

日本のフィットネスクラブにおける利用目的と集団形成に関する社会学的考察
**Sociological Inquiry into the Purpose of Use and Group Formation
in Japanese Fitness Clubs**

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Abstract

This article analyzes the features of Japanese fitness clubs through interviews with instructors and members. It focuses on how members actually use the fitness clubs, and clarify by case studies how the meaning of a “place to do sports” is changing. Originally, fitness clubs existed as a sports space where people could exercise, keep up their health, and build an ideal physique. In reality, however, this space is used for different purposes based on the clients. At certain fitness clubs, communication between members serves a crucial role in addition to exercises such as dancing and swimming, and groups are formed through this communication. When this occurs, factors such as social class and age function strongly, and groups that share common interests or preferences are formed. In addition, there are cases where members and instructors form intimate human relationships, and fitness club groups turn into pseudo-families. In other words, fitness club members bring their likes and tastes secured by social class and desires for familial human relationships into the sports space, and arbitrarily reform the social meaning of that space.

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I. Fitness Clubs as Japan's New Sports Culture

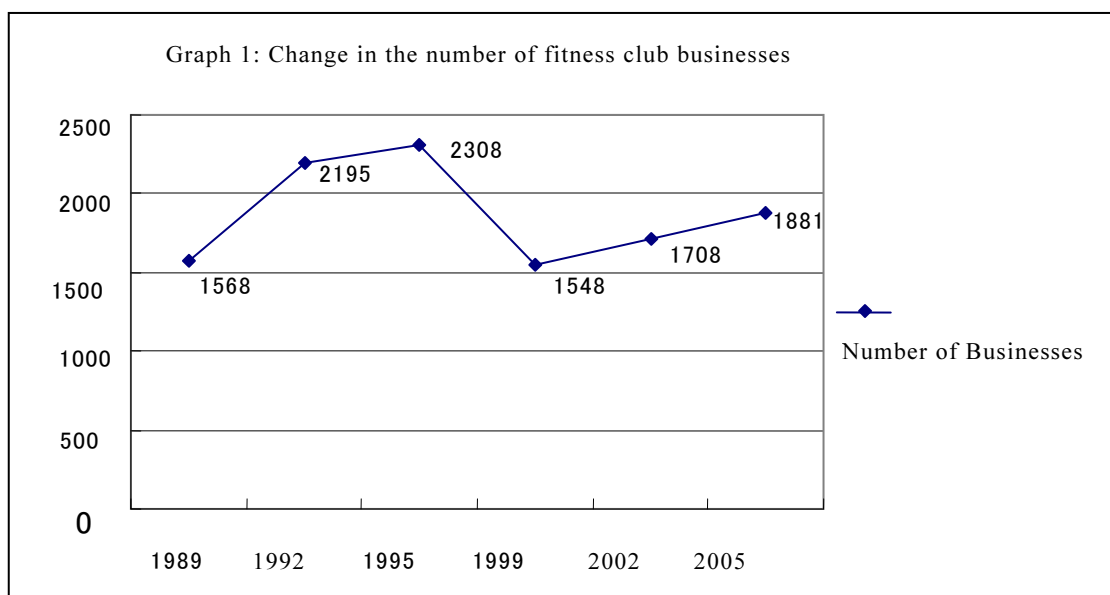
Fitness clubs came on to the scene in Japan in the late 1980s, and continue to prosper today. Currently, men and women, both young and old, go to fitness clubs, and work up a sweat through dance, training with machines, swimming, and saunas. For people seeking physical beauty, or who are mindful of their health, these behaviors have become part of daily life.

Fitness is not a fundamentally competitive sport. The goals are rather abstract, like “to be healthy” or “to be beautiful”, and it could be said that maintaining motivation is extremely difficult. Of course, most fitness club are members-only, so clients pay the membership fees in advance. In other words, it would be a waste of money not to go, but it is not always easy to continue going. This is because people that attend fitness clubs are primarily working

people and not students. Most working people have full schedules. There are days where they have no time due to work, and times where they are too tired to exercise.

