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Social Change Seen from Social Stratification in Post-war Japan

ABSTRACT

Despite the public belief that Japanese society has become, and continues to be, an egalitarian society, there are some statistics that clearly show increasing disparities in terms of, for example, income and assets, at least since the mid-seventies. Still, the level of satisfaction among the general populace remains fairly high. People do not seem to be affected by the existence of these and other disparities. The present paper examines possible reasons for this lack of noticeable concern. A number of hypotheses are suggested. First, being in the lower economic bracket does not necessarily mean that a person is actually poor. Almost everyone in the society seems to enjoy the benefits of affluence. Secondly, the rate of social mobility is fairly high. Thirdly, the legal apparatus for human rights is now elaborated for and inclusive of minorities. In addition, people seem to compare themselves with others from less developed countries, and this may lead them to believe that they are 'rich.' One other reason lies in the fact that people seem to be more concerned with fairness rather than equality (of result) as such. The SSM data shows that people in Japan regard highly the criterion of fairness, equating it with effort and achievement, in contrast to equality and need. They indeed appreciate the equality of opportunity but not the equality of outcome anymore. That is why they are not so bothered by socio-economic disparities as is widely imagined.

Keywords: social change, social stratification, disparity, fairness, equality of opportunity, equality of result,