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Constructing the Family through Opinion Polls:

A Comparative Analysis of Japan and the USA*

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Introduction and preview

“If you were to be born again, would you want to be a woman or a man?” This is a popular question asked in opinion polls in Japan through the years. Invariably people seem able to come up with a definite answer: “man” or “woman.” Over-time changes in the pattern of responses have also been analyzed and explained by macro-level changes in consciousness, women’s opportunities in the public sphere, and so on. Everything seems to make perfect sense except perhaps the question itself. What does it really *mean* to ask if one would want to be a woman or a man if one were to be reborn? What does it mean to say “I’d want to become a woman” or “I’d want to become a man”? Is internal homogeneity of the respective categories “man” and “woman” a viable assumption? Can we assume a shared understanding of the respective categories that allows a meaningful interpretation of the responses?

A question like this could be taken as trivial and an analysis of it, by extension, equally trivial. However, experts are involved and material resources mobilized to write this question, format it, put it in a survey, and administered to thousands of people, who in turn apparently answer it seriously. Experts are then invited on TV or asked to write in the newspaper about the responses and academic papers have probably been pub-

lished on it. Rather than dismissing this question or opinion polls in general as trivial, one should pay attention to the meaning of opinion polls and analyze the questions — the way the questions are framed and the response categories configured — to understand anew the significance of opinion polling in constructing our consciousness.

Taking the perspective that opinion polls are a text to be analyzed in and of itself and extending an earlier analysis I did on women's employment in Japan (Khor 2002), this paper analyzes questions and corresponding response categories on the family in opinion polls conducted in 2000–2002 in Japan and the United States. I will begin with a theoretical contextualization of the present analysis before introducing the data and presenting the analysis.

The construction of reality through opinion polling

Researchers have long identified various problems of relying on opinion polls as a source of information to gauge “public opinion.” There is the problem of the lack of interest of the respondents and their tendency to select an answer in fixed-response type questions without giving the question enough consideration (Foddy 1993). Alternatively, if one has a clear opinion that is not represented in the available response categories, one might choose the “Other” category, which is usually omitted from the final analysis. In addition, the wording, order, and phrasing of the questions have also been shown to affect responses (Schuman and Presser 1996; Lewis 2001; Page and Shapiro 1992). On one level, these are technical problems that can be “fixed” through sampling and the wording of questions and responses. On another level, however, they are deeper problems beyond quick fixes because they show that by manipulating the questions and response categories, “results” and “opinions” can indeed be created. “Results” and “opinions” are quickly converted into “data” with a life of their own, or in other words, “social facts.” These “social facts” are further interpreted and “framed,” separated from the circumstances of the

individuals who issue those opinions, and they finally become the “official” text of public discourse. As social theorists and methodologists have indicated succinctly, rather than measuring public opinion, opinion surveys actually manufacture it (Blumer 1948; Bourdieu 1979; Smith 1990). In turn, these social facts, once made “official,” become the raw materials of an average individual’s reality and from which she draws to interpret, understand and make sense of her world and answer opinion poll questions. Opinion polls are therefore important constitutive elements of a modern individual’s reality. An individual learns to frame his thinking and look at the world in particular ways through constant exposures to opinion surveys and in turn contributes to the construction of public opinion through answering these survey questions.

The Un-reality of Opinion Polls¹

Opinion polls are “unreal” in the sense that most people (with the possible exception of social scientists) do not think or converse in the manner of an opinion poll question. The scientific clarity of an opinion poll question does not correspond to the ambiguities and messiness of ordinary conversation. That most of us can answer an opinion question without much problem is the result of a learning process through which we acquire a particular way of thinking and manner of articulating what we come to consider as “our” opinion. For example, a common poll question utilizes a “numerical scale,” or the so-called feeling barometer, to ask respondents to rank the importance of family, career, relatives, religion, and the like on a scale of 1 to 10 (see, for example, Institute of Statistical Mathematics 1992). Our apparent ability to answer such questions with ease shows that we have learned how to describe our emotions with numbers, rather than that numerical scales approximate people’s feelings.

The “Framing” of Questions and Response Categories

How a question is framed — how it is phrased and what response categories are made available — shapes the answer and sets a parameter

for the interpretation of the “findings.” For example, consider this question: “What do you think is the ideal life course for women?” The response categories include an “absolute endorsement” (“it is better to work throughout one’s life”) and/or an absolute opposition (“It is better for women not to work outside of the home”), with the latter given less frequently than the former across surveys and over time. In between these two extremes are typically the following options:

2. It is better to work until marriage and then quit upon marriage;
3. It is better to work even after marriage but quit after one has children;
4. It is better to work throughout but stop during child-rearing time to stay home;
5. It is better not to work until after marriage or after finishing with child-rearing.

