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ABSTRACT

While concerns grow regarding the possible "decline" of America's traditional work ethics, there is a growing interest in Japanese economic successes and work ethics. This study compares the work ethics of American and Japanese men. A questionnaire was designed to measure values related to America's "Protestant work ethics" and to traditional Japanese work ethics. Work Ethic Questionnaires were distributed to samples of 220 American and 368 Japanese employed men. T-test comparisons of groups resulted in significant differences on 29 of 34 work ethic items. American men were found to place a higher value on individualism, independence, and self-sufficiency, and tended to believe that education and hard work lead to success. Japanese men were found to place a higher value on group involvement, loyalty to employer and country, and large over small organizations; and tended to agree with many of the values that have been termed "Puritan" or "Protestant work ethic" in America. Results were discussed in terms of American and Japanese cultural traditions and change. The data provided evidence that "Protestant ethics" are still strong in America, while some aspects of traditional Japanese work ethics may be changing. A reference list and a table showing the results of a comparison between the work values of American and Japanese men conclude the document.
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Protestant Work Ethics:

A Comparison of American and Japanese Working Men*

John W. Engel**

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ERIC ABSTRACT

Protestant Work Ethics: A Comparison of American and Japanese Working Men

John W. Engel

While concerns grow regarding the possible "decline" of America's traditional work ethics, there is a growing interest in Japanese economic successes and work ethics. This study compares the work ethics of American and Japanese men. A questionnaire was designed to measure values related to America's "Protestant" work ethics and to traditional Japanese work ethics. Work Ethic questionnaires were distributed to samples of American (N = 220) and Japanese (N = 368) employed men. T-test comparisons of groups resulted in significant ($p < .05$) differences on 29 of 34 work ethic items. American men were found to place a higher value on individualism, independence, and self-sufficiency; and tended to believe that education and hard work leads to success. Japanese men were found to place a higher value on group involvement, loyalty to employer and country, and large over small organizations; and tended to agree with many of the values that have been termed "puritan" or "protestant work ethic" in America. Results were discussed in terms of American and Japanese cultural traditions and change. The data provided evidence that "Protestant ethics" are still strong in America, while some aspects of traditional Japanese work ethics may be changing.

Protestant Work Ethics:
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Abstract

This study compares the work ethics of American and Japanese men. Work Ethic questionnaires were distributed to samples of American (N = 220) and Japanese (N = 368) employed men. T-test comparisons of groups resulted in significant ($p < .05$) differences on 29 of 34 work ethic items. American men were found to place a higher value on individualism, independence, and self-sufficiency; and tended to believe that education and hard work leads to success. Japanese men were found to place a higher value on group involvement, loyalty to employer and country, and large over small organizations; and tended to agree with many of the values that have been termed "puritan" or "protestant work ethic" in America. Results were discussed in terms of American and Japanese cultural traditions and change.

Protestant Work Ethics:

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Ethics, attitudes and values are considered important factors that influence if not determine the "goals, conditions and results of our individual and collective work activities" (Best, 1985:37). America's "Protestant" (Weber, 1958) work ethics have been related to occupational success and achievement (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Duncan & Featherman, 1972; and Lenski, 1963). Similarly, Japan's work ethics, which developed out of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions (Morishima, 1982), appear to account for some of its remarkable economic success (Kraft, 1983; Ouchi, 1981). Indeed, the American popular press uses oriental (often "Confucian") work ethics to account for the phenomenal success of Asian-American students in the American school system (e.g., Lewthwaite, 1983; McGrath, 1983a; and Shearer, 1984).

