pursuing a career. Often grandmothers are holding part-time jobs and committed to the care of senior members of the family. Therefore, the younger generation of Japanese women find themselves in a difficult position where earning a second income even

as a part-time work brings significant challenges regarding childcare and senior care issues.

It is understandable that rapid change from collectivism to individualism will create quit a few conflicts. If young male and female without financial independence and mature ego-identity get married, they are bound for a disastrous relationship. A successful marriage requires psychological and economical independence. Recent changes in the Japanese society dictates young couples to be self-reliant and independent of their relatives or parents for financial assistance, childcare, transportation, living accommodation, and domestic care. Unfortunately such services are not available through public institutions or facilities.

Vertical versus Horizontal

It is important to recognize that individualism has both risk and benefits. (Triandis 1995) divides individualism and collectivism into two forms: 1) vertical; and 2) horizontal. Vertical individualism can be defined as being independent and different from others, having high level of freedom with less concern for equality. The political system for vertical individualism is based on free enterprise market and democracy. In contrast, horizontal individualism can be defined as being independent, but the same as others, having high level of freedom and concern for equality. The political system compatible with horizontal individualism is the democratic socialism.

(Hofstede 1991) reported another classification of cultural value systems; masculinity-femininity and acceptability of "power distance". Accordingly, masculinity stands for a society in which men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on marital success and women are expected to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. The opposite pole, femininity, stands for a society in which both men and women are to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.

The "power distance" defines a powerless group of people who accept social

inequalities within the national institutions and systems. So vertical individualism seems to be masculine and in agreement with the concept of "power distance", while horizontal individualism seems to be feminine and in disagreement with "power distance".

Gender equality can be achieved in a society with horizontal or feminine individualism, and today, the Japanese society seems to be based on vertical collectivism. In contrast, the United States seems to be the most individualistic and vertical society. The workforce in Japan follows a strict gender role pattern and differentiates superiors from inferiors, seniors from juniors and continues to be the most masculine society in the world (Hofstede 1991). Fig.3 below illustrates the individualism-collectivism concepts from vertical and horizontal perspectives.

Fig.3: Image of Individualism-Collectivism with Vertical and Horizontal perspectives
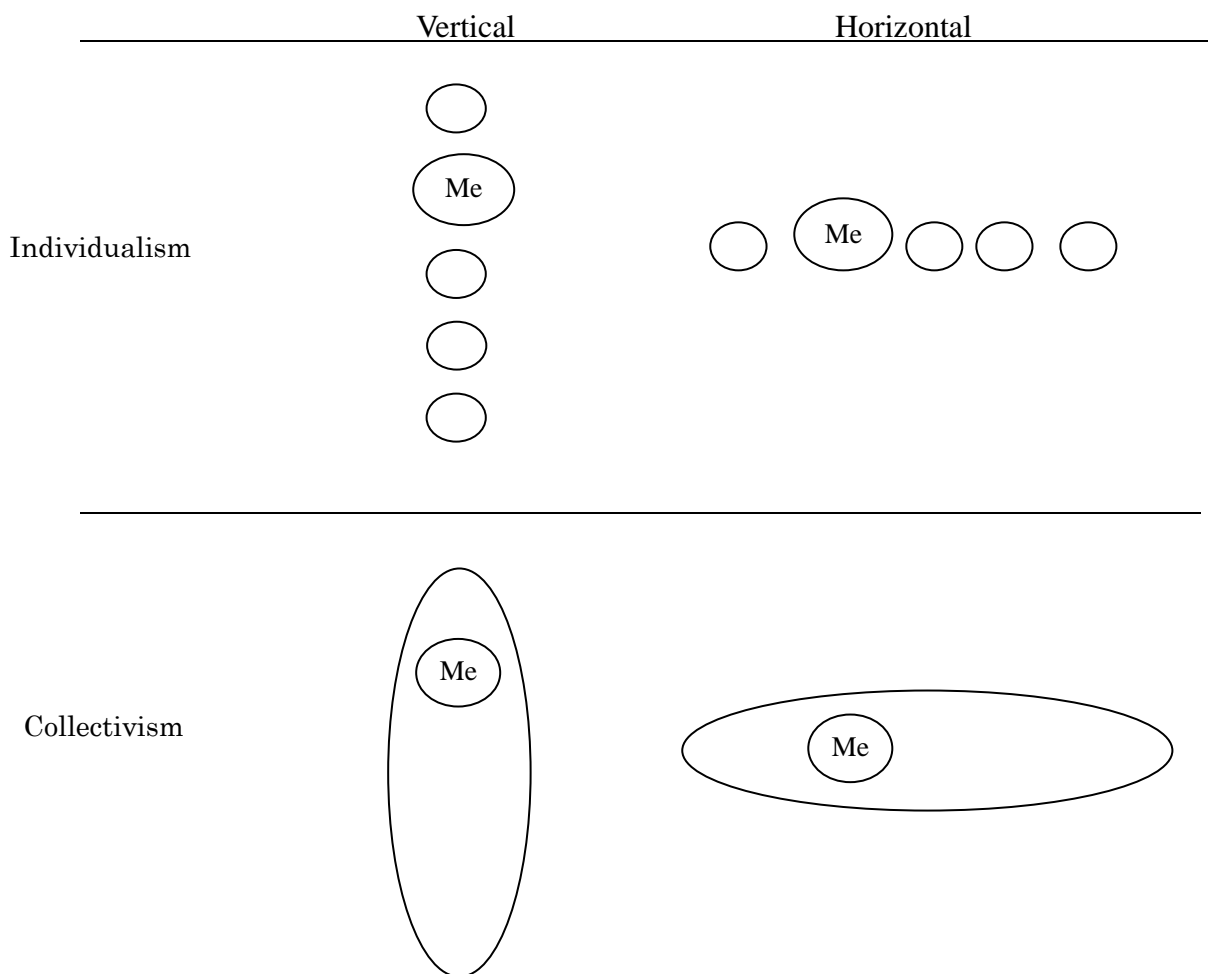
Conclusion

What is needed to actualize gender equality in Japan? In our opinion, an individual in Japan should be more androgynous and empowered as an independent person. (Dion and Dion 1996) proposed, individualism should be analyzed from individualistic at a social level. Today, the Japanese society is still gender-typed. When individuals become androgynous, the boundaries between individuals and couples may permeate to enhance communication skills. In Japan, there is a serious misunderstanding between couple due to lack of clear communication.

In addition, the Japanese society would benefit from changing from collectivism to individualism in the public areas. For example, in work place, there should be no discrimination against a single versus a married worker or a full-time versus a part-time worker. Changing the public domains of the Japanese society into individualistic approach will help remove barriers between the public and groups. For example, since the year 2000, the Japanese health insurance system has been assisting disabled elderly over the age of 65 and their family by providing home health care services. The elderly and family members discuss their preferences and which services they may need according to the social services being offered. This system has helped the social structure by removing the burden of responsibility off the close relatives who feel obligated to care for the dependent elderly family member. Various groups can be surveyed regarding individualism and collectivism concepts and develop public policies to improve gender equality at home and in the workforce.

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