The response categories are formulated on the basis that women’s employment is defined by their family responsibilities of housework (implicated in “marriage”), childbirth, and childrearing. Further, it should be noted that no parallel questions of men’s life course are asked. All these characteristics considered, what this question does is to problematize women’s lives (specifically, employment decisions and family responsibilities) as a “social issue” to be assessed by the public and make women’s employment contingent on family responsibilities. Conversely, if a parallel question were also asked of men and the public invited to consider men’s lives as a social issue, the naturalness of men’s employment might be questioned rather than assumed, and the balance of family and work responsibilities could then be seen as decisions to be made by men and women. An issue can be framed in many ways, and it has been argued convincingly, corroborated also by the example above, that the particular frame that is used often reflects the interests of the powerful, or the dominant discourse (see Smith 1999).

The “Framing” of Poll Results

Not only can questions be framed, the “results” can also be “framed” in particular ways when they are reported in public — on television, in newspapers and magazines, or in academic publications. The polls are frequently extrapolated to “fit” a story that has already been written. For example, Page and Shapiro (1992) show in the United States that whether “the public” really support or are opposed to “welfare programs” depends on whether the stigmatized term “welfare” is used in the question. The same respondents are found to be more likely to express support for “programs to help the poor” than for “welfare programs,” which are of course essentially the same thing. The apparent contradiction that respondents are both for and against welfare programs is almost never reported or discussed. Rather, it is the finding of the “unpopularity” of “welfare” (rather than public support for “programs for the poor”) that is cited time and again in stories about cutting welfare programs, especially by politicians in their endeavor to cut (or in their language, “to reform”) welfare programs. Indeed, ideas in support of the public discourse — ideas that do not challenge the status quo — are generally over-represented in the mass media, whereas dissenting ideas are underreported (Lewis 2001).

By the time the polls get reported on television or in the newspapers, the findings are presented as “social facts... [which] are constituted already in a mode that separates them from the actualities and subjective presences of individuals... as administrative products...” (Smith 1990:54). Ambiguities in the construction of the questions and responses are removed, the processes leading up to the “findings” are made invisible, and the “findings” become solid “facts.” Indeed, opinion polls are a text of the relations of ruling that bring a “virtual reality” into the presence of the reader or the viewer (Smith 1990).

In sum, “reality” is constructed from opinion polls in two processes of framing: first, the framing of the questions and response categories, and

second, the framing of the report of the findings. While the two processes are intimately connected with each other and both are important in helping us understand how reality is constructed through polls, one may argue that the first process in some way limits the extent to which the latter can be framed. In other words, the questions and the response categories themselves set parameters that limit or constrain how the findings can be framed and reported to the public. As Dorothy Smith puts it, "the way in which questions are framed... maybe a powerful organizer of the version of the world that is built from the responses." (Smith 1990: 75).

The polls are therefore a pre-scripted text that constitutes a particular reality by selecting the issues polled, the aspects polled, and the response categories available. It is this pre-scripted text — the poll questions and response categories — that is the focus of the present analysis.

Data and methodology

Sources of Data on Japan and the USA

Data on Japan are taken from the most recent (2002 and 2001) issues of *The Current State of Public Opinion Polls in the Nation* (Zenkoku yoronchousa no genkyou) published by the Prime Minister's Office, which included major opinion polls on random samples of at least 500 respondents with a response rate of at least 70% conducted between April 2000 and March 2002 by national and local government agencies, universities and academic research institutes, marketing research companies, newspaper companies, insurance companies and so on. The questions are typical fixed-response poll questions which occasionally include an "Other" response option.

Data on the United States are taken from an on-line database called "Polling the Nation." It is "a compilation of more than 14,000 surveys conducted by more than 700 polling organizations in the United States and more than 80 other countries from 1986 to the present. Each of the nearly 350,000 records reports a question asked and the responses given." ([http:](http://)

//poll.orspuub.com/poll) The sample sizes and response rates of these surveys are comparable to the Japanese surveys noted above. For this analysis, I looked at surveys conducted between January 2001 and December 2002.

For both data sources, I used survey questions as the unit of analysis and selected relevant questions based on key words related to “the family” for analysis. For the U.S. surveys, keywords included “family,” “family values,” “parent,” “father,” “mother,” “youth” and “children”. For the Japanese surveys, the broad heading of “family life” (*katei seikatsu*) includes almost all the relevant categories for this analysis, such as “family life” and its subcategories like “marriage/divorce,” “husband-wife (male-female) division of roles,” “the participation of men in housework and childrearing,” and similar headings. In addition, I also checked relevant questions grouped under “youth” and “family/school/community.”

In total, I identified and analyzed 310 questions from the U. S. surveys and 326 questions² from the Japanese surveys. I coded each question for its “theme” or “focus” and arrived at these categories: “family relations/family life,” “parenting/parent-child relationship,” “work and family,” “(gender) role and power,” “division of labor in the family,” and “composition of the family.”

In the United States, more questions are asked about parenting and parent-child relationship and secondarily, about balancing family and work. A typical question on parenting and parent/child relationship asks how much parents and children talk about various issues, as in the following example:

“How often have you talked with your mother or father about what kinds of birth controls are available and where to get it? Have you talked about it a couple of times or is it something you talk about regularly?” (A-193, Kaiser Family Foundation, March 8, 2001).³

The following is one version of a frequently asked question about family and work responsibilities with a focus on the time available for the

family:

“Overall, do you feel you spend too much time, too little time, or just enough time with your child?” The response categories include “too much time,” “too little time,” and “just enough time.” (A-239, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2000).

