Gender Issues:
A Look at Japan and U.S. Perspectives

Rodney A. Dunham

Introduction

As Wood (1991) has detailed, the term gender connotes different meanings according to biological, sociological, and cultural perspectives or theories. The present study attempts to examine some of those sociological and cultural aspects of gender. Specifically, this study is an initial look at differences between Japanese and U.S. perspectives. Before preceding with those perspectives, the term gender needs to be examined.

Gender

Lewis and Neville (1995) stated that generally in the United States "notions of gender are considered to be social and cultural constructions of meaning" (p. 220), as opposed to actual distinctions based on biological differences between men and women. The American Heritage Dictionary on CD-ROM succinctly outlines main differences in the use of gender. In a note to the entry for gender, the following is written.

Traditionally, gender has been used primarily to refer to the grammatical categories of "masculine," "feminine," and "neuter"; but in recent years the word has become well established in its use to refer to sex-based categories, as in phrases such as gender gap and the politics of gender. This usage is supported by the practice of many anthropologists, who reserve sex for reference to biological categories, while using gender to refer to social or cultural categories. According to this rule, one would say The effectiveness of the medication appears to depend on the sex (not gender) of the patient, but In peasant societies, gender (not sex) roles are likely to be more clearly defined. This distinction is useful in principle, but it is by no means widely observed, and considerable variation in usage occurs at all levels.

The distinction noted in the dictionary between sex and gender is adopted here. Sex is used here to refer to the biological differences between men and women. Gender is used here to refer to the sociological or cultural determined differences between men and women.
Related to these ideas and the recent use of gender is the term feminism. As defined by the American Heritage Dictionary on CD-ROM, feminism means "belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" or "the movement organized around this belief." Fundamental to the idea of feminism is the fact that outside of biological differences men and women are the same. By definition, feminists believe that the social, political, and economic inequalities between men and women are applied according to biological differences but created by social or cultural distinctions (i.e., gender). Therefore, the main goal of feminists is to eliminate gender differences, which are seen as artificial.

As Busby and Leichty (1993) noted, feminism in the United States is in its second wave with regard to many of its goals. Some specific goals mentioned by Busby and Leichty are (a) to change or improve the inequalities in job categories, employment compensation, and division of labor in the home; (b) to eliminate the use of females as "objects" to attract males; and (c) to give everyone the freedom to develop one's full potential.

Lewis and Neville (1995) pointed out the effects of mass media images and how they "have become a pervasive and powerful part of the process of how notions of gender are constructed and maintained" (p. 220). Similarly, Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus, and Berkowitz (1996) found evidence that advertisements can reinforce various stereotypes of gender roles.

If this is the case, the general beliefs about gender that are held by a society can be measured through an examination of mass media portrayals within that society. In the United States, Yang (1996) found that past issues related to women, and by implication gender, as portrayed in the media dealt with social activities, advice, food, fashion, child care, homemaking and beauty. Busby and Leichty (1993) found more recently that media portrayals tend to support the goals of feminism noted above. Dunham (1997) found that one English-language Japanese newspaper presented gender issues as being related to job roles, abuse of or violence against women, and discrimination or sexual harassment. The fact that Japanese personnel produce the paper gives evidence that these values are part of Japanese society; however, the language of the newspaper and its readership indicate that effects of the portrayal might not be widespread.

The current study sought to measure the impressions of college-aged women. The research question is How do young Japanese women conceptualize gender? More specifically, the study attempted to uncover their definition of the term, especially from a biological vs. sociological standpoint. Equally important was a search to discover the issues/problems they associate with gender/sex differences.
Methods

The first step was to design a survey instrument that would capture the answers to the research question. A sample questionnaire was constructed and given to a small group of students. Afterward, they were questioned about the issues and the best way to revise the questionnaire. The questionnaire was revised and administered to another group of students.

A total of 52 students participated in the actual survey. They were second-year students enrolled in a Current English course at Tezukayama College, a two-year women's college. The survey was administered in two parts on one day during regular class time. That administration was in the following manner.

First, the students were given a B 5 sheet of paper titled "Sei ni tsuite anketo." (In actuality, those words were written in Japanese script.) Below the title, a request was written for the student to write the meaning of sei ("sei no imi wo kaite"). Three blank lines stretching across three-fourths of the paper width were printed below the request on which students wrote their responses. Next was a request to write the problems associated with sei ("sei ni tsuite mondai wo kaite"). Below that were five short blank lines on which to write the problems.

There were two reasons for using Japanese rather than English or Japanese combined with English. The first reason is that the word sei encompasses both English words sex and gender. Therefore, the student would be free to choose the meaning of the word as either related to one of the two ideas or related to both. Although sex and gender can be used to mean different things to different people, there is a certain linguistic limitation imposed when using one term or the other. However, the Japanese term allows more freedom to choose or interpret the meaning of the term.

The second reason to use the Japanese term was to eliminate any problems the students might have in using English as a second language.