However, regardless of how difficult it is to continue, many people still go to fitness clubs, and the fitness industry is prospering. According to the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry's "Special Service Industries Fact-Finding Survey Report", the number of fitness club businesses suffered a rapid decline

in 1999, but have been slowly rising ever since.¹ There are not as many as the peak in 1995, but it can be assumed that many people go to fitness clubs and work up a sweat.² So why are fitness clubs in Japan so popular? The purpose of this discussion is to examine this question from a sociological perspective. But first, we will review the history of fitness clubs in Japan, survey preceding research, and establish the purpose and methods of this study in detail based on them.



Created by the author based on the 1989, 1992, 1995, 1999, 2002, and 2005 editions of the Ministry of International Trade and Commerce's Research and Statistics Department's "Special Industry Fact-Finding Survey: Fitness Clubs"

II. History of Fitness Clubs and Review of Preceding Research

1. Introduction of Fitness Clubs to Japanese Society

To begin with, when did fitness clubs first become popular in Japan? The history of fitness clubs in Japan started around 1980. This was when exercise called aerobics, focused on dance, was introduced in metropolitan areas like Tokyo and Osaka, and became a major boom centered on women. According to Keiko Itani, places

called fitness clubs began increasingly opening in Japan in 1979. Incidentally, less than 20 clubs opened every year in the nation up until 1978. However, from around 1982, these clubs began to change their form from their original focus around swimming schools to fitness clubs, to cash in on the boom of aerobics.³ The number of clubs rapidly increased, centered around metropolitan areas, and by their peak in the 1990s, there were 2308 clubs in the nation, counting private clubs alone.⁴

Modern fitness clubs, particularly major clubs with nationwide outlets, have similar facilities all across the nation. For instance, they have a pool, a bath, a sauna, machines, and studios, and each location has an instructor staffing it. The studios have programs such as dance, yoga, and Tai Chi, and have courses suited for everyone from beginners to experts. Just as convenience stores and karaoke rooms are basically similar all across Japan, one could say a similar thing about fitness clubs.⁵

2. Review of Previous Research

As the culture of fitness clubs grows within the world of sports, research on aerobics and fitness began to appear on the scene. So what kind of research has been done in Japan and overseas? First, there is aerobics research focused on people's "body image". According to Andrew, relative in-group evaluation of one's own body image is crucial in aerobics, and people aim to approach a standard body type, for example, general criteria considering sex as well as sex appeal, age, race, and gender.⁶ The same can most likely be said for fitness. Many people undoubtedly aspire to create ideal bodies and maintain health. For that reason, they will go several days a week, or in extreme cases, almost every day. It is extremely fascinating to think about the body and health image of, for instance, a person who trains hard silently and alone from a "body theory" perspective.

Next, there is research that considers fitness clubs from a "community formation" perspective. For instance, according to Putnam, the function of new sports in America, such as snowboarding and fitness clubs, as "social capital" is extremely weak compared to traditional sports, for instance, bowling as it was. Incidentally, "social capital" is a theory that considers strong connections

between individuals of society, and the reciprocity and trust that result from them, as a form of "capital". For people in the society, possessing a large amount of "capital" is considered to be extremely beneficial.⁷ Meanwhile, according to Ginsberg, fitness clubs in Japan serve as a type of community center, and a place where people, particularly elderly women, can talk and cultivate friendships.⁸ Furthermore, Kazue Kawahara referenced the changes in Japanese fitness clubs since the 1990s, and indicated that "After the fitness boom out of fashion sense brought about by young women dwindled, fitness clubs were mainly, and continue to be, supported mainly by the middle-aged and elderly".⁹ Particularly, many elderly clients are housewives, and they have an abundance of common conversation topics, such as their husbands and children.

3. The purposes and method of this study

This discussion will analyze Japanese fitness clubs from the perspective of human relationships, or as a venue for communication. Attention will particularly be given to research such as those of Ginsberg and Kawahara, and social factors overlooked by these studies will be discussed. To anticipate a sort of conclusion, there are various social factors such as class or age, or even "family love". Through investigating these factors, we will clarify the sociological mechanisms of group formation in fitness clubs.