Similarly, in Japan, questions on parenting/parent-child relationship and role division between men and women/husband and wife are almost equally numerous. Examples from both groups of questions are given below:

“Do you do this with your parents: talk about school life?”

“Talk with father a lot,” “talk with mother a lot,” “talk with parents a lot,” “do not talk with either much” (J-80, National Federation of Parent-Teacher Associations, October, 2001, H 14: 377).⁴

“What do you think about both husband and wife having careers?”

- “(a) The husband should make more money and work more (than the wife);
- (b) If problems arise, the woman rather than the man should stop working;
- (c) Most men use work as a reason not to participate in housework, childrearing;
- (d) That the man doesn’t do housework and childcare is because the woman doesn’t ask him to.” (A-215; Jiji Press, September, 2000, H 13: 321).

The meaning of comparing Japan and USA

The analysis of questions and response categories to understand how the family is constructed benefits from a comparison between two cultures. While the family is typically seen as a core institution in Asian cultures, there is much discussion on the disintegration of the family in the West, indicated by the high divorce rate, single motherhood, and the

like. However, at the same time, “family values” have been made a major political issue in recent presidential campaigns in the United States. In addition, central to a consideration of the family is gender dynamics. Japan is often compared to the United States, and is frequently seen as 20 or 30 years behind in consciousness of and measures to combat gender equality both inside and outside of the family. This observation, while accurate to some extent, inadvertently creates a false impression that gender is no longer an issue in the United States. “Gender” is still a powerful organizing principle in the United States, and issues familiar to feminist activists in Japan are still being argued politically and explored academically in the United States, namely the competing responsibilities of work and family, gender role divisions, power relations between husband and wife, and so on (see, for example, Coltrane 2000; Heymann 2000; Parcel and Cornfield 2000; Weiss 2000). Comparing United States and Japan should reveal more clearly the mechanisms through which family and gender are constructed and configured, as well as the possibilities and limits of altering the reality thus constituted.

The construction of the Family

To provide a background for the analysis, basic information on the patterns of behavior related to the family in the United States and Japan is presented in Table 1 below. Statistics show that while there are differences between USA and Japan with respect to familial patterns, frequently these differences are more quantitative than qualitative differences.

In both the United States and Japan, the nuclear form of family — two generations comprising heterosexual parents and their non-adult children — is seen as the “norm.” However, diversity of family forms has also been brought up in public discourse. For example, children’s books have been written on diverse family forms and educational videos produced in the United States (see, for example, Chasnoff and Cohen 2000). Similarly, textbooks approved to be used in 2003 by the Ministry of Edu-

Table 1 Statistics related to the family in the USA and Japan^{*1}

	USA	Japan
Average number of births of women aged 15-49 (2000)	2.13	1.36
Abortion rate/as percentage of births ^{**}	2.1%/33.8% (1991)	13.9%/35.7% (1991) 11.7%/28.7% (2000)
Average Life expectancy (1995-2000)	Women: 79.4 Men: 73.6	Women: 83.8 Men: 77
Non-marriage rate (2000)	Women & men: 8.5%	Women: 5.82% Men: 12.57%
Marriage rate	8.3 (per 1000) (1998)	6.4 (per 1000) (2000)
Age of first marriage	Median age for women: 25.1 Median age for men: 26.8	Mean age for women: 28.58 (2000) Mean age for men: 30.81 (2000)
Divorce rate	4.19 (per 1000) (1998)	2.10 (per 1000) (2000)
Average number of people in household	2.6 (1993)	2.7 (2000)
Percentage of nuclear households	75.7% (1994)	60.1% (2000) husband and wife only: 18.9% husband, wife, children: 31.9% male parent, children: 1.2% female parent, children: 6.5%
Employment rate of married population aged 15 and above	Women: 61.2% (1999)	Men: 81.5% (2000) Women: 48.4% (2000)

*1 The data are taken from Kamano 2000 and NIPSSR 2002.

** number of abortions performed as % of 15-49 female population/number of abortion in comparison with births set as 100

cation, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology now include depictions of non-nuclear forms of families (Asahi Shimbun 2002).

Statistics, however, are not objective indicators.⁵ Instead, they can be framed and manipulated to tell particular stories. Given the statistics of employment, family relationships, and the composition of the family, we can ask how these poll questions frame or respond to these statistics. Basically, we can ask which questions are asked and which are not asked. When asked, does a question allow one to imagine alternatives or does it

suppress any imagination of alternatives? Are all “imaginable” possibilities given as response categories? Do these “possibilities” challenge or support the status quo? Which possibilities are excluded from consideration and hence banished from imagination (and “reality”)? What is being problematized and for which opinion is sought? All these questions relate basically to identifying patterns in these questions and response categories that challenge or support the status quo.