The survey was distributed and students were given time to respond. Two oral requests were made of the students. One was to put their student ID numbers on the form for collation with part two of the survey. The second request was to respond any way they wanted to the survey requests. They were told that there were no correct or incorrect responses and either Japanese or English would be fine.

After the students finished writing, the survey papers were collected. The next 40 minutes of class were spent analyzing a clip from the film "White Men Can't Jump." The scene was of the main character and his girlfriend, Gloria, sleeping in bed. She woke him
up stating that she was thirsty. The conversation revolved around that fact that men and women communicate in different ways and that men try to control women. Gloria commented that she had read these ideas in a magazine. The scene ended with the man throwing a glass of water in her face and her becoming angry.

After the scene was showed and discussed, the instructor noted that Gloria’s magazine article might have been based on the book “Men are From Mars and Women are From Venus” by John Gray. After some explanation, the instructor pointed out that the author’s thesis was based on an assumption that ALL differences between men and women are based on biological factors. The lesson then proceeded to introduce the concepts of gender and sex and denoting nurtured and nature differences between women and men. Specifically, Deborah Tannen’s book “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation” was presented to the class as an alternative point of view in that communication differences are learned (i.e., based on society). After this lesson, the students were given part two of the survey.

Because the students had been exposed to the vocabulary and ideas of gender vs. sex, this part of the survey was written in both English and Japanese. On the form, students were asked to rate the importance of six items in relation to gender. They were instructed to rate the items on an 11-point Likert scale with “0” being “not important” and “10” being “very important.” The six items were listed twice so that the students would rate them once in relation to her life and once in relation to Japanese society. Further, the survey form included a space for each student to add her own item (i.e., other) and rate it. Based on the pilot survey and the study findings noted above, the six provided items were (a) job roles, (b) relationships between men and women outside the workplace, (c) domestic violence, (d) discrimination or sexual harassment, (e) pregnancy, and (f) birth control.

The students were given ample time to fill out the questionnaires. The papers were collected and the students were dismissed. The first and second parts of the survey were matched for each student, items were coded, and the numbers were entered into a Macintosh Powerbook 145 B computer. The data was analyzed using SPSS 4.0 software on that computer.

**Results**

With regard to the meaning of sei, 6.5 percent of the students who responded indicated that they could not write the meaning or that they did not know what to write. Sixty three percent of the respondents wrote one meaning/idea, 17.4 percent gave two
meanings, 8.7 percent wrote three meaning, and 4.3 percent wrote four meanings. In total, there were eight different meanings given by respondents. One student (1.9%) responded that sei encompasses both ideas of gender and sex. In various combinations, other students responded that sei is related to sex (15.4%), man/woman or male/female (73.0%), ancestry/inheritance/lineage (17.3%), communication (7.7%), the opposite sex (3.8%), and intercourse (1.9%). (Note that percentages total more than 100 because many students gave multiple responses.)

With regard to unaided request for problems associated with sei, there were 20 different problems given by the students as a group. However, no student offered more than five problems. (It is interesting to note that the survey form had only five blanks on which to list responses. Students may have taken that to mean that they should limit their responses to five or attempt to list five.) Of the students who responded to this part of the survey, 3.8 percent noted that they did not know the problems related to sei. Table 1 shows the 20 different problems given by students and how many wrote each problem.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROBLEM</th>
<th>PERCENT REPORTED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIDS/HIV</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth Control/Contraception</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Crimes</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Chauvinism</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen Pregnancy</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Maltreatment</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort women</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Wedlock Pregnancy</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Many Women</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge About Sex</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences of Men &amp; Women</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the student responses to the request to rate the importance of the six problems related to sex/gender.

As noted above, the survey instrument had a space for students to write another problem and rate it. A full 25 percent of the students rated the other category for themselves, and 20 percent did so for Japanese society. Of those who rated the other problem, 5 students (38%) did not specify the problem with regard to themselves and all but 1 student did not specify the other problem for Japanese society. With regard to themselves, 2
students noted friendships, 2 students noted AIDS, 2 students noted taking care of children, 1 student noted rape, and 1 student noted sex crimes as being the other problem.

Table 2 indicates the relative importance of various problems for individual students in comparison to Japanese society as a whole. However, the table is not precise in stating that relationship nor does it show the real relationship between any two problems. Therefore, a Pearson Correlation was calculated for each pair of problems. The following problems were significantly related to each other with regard to the importance of the problem as rated by the students. First are the results of the importance of problems for the students in relation to the importance of the problem for Japanese society.

The importance of job roles as a problem related to gender/sex is important for both the students and Japanese society \((r = 0.3096, p \leq .05)\). The importance of relationships between men and women outside the workplace as a problem related to gender/sex is important for both the students and Japanese society \((r = 0.6027, p \leq .01)\). The importance of domestic violence as a problem related to gender/sex is important for both the students and Japanese society \((r = 0.7015, p \leq .01)\). The importance of discrimination as a problem related to gender/sex is important for both the students and Japanese society \((r = 0.4971, p \leq .01)\). The importance of pregnancy as a problem related to gender/sex is important for both the students and Japanese society \((r = 0.6100, p \leq .01)\). The importance of birth control as a problem related to gender/sex is important for both the students and Japanese society \((r = 0.4137, p \leq .01)\).

