

The Impact of Social Status on Lifestyle : The Case of Japan

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Abstract

We address the issue of social stratification in Japan through an analysis of the relationship between social status variables and different aspects of lifestyle. This research grows out of recent claims that in modern societies access to and participation in upper middle class culture and lifestyle is an important aspect of manifestation in social distinction and inequality. Data are drawn from the 1975 Social Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM) National Survey of Japan and analyzed using LISREL. Results show that both economic indicators (occupational prestige, personal income and family income) and “track status” (educational attainment, occupational prestige and size of company where employed) are strong predictors of lifestyle differences. Of particular importance is the concept of “track status” which strongly influences lifestyle decisions independent of the economic variables.

Keywords : social stratification, social status, lifestyle, Japan

A great deal of social science research is concerned with understanding the nature of social status and social stratification in modern societies. Research on this topic in Japan has recently undergone a significant change. Whereas earlier research characterized modern Japan as a relatively unstratified society, more recent work has called this characterization into question. The debate involves both the nature of stratification in modern societies and how to measure it.

Many of the early studies relied heavily on descriptive accounts of Japanese social structure, often aimed at highlighting unique aspects of Japanese so-

ciety (at least in terms of an implicit comparison with the West) and how those aspects are related to stratification (Murakami 1978 ; Nakane 1970 ; Vogel 1971 ; Reischauer 1977). These studies typically conclude that Japan is a relatively unstratified or homogeneous society.

These descriptive accounts of Japan as a relatively unstratified society were bolstered by empirical studies that often used very nebulous and questionable measures of stratification such as the Gini index (e.g., Koshiro 1983 ; Bronfenbrenner and Yasuba 1987), or survey data on self-perceived social class affiliation (e.g., Office of the Prime Minister 1969–1993). The Gini index, which measures income distribution patterns, shows that Japan, relative to other modern, industri-

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alized countries, has a relatively equal distribution. Survey research conducted by the Office of the Prime Minister shows that approximately 90 percent of Japanese people consider themselves to be middle class. Thus, these two measures were often used to support the claim that Japan was relatively unstratified.

Some studies dispute the claim that Japan is 90 percent middle class. Some researchers claim that status inconsistency, rather than class homogeneity, has led to a 'middle-class mentality' in Japan (Tomimaga and Tomoeda 1986; Ishida 1989; Hara 1990). This argument claims that signs of status in Japan tend to be so ubiquitous that most people can point to some source of status in their lives (e.g., occupational status, spouse or family member's occupational status, size or location of company where one works, educational attainment, income, standard of living). Based on this discussion, Murakami predicted the emergence of 'the new middle mass'. The new middle mass is a huge intermediate stratum, whose members are highly homogeneous in their lifestyles and attitudes (Murakami 1984). Imada follows this argument. He claims that social changes that occurred after World War II have diminished the difference of value-orientations and of lifestyles between classes and the class-based sub-cultures (Imada 1989). As a whole, these studies predict class homogeneity rather than class heterogeneity; status differentiation is small in Japan.

Other scholars have directly questioned the survey results. The government survey allowed respondents to locate their standard of living in one of five categories: lower, lower middle, middle middle, upper middle, and upper. The three middle categories were then all categorized as "middle-class." This technique, it is argued, influenced respondents and

accounts for the majority referring to themselves as middle-class¹ (Ozawa 1985; Fukutake 1982).

More recent studies, however, have questioned all of the above claims. Ishida (1993) has effectively argued against the claims of the unstratified nature of Japanese society. His results show that in Japan the overall mechanism through which social background affects socioeconomic attainment is similar to that in the United States and Britain. In addition, he shows that class position, education and occupational status are determinants of inequality in the labor market in Japan as well as in the United States.

Finally, recent theoretical arguments concerning the nature of stratification in modern societies suggest that income and occupation alone are not sufficient to determine the existence or nonexistence of a stratified society. Inequality and stratification do not necessarily manifest themselves in the same way as in previous times. Thus, new concepts have emerged such as 'cultural boundaries,' 'culture of consumption,' and 'cultural capital' (DiMaggio 1982; Bourdieu 1977; Lamont 1992; Hamnett, McDowell and Sarre 1989). These concepts reflect the fact that while some modern societies might not exhibit classic forms of stratification, such as inherited status, they still might perpetuate inequalities in more subtle ways.