“Should we teach that a normal family is one that consists of man, woman, and children?” (A-71, Rasmussen Research, March 24, 2000)

Questions related to the composition of the family, family values, and family relations/family life are relevant here.

The United States surveys include relatively few of these questions, totaling only 51 among over 300 questions analyzed. The questions about family values are about attitudes towards married children living with parents and elderly parents living with children, having children outside of marriage, and whether people have too many children without thinking. Granted that the norm of nuclear family specifies a heterosexually married couple with their children, these questions are therefore all about deviations from the nuclear family norm. In singling out these deviations and seeking opinions only about them, these questions further problematize them. Given an interest in the number of children people should have, instead of inviting condemnation of “people who are having too many children without thinking”, one could ask questions like the following instead: (A) “Do you think people are having too few, too many, or just the right number of children?” (B) “What do you think about people’s decision to have children? a) people think too much and end up having few children; b) people do not think enough and end up having many children; c) regardless of number, people generally plan rationally about having children.” This pair of questions is not perfect since question (B) associates thinking with few children and lack of thinking with too many children. Still, by first asking a question about the number of children

and by the inclusion of option c) and response choices of both “too few” and “too many” children, the question does not steer one to think (and perhaps condemn) those who have “too many” children. By focusing only on the “deviation,” a question can have the effect of problematizing the deviation, defining narrowly what a “normal” family is, and consequently supporting the status quo.

Given the foregoing argument, what happens then if a question is asked about the “norm” directly? In a way, the effect of a question like “Should we teach that a normal family consists of man, woman, and children?” is unpredictable. By getting at the heart of the nuclear family, this question takes the unsaid assumption of normality and makes it an issue to be discussed, and in doing so, carries the possibility of undermining its normality. On the other hand, however, given the strong institutionalization of the nuclear family in the society, this question could have the effect of privileging the nuclear family by inviting an answer: “Sure, of course.” Basically, by selecting only one element and asking respondents their opinions about it, a question on the status quo could invite a positive response and a question on the deviation from the status quo could invite a negative response. To avoid constructing a reality that consolidates the status quo and to allow more imagination of the alternatives, one can easily ask a different question like this: “What should we teach about “family” to children”? And in the response categories, one can list all logically possible family forms, including the nuclear form.

In the Japanese surveys, questions asked define the parameters of nuclear families more strictly than those in the U. S. A., problematizing a range of deviations from the nuclear form, including divorce, marriage without children, non-marriage, late-marriage, and so on. For example, consider the following question:

“What is your view about marriage: (a) one should marry once one reaches a certain age; (b) one should marry, in thinking about the future; (c) one should marry because of social customs; (d) it is all right not to marry; it's individual freedom; (e) it is all right not to marry if

there are other things one devotes oneself to" (J-31; Akita Prefecture, July 2001, H 14: 121)

Further, such questions are also more numerous than in the American surveys. For example, there are 24 questions on whether one should get married or have children if one is married. The following is a typical question.

"What do you think about marriage (for men and for women, separately)?"

- (a) One should get married;
- (b) It's better to get married;
- (c) It is all right not to get married;
- (d) It is better not to get married."

Given the same interest, questions can be framed differently. For example, questions about children and marriage are asked both in the United States and in Japan. In the United States, the following questions are asked:

"Are children the most important thing in a marriage?" (A-223, DDB Needham Worldwide, 2000);

"Too many people have children without thinking enough?" (A-303, Public Agenda, 2000);

"When making important decisions, consideration of the children should come first?" (A-224, DDB Needham Worldwide, 2000);

"Having a child has brought you and your spouse closer?" (A-130, Public Agenda Foundation, 2002);

"Having a child brought tension and stress in relationship between you and your spouse?" (A-131, Public Agenda Foundation, 2002)

In Japan, the following questions can be considered:

"What do you think about family: one can live a full life if one has children?" (J-4 E, Prime Minister's Office, May 2001, H 14: 14)

“What do you think about marriage, etc. : priority should be on the children, even if that means sacrifice on the part of husband and wife?” (J-8 H, Prime Minister’s Office, May 2001, H 14: 14)

“What do you think about not having children even if married?” (J-4 F, Prime Minister’s Office, May 2001, H 14: 14)

“Do you think one should have children if married?” (J-154, Ehime Prefecture, November, 2000, H 13: 100)

“What do you think about this: even if married, it is not necessary to have children?” (J-178 C, Koto Ward, June 2000, H 13: 153)

Some similar questions are asked in both the United States and in Japan, but overall, the questions in Japan seem to focus more on prescription when it comes to having children. Even though the choices include both yes and no and the questions ask about both “having” and “not having children”, the focus on “should” or “not necessary” and the practice of asking about children only in the context of marriage reinforce the conventional life-course as a matter of course. In contrast, the way the questions are framed in the United States invite the respondents to think about the meaning of having children and children’s welfare, and therefore allows room for considering having children as a decision and responsibility rather than as just a norm to follow.

