Diverging Democracy:
Comparing Japanese and American Interpretations of Equality and Freedom

Five Words: Democracy, Equality, Freedom, Japan, Paternalism

Abstract: Democracy and freedom are abstract terms that have varying definitions across the globe. However, it seems that these terms should ultimately stem from the same values and desires. I wanted to explore how the interpretations of equality and freedom have changed depending on their context. Japan and the US were used as contrasting case studies to represent two different approaches to freedom and equality. Ultimately, the starkest difference is the end goal of pursuing this equality and freedom. These differences in conceptualizing freedom and equality have altered the pursuit of democracy in these countries. Japan seems to prioritize the collective society while the US prioritizes the individual. This has created a stark difference in the diplomatic policies and laws implemented in each country. Cultural ideals and conceptualization of the same words have created two societies that are both taking a democratic approach to governing, but each with its own interpretation on what qualifies as democratic.
Democracy has long been lauded as the opponent to communism. The strong focus on the dissimilarities between the two makes it plausible to assume that democracy should have a universal meaning. However, when we analyze the public policies of two democratic countries such as Japan and the US, we see two different methods of approaching this universal “democracy.” Economically and technologically, Japan and the US are reasonably similar. In a relatively short time, Japan has managed to join the US in having one of the top three financial economies in the world. With democracy as an important component of their political scene, it might appear that Japan embraces democracy as the US has. Yet, with such similar economic and political stances, why are there such divergent public policies between the US and Japan? A quick glance into the healthcare system reveals a stark contrast between the universal healthcare coverage in Japan and the privatized insurance system in the US. The differences in democracy have manifested in two main social spheres of Japan: gender and health. However, how did these differences come to exist? Tracing democracy through these two areas of society will reveal that the differences stem from how each country defines the pillars of democracy: freedom and equality. Cultural nuances have shaped these terms to have different societal connotations. By exploring the realm of family, we see how the history of gender reflects the Japanese conception of equality. Within the healthcare institutions, we see how certain health initiatives reveal the boundaries of freedom for each country. However, the divergence goes beyond the definitions themselves. It extends to the final goals each country hopes to achieve with this democracy. Democracy in America means defending the freedom to stand alone while democracy in Japan means protecting the liberties of the collective society.

To exemplify the differences in defining equality, I will explore the realm of the family unit in Japan and how their gendered family roles portray their understanding of equality. In *The Too-Good Wife* by Amy Borovoy, Dr. Borovoy explains how, after losing the war in the 1940s, the Japanese government used “the notion of the family as the template for society.” (Borovoy, “Too-Good Wife” 69) In pre-war Japan, the framework emphasized the trans-generational bonds between
ancestors and their descendants. However, post-war Japan began to see a different emphasis on the nuclear family as the critical subunit of the nation. Dr. Borovoy continues on to explain how “the family became a …site for promoting peace, community, and the transformation to democracy.” (Borovoy, “Too-Good Wife” 74) The emphasis on the contribution of the family lies in stark contrast to the American emphasis on the contribution of the individual.

These historical beginnings explain the different definitions of equality. As the family became integral to the Japanese society, the nuclear family created a division of labor where women embraced their roles as mothers and men devoted themselves to work. Although this appears similar to the American family, the divergence began when the popularized American image of a stay at home mother became seen as an oppressed individual who was imprisoned by the lack of equality. On the other hand, the Japanese mother was embodied as an integral part of building the family and as the nation’s foundation. Her equality was signified by her ability to contribute to society through raising ideal citizens just as her husband contributed with his work to rebuild the nation.

In the late 1960s, Japanese women even “[used] the home as a basis for claiming a voice in public affairs in the postwar period.” (Borovoy, “Too-Good Wife” 18) This “housewife feminism” was very different from the American feminist movement. The American housewife was seen as an exploited individual who deserved her own chance to acquire financial independence outside of the home. However, the Japanese culture never portrayed motherhood as anything but a coveted occupation that contributed to the family’s support system. Women emphasized the role of motherhood as an active and definitive role in society when they fought for voting rights.

The government supported this promotion of motherhood as a vital role by creating certain policies to support this. In her book, Dr. Borovoy explains how “the [Japanese] government, along with Japanese enterprises, came to view the professional housewife as integral to the postwar drive for economic growth.” (Borovoy, “Too-Good Wife” 20) The government subsidized stay-at-home mothers with chufu hogo seido (“housewife welfare”), and corporations encouraged marriage through
“marriage bonuses.” (Borovoy, “Too-Good Wife” 74) The women were viewed as vital to their country in a different manner than men. However, to understand why this “housewife” argument worked, explorations into certain cultural values are necessary.