In this paper we continue evaluating the exact nature and strength of social stratification in modern Japanese society. Our goal is to extend the work of Ishida and others, who have focused up until now on class structure, by concentrating on other aspects of social stratification. This study will focus on the role social status variables play in predicting differences in consumption patterns and preferred leisure activities. Thus we will determine if Japanese society, like many other modern industrial societies, is stratified

not by income or class consciousness, but by more subtle distinctions in lifestyle, as Sobel showed with the United States (Sobel 1983).

A variety of past studies on stratification in contemporary societies have concentrated on consumption patterns and leisure activities (Sobel 1983 ; De Graaf 1991 ; Valadez and Clignet 1987 ; Turner 1988). These studies suggest that by locating those variables most closely related to these types of lifestyle differences, a better understanding of modern stratification systems can be obtained. Furthermore, studies focusing on lifestyle differentiation (in terms of consumption patterns and leisure activities) have the advantage of focusing on concrete ways in which the social structure is likely to directly affect actual behavioral choices. Oddly, issues of lifestyle have been discussed in the past by scholars claiming Japan has become a more-or-less homogeneous middle-class society (Murakami 1978 ; 1984 ; Ishida 1971) despite little actual empirical support. Thus there is a need to clarify the degree to which stratification at this level exists or does not exist in modern Japan.

The principal goals of this paper are to determine (1) which variables best predict lifestyle differentiation in modern Japanese society ; and (2) what the relative contribution is of these variables. In other words, what is the relative importance of variables such as education and related labor market characteristics, and the economic aspect of social status, especially income, in predicting different lifestyles. By focusing on observable behaviors, rather than relying on income distribution indices or self-perceived class affiliation surveys, we hope to present a clearer picture of how social structural variables affect daily living patterns.

DATA AND MEASURES

In considering those variables likely to produce lifestyle differentiation, care is needed in considering the Japan-specific social structure. We were not able to locate any previous Japanese studies that constructed and tested a measurement model of social stratification. However, two reports based on the 1985 Social Stratification and Mobility National Survey contain useful information. These reports claim that basic social status is determined through two conceptually distinct, although overlapping, dimensions. These two dimensions are economic status and educational-occupational track (Tsukahara et al. 1990 ; Kobayashi et al. 1990).

Economic status indicators such as occupational prestige and income are, of course, consistently used in studies of stratification and lifestyle differentiation (Sobel 1983 ; Zablocki and Kanter 1976). In addition, Sobel uses education as an indicator that predicts lifestyle differentiation. The concept of an education track, however, is somewhat different from typical Western models of social stratification. The education system in Japan is designed to place students on specific "occupational paths" from a fairly early age, with the ability to move from one path to another being much more difficult than in the West (Rohlen 1988). Therefore, we use the term "track" because education in Japan can be thought of as producing a variety of hierarchical tracks that lead to differential access to social status, power and privilege (see Fujita 1985). Those people who eventually graduate from universities, especially prestigious universities, have a much greater chance of accessing a high level position in either government or big business. In other words, they have access not only to prestigious jobs

but also to big business and government. Even within the same class position, level of education is higher in large firms than in small and medium-sized firms (Ishida 1993).

It should be noted that although education is extremely important in terms of predicting future success just as it is in the U. S. and other societies, it is not the only avenue to high income in Japan. In Japan, the effect of education on income is actually smaller than it is in the U. S. (Ishida 1993). This is because there is another avenue to monetary success. For those individuals with low educational attainment levels, successful self-employment is the typical path to high income (Tsukahara et al. 1990 ; Kobayashi et al. 1990).

It should be noted that our interest in education is quite different from previous studies in that we are not concerned with the relationship between education and socioeconomic attainment per se. Rather, we are interested in determining if education and its related social status promote social stratification by having a direct influence on personal lifestyle. In other words, does education and labor market characteristics that are based on education affect a person's choice of consumer products and cultural activities even after controlling for economic effects.