While Max Weber's (1958) thesis, that the Protestant work ethic facilitated the development of capitalism, was controversial, his description and explication of the Protestant Ethic has been widely accepted. The early American Puritan settlers believed that economic success was a sign of grace, but that the possession of wealth was a source of temptation and evil. The Protestant ethic encouraged hard work, independence, frugality, and asceticism; while it warned against the dangers of leisure, immoderate consumption, and pleasure. Over time, America's work ethic came to include other

elements such as the importance of education and having the right attitude towards work (Maccoby & Terzi, 1981). In recent years America has experienced a decline in productivity and profits (in a sense, a "fall from grace") relative to competition (particularly Asian) in the international marketplace. Consequently, questions have been raised regarding the health of America's work ethic. Increasingly theoretical articles are published with titles such as "What happened to the work ethic?" (Maccoby & Terzi, 1981), "Whither the work ethic?" (Whither, 1984), "What is the point of working?" (Time, 1981), and "Nation's ethic of enterprise is vanishing" (Maccoby, 1981). Empirical research is needed to assess the work ethics, values and beliefs of workers in contemporary America, and to determine whether they are indeed changing.

While American workers experienced a decline in relative productivity and profits, Japanese workers performed technological and economic "miracles" (Morrow, 1983:20; Vogel, 1979:9) in the international marketplace. Consequently, there is a growing interest, indeed fascination, with Japanese work ethics and management styles (e.g., Kraft, 1983; Morishima, 1982; Ouchi, 1981; and Vogel, 1979). Traditional Japanese work values emphasize group concerns, including loyalty and harmony, respect for elders and authority, filial piety, education, hard work, frugality, self-sacrifice, and asceticism (Morishima, 1982). Like their American counterparts, Japanese work values may be changing. In Japan, concerns are growing that traditional values are being "lost" and that there may be a need for more protection from the negative

influences of Western ideas (Yates, 1985). However, Japan's recent economic successes may have been facilitated by emphases on values that appear Western. Empirical research is needed to assess the work ethics of workers in contemporary Japan, and to determine the extent to which they differ from those of workers in contemporary America.

The purpose of this research is to empirically define the work ethics of contemporary American and Japanese workers, to assess whether traditional values are still held by each group, and to determine the extent to which contemporary Americans and Japanese differ in their work ethics.

Method

The Work Ethic questionnaire was designed to assess work ethic beliefs and work related attitudes and values. Items were constructed to reflect traditional American puritan and protestant work ethics, traditional Japanese work ethics, and various employment and family characteristics. Items from the Protestant Ethic Scale (Mirels & Garrett, 1971; Beit-Hallahmi, 1979; and MacDonald, 1972) were included for purposes of comparison. Items offered a Likert scale response format: strongly agree to strongly disagree. After pretesting, the English version of the questionnaire was translated into Japanese. The two language versions were tested for equivalency by expert judges, including "back translation" (Brislin, 1980), and revised accordingly.

Questionnaires were distributed to over 1000 Japanese and American tourists visiting Hawaii in 1984. Subsamples of 368 Japanese and 220 American men were selected for purposes of analysis, in an attempt to control for extraneous variables. Both Japanese and American Groups averaged 34.4 years of age and 15 years of formal education. All subjects in both groups were employed full-time. Japanese men averaged 9.04 hours of work per day and 5.7 days of work per week, compared with 8.78 hours and 5.27 days for American men.

T-tests were used to test for significance of differences between Japanese and American groups on each work ethic item.

Results and Discussion

Japanese and American men were found to differ significantly ($p < .05$) on 29 of 34 work ethic items.

The Value of Hard Work and Education

The results of comparisons of American and Japanese values related to hard work and education are summarized in Table 1. According to the traditional American protestant work ethic, hard work is rewarded by success. The results show that both American and Japanese men believed in the value of hard work. However, this value appears stronger among American men than among Japanese men. American men tended to agree significantly ($p < .001$) more than

Japanese men with the statement "if one works hard enough he is likely to make a good life for himself" (item 1); and tended to disagree significantly ($p < .001$) more than Japanese men with the statement that "hard work offers little guarantee of success" (item 2). Similarly, American men agreed significantly ($p < .01$) more than Japanese men that "the man who can approach an unpleasant task with enthusiasm is the man who gets ahead" (item 4).

Insert Table 1 about here

The value of hard work may also be expressed inversely, in negative terms associated with failure, weakness or inadequacy. In this case, the Japanese men were significantly ($p < .001$) more likely than American men to believe that "people who fail at a job have usually not tried hard enough" (item 3), and that "a distaste for hard work usually reflects a weakness of character" (item 5).