Through the evolution of motherhood, we can see that equality is a grounded reflection of two cultural concepts: amae and ikigai. Equality is not viewed as sameness but as contributing items of equal value to a mutual relationship. From Dr. Borovoy’s fieldwork, she found that the men worked long hours and often left the childrearing to the mother. This codependent system was the ideal family model for those who could afford it. The equality is most exemplified by exploring the term amae, or codependency. In America, the nation was depicted as a powerhouse of independence rather than one of interdependence among families. The Japanese emphasis on interdependence exemplifies the divergence of ideals about the political body between Japan and the US. In Daniel Okimoto and Thomas Rohlen’s Inside the Japanese System, they include a few excerpts from Doi Takeo’s Anatomy of Dependence. (Rohlen) After coining the term of amae, Doi Takeo went on to discuss the absence of amae in America. The implied dependency of amae refers to an unspoken agreement to form a symbiotic relationship. His model example was the mother-child relationship. A child depends on his mother for support and, in return, she has a certain level of control over shaping the child’s life. The relationship is ideally beneficial to both parties involved. The term amae can also be extended to understand the relationship between a husband and wife as well. The family structure was one where the mother provided the emotional support for the family while the father provided the economic support. The government promoted this division of labor in order to create a form of social welfare for the Japanese family. (Borovoy “Too-Good Wife”; Lock 209)

To further explore how amae is linked to equality, we can look at the Gordon Matthews’ What Makes Life Worth Living? where he defines the term ikigai as the meaning of life. (Matthews) Ikigai is a broad term used to symbolize the purpose of life. (Matthews) When Japanese men and women were surveyed, they generally expressed different sources of ikigai. Men typically chose their
work as ikigai while women found family to be the source of their ikigai. (Matthews) From an American viewpoint, the division of labor can be seen as exploitative. However, by using *ikigai*, it becomes possible to rationalize how this division of labor is fair since both men and women have an equal opportunity to pursue their own life’s goal. Matthews continues on to describe how postwar Japan embraced the idea of “*ikigai as ittaikan,*” (Matthews, 24) which meant “a ‘sense of belonging’” (Matthews, 18) By creating gendered roles, the Japanese were emphasizing what Matthews calls their “commitment to [the] group.” (Matthews, 25) From this, we see that Japanese equality is not synonymous to sameness, but rather an equal chance to pursue an individual’s personal *ikigai* for the greater good of the nation. In the US, equality presupposes sameness and is seen as the opportunity to pursue the same goals. American equality emphasized the power to *not* depend on others. In contrast, the Japanese form of equality is about the equal chance to receive and reciprocate *amae* for others in society through achieving your own personal *ikigai.* These conceptions of equality are the first divergence in American and Japanese democracy.

In addressing the tenants of democracy, freedom also has different limits in Japan than in the US. To define the boundaries of freedom, we can look at acts that are considered an infringement upon this right, according to each country’s own citizens. For instance, US health insurance has been privatized, and some US citizens feel this is a liberating example of their freedom of choice. Many would consider it a “socialization nightmare” to lose the ability to choose their own healthcare insurer. On the other side of the ocean, the Japanese government subsidizes insurance so that all of its citizens are required to have healthcare insurance. The boundaries of freedom in Japan are slightly hampered with government involvement in their health through different programs. For instance, the government issued Metabo Program requires yearly measurements to check for signs of metabolic syndrome. (Borovoy et al. 2012)

Metabolic syndrome includes various symptoms associated with obesity such as high blood pressure, a larger waistline, and high blood pressure. These government mandated visits ensure that
citizens have “enthusiastic support” (sekkyoku teki shien) for the next six months to help them address this metabolic issue. (Borovoy et al. 2012) The support comes in various forms, and the main emphasis of the program is to address lifestyle changes that would lead to recovery. Companies who fail to encourage their employees to maintain a life free of metabolic syndrome are fined by the government. (Borovoy et al. 2012) There exist few comparable US health initiatives such as the Metabo Program in the past. More recently, Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” program is the most similar. This program raises awareness about fitness and encourages a healthier lifestyle. However, the program is not a government mandated enterprise that the government pushes its citizens to participate in. There is no economic pressure on employers to have their employees participate in this either. Yet even this slight nudge from the government faces opposition by some Americans. In the American public, the introduction of government issued healthcare would seem like an infringement of personal choice. The general opposition seems to dislike the condition that the government can dictate whether a person is in good or bad health. However, Japanese citizens are willing to forgo total freedom in order to have certain securities such as these provided to them. Assuming that programs such as these do encroach upon certain freedoms of living an unrestrained and unhealthier lifestyle, one can still argue that the Japanese are fairly content to compromise this freedom in exchange for the government’s health support.