Gendering the Family

Put very simply, the questions in the United States surveys construct a family made up of “parents and children” while in the Japanese surveys, a family is composed of “mother, father, son(s) and daughter(s)”.

Parents and children vs mothers, fathers, daughters and sons

Questions on family relations/family life ask about relationships among father, mother, children, and other family members. The sex of children or relatives is not emphasized. Some examples are given below.

"Are you satisfied with family relations?" (A-28, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, June 2002)

"Do you have a good relationship with your mother?" (A-43, Columbia University Center for Study of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, February 2001)

"Do you have a good relationship with your father?" (A-42, Columbia University Center for Study of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, February 2001)

"Is living close to family and relatives a top priority?" (A-53, Barna Research Center, April 26, 2000)

Similarly, in the 67 questions on parent-child relationship, the "sex" of children is not differentiated, and while questions are sometimes asked of mother and father separately, the questions are fully parallel to each other.

"Do you talk with your mother or father about bullying/teasing in school?" (A-173, Kaiser Family Foundation, March 8, 2001)

"How often do you keep things from your parents?" (A-220, Kaiser Family Foundation, March 8, 2001)

These questions construct the reality of the family as being composed of the roles of parents and children, rather than of male and female parents and male and female children. A similar pattern is seen in the 82 questions on parenting. These questions cover what respondents consider to be important for a child to learn, whether parents enjoy participating in children's activities, and whether a child learns something better with a stay-at-home parent.

"Is it important for the child to learn: to be well liked or popular?" (A-157, General Social Survey, May 2001)

"Is it important for the child to learn: to think for him/herself?" (A-158, General Social Survey, May 2001)

"Is it important for the child to learn: to work hard?" (A-159,

General Social Survey, May 2001)

“Is it important for the child to learn: to help others when they need help?” (A-160, General Social Survey, May 2001)

The gender of neither parent nor child is emphasized except for two questions asking whether respondent thinks a boy or a girl is easier to raise (A-227, Gallup Poll, December 26, 2000) and whether gender difference is biological or social (A-280, Newsweek, August 15, 2000).

In the questions about influence of parents on children, the non-genderedness of familiar roles is reiterated in the questions on whether the child is more like the father or the mother by asking the question to children of both sexes (A-73, A-79, Shell Oil Company, January 2000). This recognizes the father and the mother as individuals not defined only by their sex.

What emerges from all these questions discussed above is the importance of the two roles of parents and children, rather than the gender being superimposed on these two roles.

In contrast, the questions in the Japanese surveys construct a world in which gender is a clear divide in the family. In questions about family relations, relatives are divided by gender and questions asked accordingly: “Do you have more contact with men (brothers) or women (sisters) in your family?” (J-63, Cultural Research Center, Japan Broadcasting Association, November, 2001, H 14: 343).

Questions probing level of communication and communication between parents in childrearing are not gendered, but some questions are asked only of mothers, such as questions on feelings about childrearing: “Are you enjoying raising your child?” “Are you worried about your own childrearing?” (A-121, Tokyo Education Committee, December 2000, H 13: 60; A-92, National Federation of PTA, October, 2000, H 14: 377). The questions on parental expectations are also gendered, such as the following:

“What do you consider important in disciplining your child? Answer separately for boys and girls: Sense of independence, sense of

responsibility, to be strong, to be kind, to be honest, to have perseverance, to be well-mannered, to be able to cook" (A-29, Akita Prefecture, July 2000, H 14: 121).

The gendering of roles is also achieved through questions on the socialization of children. Some of the questions directly "gender" the children, as in "What do you think about raising a girl like a girl and a boy like a boy" and "What is your view about pink clothes for girls and blue for boys?" (A-37 F and A-39 A, Taito Ward, February 2002, H 14: 144). Other questions "gender" children through requesting respondents to answer the questions separately for boys and for girls. The following is a typical question.

"What level of education do you want your boy and your girl to achieve (answer separately)?"

"Junior high, high school, vocational school, junior college/technical college, university/graduate school" (A-145, Tokushima Prefecture, September 2000, H 13: 96)

In terms of children and parental roles, while there are overlapping questions in the surveys in the United States and Japan, the differences in the questions are also obvious. Generally, the former constructs a view of the family in which there are generational differences in roles, as in parents and children, while the latter emphasizes gender differences on top of generational differences, as in mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters.

Gender role division between husband and wife

Discussions of gender role division typically revolve around the division between men and women with respect to family and work responsibilities.

In the United States surveys, a handful of questions address the relative power of husband and wife (whether husband should be the boss), whether the man belongs to "the outside" and woman "the inside",

whether mothers should be responsible for children's religious education, and whether fathers are as capable of taking care of young children as mothers are. All these questions underscores the significance of gender in the family. In the last example, the way the question is phrased suggests that it is a fact that mothers are good at taking care of young children. In other words, the association of mothers with childcare — the behavioral cum ideological norm in modern society — is repeated here. However, all this notwithstanding, these questions are few in number, and more importantly, there are other questions that undermine the behavioral and ideological norms in society. There is a question, for example, about whether respondents know any "stay-at-home dads". In addition, there are two parallel questions on whether most fathers and mothers would want to stay home: "If possible, would most dads prefer to work or stay home?" (A-89, Proprietary Association, June 2000) and "If free, would most mothers prefer to work full-time or stay home?" (A-300, Proprietary Association, June 2000).