Additional research is needed to explore whether the differences in beliefs about hard work are also reflected in work motivations. It could be that the "hard work" of American workers is relatively more motivated by positives (i.e., rewards), while the "hard work" of Japanese workers is relatively more motivated by negatives (i.e., avoidance of negative consequences).

The value of education is similar to the value of hard work. According to the protestant work ethic, education should result in

promotion or success. Indeed, American men were found to agree significantly ($p < .001$) more than Japanese men with the statement that "education leads to success and promotion in the world of work" (item 6). Nevertheless, both groups agreed with the statement. Education is also valued highly in Japan, as a result of Confucian traditions (McGrath, 1983b). Indeed, the stress put on children to succeed in school and graduate from the best universities is often extreme and sometimes the source of emotional problems (Eastham, 1984; Increasing, 1983). Graduation from the best university almost guarantees life-time employment in one of the best corporations (Ouchi, 1981). Japanese subjects were significantly ($p < .001$) less likely than American subjects to believe that "the most difficult school courses turn out to be the most rewarding" (item 7). Indeed, once enrolled in a college, the student often experiences college "work" as somewhat of a "vacation" (McGrath, 1983b).

Both American and Japanese groups tended to agree that they would "want to do some kind of work even if [they] were not paid" (item 8). However, their views of other workers differed: Americans agreed significantly ($p < .001$) more than Japanese with the statement that "many employees have an inherent dislike for work, and will avoid it if they can" (item 9). Both groups agreed that "it is very important [that] work provide opportunities for self-expression and personal growth" (item 10).

Asceticism, Leisure and "Easy Money"

The results of comparisons of American and Japanese beliefs related to asceticism, leisure and "easy money" are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Both American and Japanese traditions included some asceticism. While both Japanese and American men were uncertain whether they "would be more successful if (they) sacrificed certain pleasures" (item 1), Japanese men were significantly ($p < .001$) more likely than American men to agree that "life would have very little meaning if we never had to suffer" (item 2).

The Puritan work ethic of early America held that leisure was bad (Weber, 1958). It is not surprising then that American men agreed significantly ($p < .01$) more than Japanese men that "most people spend too much time in unprofitable amusements" (item 6). In contrast, Japanese men agreed significantly ($p < .001$) more than American men that "life would be more meaningful if we had more leisure time" (item 4) and that "people should have more leisure time to spend in relaxation" (item 5). And while both groups indicated that they felt "uneasy when there is little work . . . to do" (item 3), this was the case for Japanese men significantly

($p < .01$) more than for American men. Such differences may be a function of differences in how much leisure the two groups actually have. The findings provided some evidence that American men worked less, and presumably had more leisure, than Japanese men. American men worked an average of 8.75 hours per day and 5.25 days per week, compared with 9.04 hours per day and 5.7 days per week for Japanese men.

Japanese men were significantly ($p < .001$ and $.01$, respectively) more likely to believe that "money acquired easily (e.g., through gambling) is usually spent unwisely" (item 7) and "the credit card is a ticket to careless spending" (item 8). On the other hand, American men appeared more likely ($p < .05$) to believe that "the self-made man is likely to be more ethical than the man born to wealth" (item 9).

Individualism versus Group Orientation

The results of t -test comparisons of American and Japanese values related to individualism, group orientation, harmony and loyalty are summarized in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here.

In American traditions, the individual was more important than

the group. The American "rugged individualist" was ideally independent and self-sufficient. In Japanese traditions, the group was more important, and interdependence was valued. The findings of this study suggest that cultural traditions are still expressed in the work ethics of contemporary workers. American men were significantly more likely than Japanese men to agree that "individual freedom is more important than group solidarity" (item 1), and that "only those who depend upon themselves get ahead in life" (item 2). On the other hand, Japanese men were more likely than American men to believe that "one should take an active part in all group affairs" (item 3).