If Japan has diverging democracies, then what values and “inalienable rights” does each democracy defend? In America, the right to make individual choices based on personal judgment is an important one. We can see this right defended in the right to bear arms, the right to freedom of speech, and many others. There may even be an unwritten right to choose your own state of health. However, what happens when that personal choice is self-destructive and indirectly troubles others? This choice, although harmful, falls into the realm of the American conception of personal freedom. However, in Japan, the government enforces certain restrictions on freedoms that place a burden on others. One of the driving forces of the Metabo Program seems to be an emphasis on how obesity
can cause others trouble. By having metabolic syndrome, a citizen will place a burden on society because he or she will require higher health costs. In the US, the lack of an emphasis on programs such as these reflects the lack of a strong social contract. In Japan, non-verbal communication and the awareness of others is prevalent in many of their public policies, including those geared toward healthcare and smoking. Japanese feel a strong sense of responsibility towards other citizens in their society that results from their idea of the collective identity. The strong consideration for others may be a reflection of older family values as well. A Japanese historian, Watsuji Tetsuro, once described how “the family as a whole takes precedence over its individual members.” (Tetsuro, 3) The idea of deemphasizing the individual is a deeply rooted concept of Japanese culture. This acute awareness of others around them is represented in the Japanese definitions of democracy. Other scholars, such as Doi Takeo, have supported this rooted collectivism as well. In defining freedom in the democracy framework, Doi Takeo once commented on how the Japanese term of jiyu most resembled the American word of freedom. However, he noted how the “Japanese-style idea of jiyu cannot serve as the basis for asserting the superiority of the individual over the group.” (Takeo, 23) Democracy in Japan defends the freedom to pursue equality for the nation as a whole and the greater good rather than the freedom to exercise individualistic pursuits.

Many might claim that democracy should and does have a universal meaning. Freedom and equality sets certain standards that should never be violated. However, in gender and healthcare, I would argue that the nuances extend beyond the simple differences in definitions. The final commitments that each country hopes to achieve with its democracy are slightly different from each other. In the gender situation, the American women were fighting based on the democratic goal of protecting the individual. Although the Japanese women were fighting for their voting rights, their premise was grounded in the democratic commitment to the collective identity of the nation. Without women, the unity of society could not be preserved since mothers supported the core
family. While Americans view the individual as the smallest subunit of the nation, the Japanese view the nuclear family as the smallest monomer.

It is important to understand these Japanese conceptions of democracy in order to understand their public policy initiatives. In Eric Feldman’s piece on tobacco policy, he discusses how lobbying for tobacco prevention in the Western sense did not appeal to the Japanese form of democracy. (Feldman) Arguing for the rights of the individual seemed irrelevant as the needs of the collective identity outweighed the disturbance it brought to the individual. However, when the idea of manners was emphasized, many citizens responded. The idea that smokers should “be aware of the burden of smoke on non-smokers” and self-regulate in a sense appealed to their conception of democracy as preserving the benefits of the nation. (Feldman, 704)

By studying the history of gender and the family, policy makers can see how amaе and ikigai are reflected in the Japanese conceptualization of equality. With healthcare, they can explore the boundaries of freedom. Although the Japanese conceptualize these tenants of democracy differently, the most exemplary difference is in the goals that each version of democracy hopes to attain. While the Japanese democracy pursues social welfare above all else, the American democracy defends individual welfare. The Japanese democracy appeals to the collective identity while the American democracy calls attention to the freedoms of the individual. In this increasingly globalized world, it is important to understand the forces behind each nation’s political values in order to implement efficient global policies in education, health, and society. By understanding these different views of democracy, it allows public policy makers to craft public initiatives that will address the needs of each country.
Works Cited


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1 This is from Gordon Matthews’ *What Makes Life Worth Living?: How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds*. However, his definition of *ikigai* comes from various sources such as David Plath and others on page 12 of his book. Kathleen Pike Amy Borovoy, and Christina Roberto, "Obesity Vs Metabolic Syndrome: A Comparison of Us and Japanese Approaches to Growing Population Weight," (2012), vol.