For the students as individuals, the importance of birth control was correlated to the importance of job roles \((r = 0.3177, p \leq .05)\). The importance of domestic violence was correlated to the importance of discrimination \((r = 0.8431, p \leq .01)\) and pregnancy \((r = 0.4307, p \leq .01)\). The importance of discrimination was also related to the importance of pregnancy \((r = 0.3068, p \leq .05)\). The importance of pregnancy was related to the importance of birth control \((r = 0.5386, p \leq .01)\).

Students who had more definitions of sei tended to rate the importance of relation-
ships between men and women outside the workplace higher than other students \( (r = 0.4568, p \leq .01) \) but rated the importance of domestic violence for Japanese society lower than other students \( (r = -0.394, p < .05) \). There were no other relationships between number of definitions and importance of problems. Similarly, there was no correlation between number of problems listed by students and rating of importance of problems given to rate.

**Conclusions**

Students tended to report that *sei* is related to differences between men and women. However, students generally did not indicate that they are aware of the biological and sociological aspects of sex/gender. It is not clear whether this is due to their training, the difficulty of expressing such a thing in Japanese, or the lack of engagement on the part of the survey instrument. Nevertheless, the student responses indicate a simplistic view of *sei*.

With regard to problems related to *sei*, students tended to report that those problems are connected to sexual activities. As Table 1 shows, AIDS/HIV was the major concern, with 78 percent of the students writing that on their questionnaire. Disease was second; however, it is not clear how many students envision disease as limited to sexually transmitted diseases or including diseases such as breast cancer. Regardless, these two problems, AIDS and disease, are not related generally to sociologically or culturally determined differences between men and women.

Sexual harassment was third in Table 1. This is a problem clearly related to gender. The next few problems are again related to sexual activities, and it is not clear whether students conceptualize these problems as being related to biological or sociological factors. For example, pregnancy is certainly related to biological factors but there is a relationship to sociological factors which is not readily apparent. If there is some stigma attached to pregnant women or somehow the society sees pregnancy as being the women's fault and responsibility, then it is a problem related to gender. However, Japanese society does not usually take this stance. At any rate, the self-reported problems related to sex/gender tended to be connected to sexual activity rather than any real biological or sociological aspects of men and women.

With regard to rating the six given problems, there was little variation by each student in her rating. Most students tended to rate each problem as quite important (more than 7 on a scale with 10 as the most important). However, discrimination, inequality in relationships, and pregnancy seemed to be slightly more important than the other three.
Students tended to rate the six problems as being of equal importance to their own lives and Japanese society as a whole. With regard to the correlations between various problems, it is difficult to know whether the discovered correlations are a conscious part of the student’s thinking or whether there is some common underlying reason for the problems. For example, birth control and job roles were highly correlated in the student rating of importance for their own life. Could this be related to freedom or control? Women who have the same jobs as men have more freedom to choose and have more power in the workplace. Similarly, access to birth control methods gives one freedom to choose about parenthood and power over one’s body/life. The question is whether or not students are consciously making this connection between the two gender problems or that the correlation is for another reason.

**Discussion**

With regard to the implications of the results here, there are certain limitations of the study itself. The survey was a convenience sample of a very specific aspect of Japanese society. The data here were generated by young, Japanese women enrolled in this college. That group is fairly unique; however, that group was produced by the society in which the members live. Therefore, there is some connection between and some reflection of the values held by the larger society and the surveyed group. The difficulty here is to determine which characteristics are common and which are unique.

The students indicated that Japanese society, unlike the Asahi Evening News findings noted above, does not seem to be highly aware of or concerned by the sociological and biological differences between sex and gender. The students indicated that problems between men and women are mainly related to sexual activities or the results of those activities with AIDS being the most significant. Sexual harassment is also quite important. The mass media in Japan has drawn attention to AIDS and sexual harassment recently and made them *popular*. However, the students rated the six given problems as quite important.

Investigation is necessary to determine the connection between the student responses on the survey and the views of Japanese society. Further, exploration of the connection between the mass media and student opinions is also necessary. The next stages of research on gender in Japan should concentrate on these areas.

With regard to comparisons between the United States and Japan, it seems that people in the United States are more aware than Japanese people of the sociological nature of gender. And Americans seem to be more concerned with gender equality than sex
equality, which does not seem to be the case with Japanese people. In addition, the data here indicate that Japanese people are more concerned with physical or biological aspects of sex and less concerned with the sociological aspects of gender. In many respects, this situation in the two countries should be expected because of the cultural values underlying the societies. American culture values individuality and freedom while Japanese culture values the social unit and group harmony. The concepts of gender (arbitrary differences determined by society) and sex (differences which cannot be changed and which require little attention) tend to follow that division in many respects. However, the overall situation is much more complex that this and closer examination is necessary before any solid conclusions concerning the nature of sex and gender can be drawn for either the U. S. or Japanese cultures.

References