The data we analyze are from the 1975 Social Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM) National Survey. The survey population consisted of Japanese males aged 20-69, and was based on a two-stage random sample of 300 areas, including metropolitan, cities and towns. Face-to-face interviews were conducted on 2,724 respondents, representing a 68.1 percent response rate. The 1970s provide an interesting period to conduct this analysis since that is the period when the Gini coefficient was at its post-war

lowest and middle class affiliation was at its highest, suggesting a relatively unstratified society.

As already stated, consumption patterns and leisure activities are used as indicators of lifestyle. The SSM survey includes a variety of questions concerning ownership of consumer goods or property, and participation within the previous year in a variety of leisure activities. The first set of questions are coded as "yes" or "no"; the second set contain a 3-point scale, recording the frequency of participation in the activity (i.e., "regularly," "occasionally" or "never"). The consumer goods questions do not, of course, directly measure current consumption behavior but rather past consumption behavior. It is assumed that consumption patterns remain relatively stable over time. The leisure activities questions roughly approximate the questions used by DiMaggio (1982) in measuring cultural capital.

Our task is to create a multiple indicators model that will allow us to measure the relative influence of social status indicators on lifestyle variables. Although measures of social status are frequently used in studies, lifestyle variables are less commonly used. To aid in conceptualizing lifestyle as a multi-dimensional concept we use exploratory principal component analysis. Excluded from this analysis are those variables that measure inherited items such as real estate and some types of bonds. Because we conceive of lifestyle as observable expressive behavior (Sobel 1981 ; 1983), these variables are inappropriate as indicators. We also exclude those consumer products that are used by an overwhelming percentage of the population (e.g., television and refrigerator) since they are also inappropriate for measuring lifestyle differentiation.

As a result of the principal component analysis,

two unique dimensions of lifestyle emerged : leisure activities, and luxury items. Because indicators of these concepts are dichotomous and trichotomous variables , we use polychoric correlations and weighted-least-squares (see Muthen 1983, 1978 for a discussion of this procedure).

Table 1 presents the measurement model, where social status and lifestyle are measured simultaneously. The first dimension, leisure activities, contains five items : (1) attending movies ; (2) playing golf or tennis, or yachting ; (3) mountain climbing or hiking ; (4) reading novels or history books ; and (5) attending plays, concerts or exhibitions. The second dimension, luxury items, contains both leisure activities and consumer goods. The unique feature of these items is their relative cost. The leisure activities are golf and travel abroad. (In Japan golf is a very ex-

pensive sport costing a minimum of \$100 a round.) The consumer products are a microwave oven, piano, air conditioner, living room set, and membership in a sports club. It should be noted that although many of these items are now relatively common, in 1975 they still represented luxuries. In fact, in the SSM survey no more than 35 percent of the respondents owned any one of these items.

The independent variables in the model measure social status. Social status in its broadest sense can include lifestyle since, as Weber showed, status groups are based in part on one's way of life (Weber, 1968). In this study, however, we intend to clarify the degree to which basic measures of social status are able to predict lifestyle differentiation. As previously mentioned, based on relevant research on social stratification in Japan, we use two social status con-

Table 1 Measurement Model of Social Status and Lifestyle (Lambda Y)

Status Variables and Items	Track Status	Economic Status	Leisure Activities	Luxury Items
Education ^a	.741	----	----	----
Size of Company ^{b*}	.494	----	----	----
Occupational Prestige ^c	.269	.549	----	----
Personal Income ^d	----	.786	----	----
Family Income ^d	----	.814	----	----
Movies*	----	----	.421	----
Climbing, hiking, skiing*	----	----	.594	----
Novels and history books*	----	----	.691	----
Play, concert, exhibition*	----	----	.575	----
Golf and tennis, yachting*	----	----	.194	.448
Travelling abroad*	----	----	----	.511
Microwave*	----	----	----	.526
Piano*	----	----	----	.637
Sports club*	----	----	----	.706
Sofa and guest table*	----	----	----	.619
Air Conditioner*	----	----	----	.625