Americans idealized the self-employed entrepreneur, whether farmer, small businessman or millionaire industrialist. Many Americans believed that being self-employed was better than "working for someone else." In contrast, working for a large company has become an ideal in contemporary Japan. In modern Japan, the larger companies offer the better salaries, benefits, potential for advancement, job security and retirement programs. As might be expected, the results show that Americans were more likely than Japanese to prefer "to work alone than in a group" (item 4), "to be my own boss" (item 5), and "be self-employed [rather] than be employed by a large corporation" (item 6). While such differences might be expected given differences in traditions, the Japanese tendency to indicate a preference for independence and self-employment was unexpected, and may be an indication of cultural change. Japanese men were more likely than American men to believe

that "a large corporation is generally a more desirable place to work than a small company" (item 7).

While both groups believed that "competition between individuals within the same company is good for all concerned" (item 8), Japanese men were more likely to believe this than American men. Both groups agreed that "it is very important [that co-workers] cooperate well with one another" (item 9). Contrary to expectation, Americans tended to agree with this statement slightly more than Japanese. Additional research is needed to determine whether Americans are becoming more concerned about group harmony while Japanese become more willing to risk harmony for the benefits of competition.

Loyalty, Patriotism and Self Sacrifice

Japanese Confucian traditions emphasized loyalty and self sacrifice of the individual for the good of some larger group. Loyalty was owed to family, employer and country. According to traditional Japanese values, filial piety and loyalty to family should motivate hard work and success in school. However, the results of this study indicated that Japanese as well as American men rejected the idea that "students should work for good grades out of respect and honor for their parents" (item 10).

Neither Japanese nor American men were particularly loyal to their employers. Both Japanese and American men tended to disagree with statements emphasizing self sacrifice for the good of the

employer. For example, both groups disagreed with statements that "out of loyalty to employer, an employee should go to work early and stay late" (item 11), and that "an employee should sacrifice him/herself for the good of the company" (item 12). Indeed, Japanese men disagreed significantly ($p < .001$) more than American men with the latter statement. It could be that contemporary Japanese workers have rebelled against some traditional work values, and now hold somewhat opposite values. Additional research is needed to explore recent changes in Japanese culture and society.

The results provided some evidence that Japanese workers valued loyalty to employer more highly than American workers. Japanese workers agreed significantly ($p < .001$) more than American workers with the statement that "out of loyalty to my employer I would reject a job offer from another company willing to pay a higher salary" (item 13). While both groups tended to reject the statement that "a worker should be loyal and stay with the same employer until retirement" (item 14), the Japanese men rejected this statement significantly ($p < .001$) less than American men.

Perhaps an extreme example of Japanese loyalty and self sacrifice was the "kamikaze" pilots of World War II, who crashed their planes into enemy warships, and thereby sacrificed their lives for the good of the group. Patriotism has also been valued highly in American traditions. The results of this study indicate that while both groups appeared to be patriotic, Japanese workers tended to agree significantly ($p < .001$) more than American workers with the statement that "it is important to me that my work serves

my country" (item 15).

Conclusion

Generalizations from this study should take into account various limitations in the data and its analysis. There can be no assurance that the men sampled in this study adequately represent all men, or even all middle class employed men in either America or Japan. Thirty-eight separate t-tests were calculated. As the number of tests increase, the chances of getting a significant difference by chance alone also increases. It may be that work ethics are different for women than they are for men. Therefore, additional research is needed that samples women as well as men, and that includes a focus on values related to the interface between work and traditional female roles (such as maternal employment).

The results of this study provide evidence that the Protestant work ethic is still alive and well in modern America, at least for employed men. American men still believe in the value and potential of hard work, right attitudes, education, and independence and individualism.

The results also provide evidence for change in America's work ethics. The majority of American respondents believed that many workers dislike and avoid work. American men, on the average, were uncertain about asceticism, leisure, easy money and frugality, suggesting that these aspects of work ethic are no longer considered very important in America. Cooperation within the work group

emerged as an important element in America's contemporary work ethics.

Contemporary Japanese work ethics appear to retain the traditional elements of group orientation, harmony, patriotism, hard work, education and asceticism. The results also provide evidence for change in Japan's ethics. Filial piety and loyalty to employer appear to be less important to modern Japanese workers. Self-expression and personal growth, leisure, independence and competition emerged as important elements of Japan's contemporary work ethics.