Beyond these few questions the majority of questions are absolutely non-gendered — reference is made not to mother or father but to a parent or parents. Highlighted is a concern with time: the amount of time one has for one's family. Most of the questions are about whether one has enough time for the family. Even though there is a question about the amount of time spent with the family that includes the option of "too much time spent in the family," which underscores the importance of "balance" between work and family, the idea that not enough time is spent in the family seems to be emphasized. The following questions show this emphasis most clearly.

"Do you agree or disagree that parents choosing careers and financial goals over staying home [have] made a mistake?" (A-301, Proprietary Association, June 2000)

"Think about a situation where having one parent stay at home would mean taking a substantial cut in the family's standard of living. For this family, do you think it would be better to have one parent stay

at home and accept the cut in the family's standard of living, or to put their child in a quality day care situation so both parents can work?" (A-46, Proprietary Association, June 15, 2000)

"Pre-school children [are] likely to have problem later if both parents work?" (A-134, Rice University, Spring 2002)

"... if a family can afford it, it's almost always best for the children if one parent stays at home with them full time. Do you agree or disagree? Is that strongly or somewhat?" (A-48, Proprietary Association, June 15, 2000)

"... please tell me whether the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right. Families need two paychecks just to make ends meet; families can work less and do without extra material things, to have more time together?" (A-2, Dallas Chamber, April 4, 2002)

All these questions show a privileging of the family over work; the weight of opinions represented for respondents to react to is tilted towards more time for family. It is dual-career families or spending more time for work than for the family that needs to be explained. At the same time, however, juxtaposing quality time with family and material well-being/financial situation, in general, the image conveyed through these questions is that two individuals — not women alone — are strategizing and balancing home and work responsibilities. Further, these are constructed as individual decisions rather than social prescriptions. The almost aggressive avoidance of associating women with the family, despite the behavioral dominance of stay-at-home mothers instead of fathers, should also be noted. Consider the following questions for this point.

"Considering the needs of both parents and children, which of the following do you see as the ideal situation for a family in today's society — both parents work full time outside the home; one parent works full time outside the home, the other works part time; one parent works full time outside the home, the other works at home; or one parent stays

at home solely to raise the children?" (A-35, Gallup Poll, May 4, 2001)

"Which parent do you think should stay home solely to raise the children — the husband, the wife, or it doesn't make any difference?" (A-36, Gallup Poll, May 4 2001)

"Which parent do you think should work full time outside the home — the husband, the wife, or it doesn't make any difference?" (A-37, Gallup Poll, May 4, 2001)

In contrast to the American surveys, questions on the division of roles in the family in the Japanese surveys construct these roles as being divided on the basis of gender, as opposed to financial and time concerns. First, various versions of essentially the same question about the basic gender role division of work for men and family for women are asked many times in different surveys:

"What do you think about the following: men should work outside and women to take care of the family?" (J-177 B, Koto Ward, June 2000, H 13: 153)

Questions about men's participation in housework and women's participation in work problematize crossing the boundary separating gender roles. Similar to the question about men's participation in childrearing in the US survey noted above, these questions about men's participation — for example, that "most childrearing tasks can be done by men" or that "Do you think it is bad for men to hang laundry?" — are built on the unshared assumption that these tasks are women's job basically.

The few questions on the reasons for men's low participation and what to do to encourage men to do more housework do not allow the imagination of role reversal — for a man to be the primary care-taker or to be the main person doing housework. For example, in a question about how to get women and men to participate in housework and childrearing equally, the options include "women's economic independence, shortening of work time, men participating actively in housework and childrearing,

women strongly getting men to participate, women teaching men about housework and childrearing, not necessary to share." (J-173, Chiyoda Ward, July 2000, H 13: 145) The responses put the burden on women — economic independence, teaching and getting men to do housework — and the vague option of "men participating actively", which is essentially a repetition of the question, also fail to suggest viable alternatives to the unequal gender division implied in the question.

Similarly, questions about women and housework are asked in a way consistent with dominant conceptions of gender role division: whether it is better for women to take care of the elderly, whether women should take care of children, whether women's happiness lies in marriage and therefore should not work throughout their lives, and so on. Whether questions are asked about conventional or hitherto "unconventional" roles for men and women, by focusing only on one option, they inadvertently reinforce the gender division between roles. Alternative questions are possible. For example, one can ask a question with a list of household tasks and ask whether it is strange for men and for women to do any of these tasks. Such a question denaturalizes the connection between women and household tasks by asking questions about them to both women and men.