Note : All parameters are significant at $P < 0.01$ level.

a Years of formal education

b Ordinal variable (1 = self-employed with no employees.....7 = public sector or private companies with over 1,000 employees)

c SSM Occupational Prestige Score (see Naoi 1979)

d Logarithm of actual income

* Ordinal Variables in this model

cepts: track status and economic status. Track status captures status attainment through the education system. Through educational attainment, status can be attained by increased probability of obtaining a prestigious job in a large company or in the public sector. Economic status captures status based on income and occupational prestige. The role of occupational prestige, however, needs some clarification. Naoi (1979), who constructed the SSM occupational prestige score, notes that these scores tend to be highly correlated with education and income. If the SSM occupational prestige scores are regressed on thirteen social status variables including self-perceived class affiliation, education and income have the strongest predictive power (Naoi 1979). Thus, occupational prestige appears to reflect both economic status and educational status.

Table 1 also contains the results of a confirmatory factor-analytic model measuring dimensions of social status. As expected, education, size of company and occupational prestige all load on the track status dimension, with education exhibiting the strongest relationship. Personal income, family income and occupational prestige all load on the economic status dimension.

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL STATUS ON LIFESTYLE DIFFERENTIATION

Our causal analysis focuses on the effects of the social status variables on the two aspects of lifestyle. Results are displayed in Figure 1. The model fits the data well, with a goodness of fit index of 0.996 and a chi-square of 279.19 with 92 degrees of freedom (a ratio of 3.03). All causal paths, except for the path from economic status to leisure activities, are statistically significant. We call attention to three basic fea-

tures of this model:

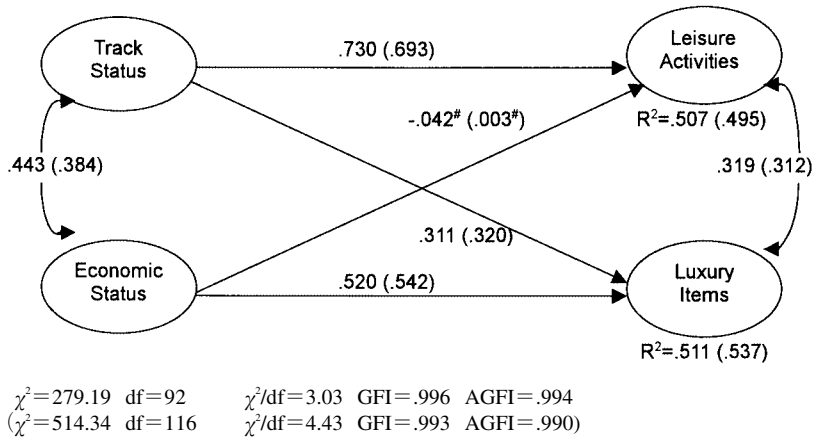
(1) The effect of economic status on luxury items and that of track status on leisure activities are strong: 0.520 and 0.730, respectively. Each independent variable predicts more than a fourth of the total variance of each dependent variable.

(2) Track status has an effect on luxury items even after controlling for economic status: .311.

(3) The coefficients of determination are 0.507 in leisure activities, and 0.511 in luxury items. This means each aspect of lifestyle is significantly related to the social status dimensions.

Social status indicators are not the only variables related to lifestyle differentiation. Demographic variables such as age, gender, race, and residential area can also affect lifestyle differentiation (Sobel 1983). Since the SSM survey respondents are all Japanese males, we cannot control for race or gender. We can, however, control for the effects of age and size of residential area. These controls are necessary since it is likely that younger people are more likely to participate in some leisure activities than older people. Similarly, some activities are more common in urban than in rural areas. Additionally, age is negatively correlated with education due to the expansion of the educational system in recent generations, and positively correlated with income because of the prevalence of a wage seniority system (*Nenko-Chingin-sei*) in Japan.