In conclusion, comparison of the work ethics held by American and Japanese employed men indicated that American men were more likely to believe in hard work, education, individualism, independence and self-sufficiency, while Japanese men were more likely to work more hours per week, desire more leisure time, and believe in asceticism, frugality, importance of the group, and loyalty to employer and country.

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Table 1. Work Values: A Comparison of American and Japanese Men

Belief	American (n = 220) Mean	Japanese (n = 368) Mean	t
1. If one works hard enough he is likely to make a good life for himself.	3.87	3.64	3.55***
2. Hard work offers little guarantee of success.	2.44	3.09	-7.67***
3. People who fail at a job have usually not tried hard enough.	2.96	3.42	-5.31***
4. The man who can approach an unpleasant task with enthusiasm is the man who gets ahead.	3.64	3.41	3.22**
5. A distaste for hard work usually reflects a weakness of character.	3.02	3.50	-5.45***
6. Education leads to success and promotion in the world of work.	3.99	3.66	4.01***
7. The most difficult school courses turn out to be the most rewarding.	3.08	2.68	4.61***
8. I would want to do some kind of work even if I were not paid.	3.37	3.52	-1.48
9. Many employees have an inherent dislike for work, and will avoid it if they can.	3.27	2.84	4.25***
10. It is very important to me that my work provide opportunities for self-expression and personal growth.	4.40	4.29	1.73

Note. Means were calculated from Likert scale scores, i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 2. Asceticism and Beliefs Regarding Leisure and "Easy Money":
A Comparison of American and Japanese Men

Belief	American (n = 220) Mean	Japanese (n = 368) Mean	t
1. I would be more successful if I sacrificed certain pleasures.	3.09	3.09	-0.08
2. Life would have very little meaning if we never had to suffer.	3.26	3.98	-8.49***
3. I feel uneasy when there is little work for me to do.	3.58	3.80	-2.82**
4. Life would be more meaningful if we had more leisure time.	2.96	3.61	-8.12***
5. People should have more leisure time to spend in relaxation.	3.31	4.07	-10.46***
6. Most people spend too much time in unprofitable amusements.	3.18	2.94	2.80**
7. Money acquired easily (e.g., through gambling) is usually spent unwisely.	3.24	3.96	-8.41***
8. The credit card is a ticket to careless spending.	3.10	3.39	-2.94**
9. The self-made man is likely to be more ethical than the man born to wealth.	3.10	2.91	2.11*

Note. Means were calculated from Likert scale scores, i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 3. Individual vs Group: A Comparison of American and Japanese Values

Individual and Group Values	American (n = 220) Mean	Japanese (n = 368) Mean	t
1. Individual freedom is more important than group solidarity.	3.60	2.90	8.04***
2. Only those who depend upon themselves get ahead in life.	3.16	2.88	3.02**
3. One should take an active part in all group affairs.	2.86	3.22	-4.57***
4. I prefer to work alone rather than in a group.	3.29	3.09	2.25*
5. I would like to be my own boss.	4.08	3.42	8.86***
6. I would rather be self-employed than be employed by a large corporation.	3.61	3.33	3.06**
7. A large corporation is generally a more desirable place to work than a small company	2.43	3.06	-7.05***
8. Competition between individuals within the same company is good for all concerned.	3.49	3.81	-3.55***
9. It is very important to me that I work with people who cooperate well with one another	4.30	4.14	2.41*
10. Students should work for good grades out of respect and honor for their parents.	2.50	2.58	-0.80
11. Out of loyalty to employer, an employee should go to work early and stay late.	2.28	2.24	0.49
12. An employee should sacrifice him/her self for the good of the company.	2.70	2.26	4.62***
13. Out of loyalty to my employer, I would reject a job offer from another company willing to pay a higher salary.	2.48	3.25	-8.33***
14. A worker should be loyal and stay with the same employer until retirement.	2.09	2.67	-7.25***
15. It is important to me that my work serves my country.	3.46	3.93	-5.60***

Note. Means were calculated from Likert scale scores, i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.