Besides questions on the division of labor, there are a few questions about power relations between men and women. For example, there is a question like the following:

"What is your view on the following aspects in social life: the wife needs the husband's permission to go out for leisure activities?" (A-39 D, Taito Ward, February 2002, H 14: 144)

Again, what these questions do is to reiterate dominant behavioral and ideological norms about gender relations in the family without allowing for an alternative way of thinking that challenges such a status quo. A question that allows an imagination of alternative can be written, again not by asking about just men or women, but parallel questions about both. For example, one can write a question like this: "Do you think that

husband and wife should seek permission from each other in any of the following: going out for leisure activities, spending a large amount of money, ..." By putting husband and wife side by side, such a question will allow respondents to think about control and power in conjugal relations generally, instead of staying within the dominant unidimensional paradigm of men yielding more power over women and judging whether that is acceptable or not.

Following the same line of reasoning, the few questions in the Japanese surveys about gender inequality in the family are important in offering a different way of thinking about the family. Gender inequality is usually conceived as an issue belonging to the public sphere. In asking about inequality in the family, these questions open up the family for critical analysis.

The problem of women's employment

The construction of gendered division between family and work responsibilities in Japanese surveys is accomplished more directly through questions related to women's employment. While these questions are not grouped under the heading of "the family," I think it merits a brief discussion here.

In an earlier analysis of 699 poll questions related to employment in surveys conducted between 1975–1995 in Japan, I found that the questions construct women's employment as a problem by making women's employment something to be explained, something that is to be decided not by the woman herself, and something to be assessed in terms of good and bad points. Further, a woman's life course is also an issue for public discussion (Khor 2002).

Questions on women's employment construct the idea that women's employment needs to be justified. A typical question simply asks, "For what purposes are you working now?". And the woman respondent is supposed to choose two or three answers from a list that may contain up to 13 items, including, for example "to help household finances," "to

help cover living expenses," "to accumulate capital for children's educational expenses, buying a home, etc.," "to obtain money that I can use freely," "to save for future use," "to widen my perspective," "to make friends," and so on. The reasons, given in great detail, suggest that a woman's decision to seek employment is or should be the result of a careful deliberate process instead of something to be taken for granted, unlike men's employment for which no questions were asked in close to 700 questions between 1975-1995.

Women's employment is also something to be decided not by the woman herself, given the many questions asked about women's employment to both men and women. The "public" is invited to comment on women's employment through questions like these: "Are you opposed to or do you agree with women's employment?" "Do you find women's employment desirable?" "Do you think, generally speaking, that women should work?". Further, questions are asked about the good and bad effects of women's employment on herself, her family, and the society. Indeed, the questions go beyond women's employment to their "ideal" life-course defined primarily by marriage and children.

The questions discussed above were grouped under "employment." Checking the same headings⁶ in 2002 in the U. S. data base I relied on for the present analysis did not turn up any questions comparable to what I found in the poll questions in Japan, showing again the construction of a gender-neutral reality in the American surveys.

Implications of the present analysis

In this analysis of poll questions related to the family in the United States and Japan conducted between 2000-2002, we can see that first, in the surveys in both countries, poll questions privilege the nuclear family as the "normal" form of family, problematizing alternative forms through the use of questions that invite opinions on either the norm only or the deviations only without allowing for a consideration of both at the same

time in parallel questions. Second, while the family is constructed as a gendered institution through the Japanese questions, non-genderedness is presented in the American questions. Such difference is particularly apparent in questions related to parenting/parent-child relationships, family and work responsibilities, and questions related to women's employment.

An obvious question can thus be raised: Don't these questions just "reflect" reality and hence what the analysis shows here is merely stating the obvious?

First, the basic assumption of "reflecting reality" is that reality is fixed, unambiguous and can be "reflected" or captured accurately (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). However, what I'd like to offer here is an alternative perspective to see reality as a complex whole that includes interpretations, enactments, and actions. There is no "reality" to reflect, but only unstable social patterns to interpret. In the act of interpreting, one also creates reality.

The important point to note here is that there are of course objective indicators, but these indicators do not become the "reality" in people's lives until they have been constructed as such. For example, statistically, there are stay-at-home fathers in both the United States and Japan. However, regardless of actual numbers — which are unknown at present — the general impression is that there are "more" such fathers in the United States than in Japan. Having a stay-at-home husband or father is made into reality by mass media coverage as well as other "official texts" circulating in society, including public opinion polls. For example, if questions were asked about whether father "can" — instead of "should" — take care of children, the assumption of the naturalness of mothers taking care of children is more directly undermined. If additional questions were asked about "actual" stay-at-home fathers, they become even more core to reality since they are given or are asked to be given concrete existence.