In order to control for the effects of age and city size, these two variables are added to the original model. Results of this analysis are presented in parentheses in Figure 1. Although this model does not fit as well as the original model, it still fits the data reasonably well. The goodness of fit index is 0.993 and the chi-square is 512.34 with 116 degrees



P > .10 All others significant at .01 level.
 Numbers in parentheses are parameters after age and city size are controlled.

Figure 1 Lifestyle Differentiation Model

of freedom (a ratio of 4.43). As can be seen, city size and age have no direct significant effect on any of the endogenous dimensions, suggesting that regional variation and age differences in Japan are very small when the effects of social status are controlled.

The purchase of luxury items is most strongly related to economic affluence, and leisure activities are strongly related to track status. In addition, track status still has an effect on luxury items after age and city size are controlled. In Japan, then, track status strongly influences not only participation in leisure activities, but also increases the individual's likelihood of purchasing luxury items even after controlling for income. There are probably two reasons for this relationship. First, education, a basic element of track status, is likely to affect a person's "tastes." Bourdieu (1984) presents extensive support for this supposition. Second, large companies sometimes provide employees with greater access to certain leisure activities (e.g., travel abroad, concert tickets and membership in sports clubs). Therefore, a person's track status is likely to affect both his tastes and his ability to

participate in a different lifestyle, regardless of his actual income.

CONCLUSION

Results provide a useful starting point for understanding the system of social stratification in modern Japan. The strong observed relationship between social status variables and lifestyle differences suggest that these social status variables are responsible for a stratified society where track status and economic status lead to differential access to a variety of resources.

These findings are consistent with theories of modern stratification systems that emphasize the role of education and occupation in producing cultural distinctions in the form of differential tastes and lifestyles (Lamont 1992 ; Bourdieu 1984). The findings also support Turner's (1988) contention that modern societies, despite claims to the contrary, are still highly stratified :

.....we can identify a cultural dimension to social

stratification in which we can conceptualize status not as political entitlement but as lifestyle……as previously privileged and prestigious cultural items became available to a mass-market, elite leaders and cultural, avant-garde groups were forced to create new forms of taste, difference and distinction to preserve their cultural superiority over the aspiring masses (pp. 66-74).

Our findings suggest that the educational and occupational track is one avenue which influences those tastes.

The current study is non-comparative and so no direct comparison between Japan and Western countries can be made. We can, however, note some important features of the Japanese social structure. Model results display a strong relationship between the two dimensions of social status and the lifestyle indicators. Of particular interest is the importance of a track status (i.e. education and occupation) that strongly influences lifestyle decisions independent of economic variables.

In previous related research, Imada and Hara (1979) suggest that education plays a crucial role in the status allocation process in Japan. Our results would seem to confirm these claims. In the analysis of lifestyle differentiation in the U. S. society, Sobel suggested that education and occupational status is as important as income in predicting lifestyle differentiation (Sobel 1981; 1983). Similarly, the importance of track status in our model displays the importance of the education system in Japan with regard to so-

cial status. In terms of the ongoing discussion of social stratification in modern Japanese society, we conclude that even if variance in income is relatively low, Japanese society still contains an underlying class structure. Clear differences in lifestyle exist even after controlling for differences in economic status. These differences are strongly related to the educational and occupational track a person enters, and manifests itself most strongly in that person's future choice of leisure activities. This is consistent with contemporary views of stratification that suggest differences in lifestyles might essentially serve to exclude some people from access to the dominant culture.

We conclude by noting that our results suggest that modern Japanese society, like other societies, is stratified and this manifests itself in distinct lifestyle differences. By concentrating on the direct relationship between social status indicators and lifestyle, we have avoided the common disadvantage of drawing conclusions based solely on a single status index or social class self-reporting. We feel this type of analysis provides a more accurate portrayal of how stratification systems are currently maintained in Japanese society.

NOTE

- 1) Another question about Class Affiliation in the 1975 SSM survey shows a different pattern. The question asks self-affiliations of three classes: Labor Class (Rodosha Kaikyu), Capital Class (Shihonka Kaikyu), and Middle Class (Chusan Kaikyu). Only 22.9% respondents identified themselves as 'Middle Class'.

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