Another issue that should be further considered is the implications of genderedness and non-genderedness in the questions. It seems quite

obvious that the U. S. surveys steer quite aggressively away from gendering roles or decisions in the family. This departs from known patterns of behavior that there are more stay-at-home mothers than fathers and that women still do more housework than men do (see, for example, Hesse-Biber and Carter 2000; Reskin and Padavic 1994). Does this non-genderedness in the questions function to help people imagine alternatives to extant pattern of division of roles? It probably does to some extent, but at the same time, in failing to recognize the genderedness of the division altogether, it might inadvertently mask gender inequality by framing the decision as one of cost and benefits with respect to time and finances, or, in other words, as individual decisions instead of the operations of the institutions of gender, family and work. Ignoring material gender divisions has the same effect as ignoring alternative arrangements like stay-at-home fathers. To balance these non-gendered questions and to foster an alternative imagination, more questions probing working women's needs and the gender effects of current work environment should be asked.

Concluding Thoughts

Given that the status quo is constituted by inequality between men and women, a rather rigid division of roles, and a restrictive definition of the family, the ability to imagine alternatives is important to create changes in the status quo towards more equality and more freedom for everyone. The ability to imagine alternatives is constituted by myriad institutions, and one important institution in this regard in modern society is opinion polling. This paper would have achieved its purpose if it has shown how opinion polls construct a particular reality through their questions and response categories and if it has started us thinking about alternatives.

Appendix A

Overview of questions analyzed in opinion polls in the USA and in Japan

Country Category	USA		Japan	
	<i>n</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Example</i>
Parenting/Parent-child Relationship	168	"How important it is for your child to learn to be well liked or popular?" (A-157, General Social Surveys, May 2001)	92	"What you do want for children as an adult or parent: "emphasis on children's self-direction; emphasis on parents'/adults' guidance; neither" (J-99; Nagano, April 2001, H 14: 388)
Composition of the family	11	"How many children would you like to have?" (A-149, National Urban League, 2001)	6	"Do you think it strange that older people live together with other old people instead of with their children?" (J-211; Yomiuri, January, 2001, H 13: 303)
Division of Labor	7	"In your family, who takes care of most of the day to day needs of the children: is it mom, dad, is it equally split between the two of you, or is it someone else?" (A-11, Public Agenda Foundation, October 2002)	19	"How much do you do each of the following: housework (cooking, cleaning up after eating, cleaning, laundry, work around the house); childrearing (bathing, playing, changing diapers, feeding, school-related activities, personal care)..." (J-194; Kawasaki, November 2000, H 13: 11)
Role and Power/ Family and work	55	"Do you agree or disagree that family life suffers because (parents are) concentrate too much on work?" (A-30, General Social Surveys, May 2001)	101	"What do you think about this: men's job is to work, and women's job is to take care of the family?" (J-184; Nerima, July 2000, H 13: 165)
Family relations/ Family life	24	"Would you say that you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, or not satisfied with your family relationships?" (A-81, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, 2000)	38	"Do you have contact more with men (brothers) or women (sisters) in your family?" (J-63, Japan Broadcasting Association, November 2001, H 14: 343)
Values related to the family	16	"What do you think about having baby outside of marriage?" (A-124, Gallup Poll, May 21, 2002)	61	"What do you think about the family: (e) One can live a full life if one has children?" (J-4E; Prime Minister's Office, May 2001, H 14: 14)
Other	29	"Are your children's opportunities to succeed better than you had?" (A-225, Democratic Leadership Council, March 29, 2000)	9	"What type of social support is needed to help with childrearing?" (J-162, Ehime, November 2000, H 13: 100)
Total	310		326	

Notes

- * This project was started jointly with Kamano Saori, from whose practical help and analytical insights I have benefited greatly. Sakai Michieru also provided much needed research assistance for the present analysis, especially with regard to the U. S. data.
- 1 The following three sub-sections draw extensively from an earlier publication entitled "The Construction of Gender through Public Opinion Polls in Japan: The "Problem" of Women's Employment" (Khor 2002).
- 2 Based on the US model, I broke up sub-questions on different topics (e.g. a question on divorce, and a question on marriage) in the Japanese surveys into two separate questions and came up with the count accordingly. For an overview of the questions, see Appendix A.
- 3 This information is for identification for questions in the U. S. surveys. "A-193" is the identification code for this question, Kaiser Family Foundation the polling organization, and "March 8, 2001" the date the poll was conducted. The date is not available for all surveys cited.
- 4 The information is for identification of questions in the Japanese surveys. "J-80" is the identification code, "National Federation of PTA" the polling organization, "October, 2001" the month and year the poll was conducted, and "H 14: 377" the assigned number of the survey in the 2002 volume (Heisei 14).
- 5 Further, note that these statistics are not qualitatively any more "real" than the opinion polls. Indeed, which statistics are collected are political decisions that shape the reality of individuals by providing certain information and withholding other information. For example, women's employment by marital status and number of children is typically presented in public, but not parallel information on men's employment. While it is safe to assume that men's employment level does not change according to their family status, presenting parallel information on men's employment will dislodge the "natural" connection between women's employment and family status and change our consciousness in thinking about family and work. Another example of selective presentation of "objective" data is the publication of researches that show "sex differences" to the exclusion of the more numerous studies showing a lack of "sex differences" (Connell, 1987).
- 6 Key words checked include: "employment," "employers," "employees," "women, working," "women, discrimination against," "women, general," "women, rights movement."

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