I conducted fieldwork as shown in Table 1, during which time I conducted several interviews as shown in Table 2, mainly with fitness club instructors, but also including one client. Needless to say, instructors have contact with a wide variety of clients as part of their job, and are in a position to comprehend the clients'

behavior from an objective standpoint.¹⁰

Table 1: Fieldwork

Name	Place	Survey period
Fitness Club X	an urban region of Kansai	Performed fieldwork as a customer during a three-month period from July to September, 2005.
Fitness Club Y	one of the 23 wards in Tokyo	Performed fieldwork as a customer during a three-month period from December 2006 to February 2007.

Table 2: Interview subjects

Name	Role	Details
Ms. A	Instructor	Profile: Female, age 50. Employed by Fitness Club X for over 20 years. Interview date: September 6, 2005 Duration: Approximately 2 h 30 min. Place: A café near fitness club X.
Ms. B	Instructor	Profile: Female, late 20s. Employed by Fitness Club Y for 3 years. Interview date: January 17, 2007 Duration: Approximately 2 h. Place: A café near fitness club Y.
Mr. C	Instructor	Profile: Male, mid 30s. Employed by Fitness Club Y for 10 years. Interview date: January 17, 2007 Duration: Approximately 1 h 30 min. Place: A café near fitness club Y.
Ms.D	Client	Profile: Female, late 20s. Client at fitness club Z for 1 year. Although fitness club Z is located in the Kansai metropolitan area, the author did not perform fieldwork. Interview date: December 10, 2005 Duration: Approximately 1 h 30 min. Place: A café in Osaka City.

III. Community Formation of Fitness Clubs

1. Group Formation by Social Class and Exclusion by Generation

Firstly, we will cover a fitness club in an urban region of Kansai. I call this Fitness Club X. X is not one of the sports clubs that opened worldwide during mid-1980s, but has been in the region as a facility involved with sports since the 1960s. For that reason, X is a rather well-established club, and was reopened as a fitness club in the early 1980s.

According to the instructor Ms. A, this fitness club has a high ratio of elderly female members, and many customers in a wealthy, or near-wealthy class. For instance, X is in a location that is incredibly convenient to access by public transit, such as by train and bus, but regardless, most of the customers go to and from the fitness club by private car. Furthermore, the elderly women, particularly women over 60 have formed a group, and there are repeat clients who have attended the club for over 20 years in that

group. Ms. A says the following about the characteristics of X's members.

Interviewer: What kind of menu do most of the elderly clients that come to X take up? Do they include water walking?

A: Let's see, most of the men do swimming or water walking. The women talk amongst themselves after swimming, talk while they do walking together, and talk after walking.

Interviewer: I see. So the female clients talk repeatedly?

A: Yes. Then they say "I'm getting cold, so let's go swimming again", and go swimming. They get out of the pool, then talk until they get cold, and go to the sauna. They talk in the sauna, then go to the shower room and talk again. Then they talk as they change their clothes and put on make-up.

Interviewer: The excuse "I'm getting cold" is pretty funny.

A: There are many people who say "Most people come here to exercise their mouths". It acts almost like a stress reliever.

Though "exercise their mouths" is most likely a joke, it appears that they are that earnestly devoted to talking. Communicating between female clients at this venue is just as crucial as exercising their bodies, if not more so. In fact, I joined fitness club X as a client and performed fieldwork for 3 months. I studied mostly the machine rooms and studios, and my impression regarding not only the pool and the dressing area, but also other areas, was similar to that described by instructor A.

However, they do not simply talk to anyone. This is because they have many common interests and tastes.

Interviewer: I would imagine that the elderly women talk about a lot of interesting things, but what kinds of things do they mostly talk about? You mentioned overseas vacations

earlier, but what other topics have you heard?

A: They talk a lot about eating.

Interviewer: Do you mean they talk about what they eat?

A: Yes. Things like "That restaurant is delicious", or "That dish is delicious".

Interviewer: And are they high-class restaurants?

A: Yes. They talk about the restaurants by name.

Interviewer: These clients must be very rich. They must all be famous restaurants that I've never been to.

A: Aside from that, they talk a lot about health.

Interviewer: I see.

A: We discuss things like "My back hurts".

Interviewer: Are these clients rather elderly, age-wise?

A: They're in their 60s or 70s.

Interviewer: That elderly?

A: At the end of their conversation, these clients always conclude "No matter how much money you have, health is most important".

As indicated by the words "No matter how much money you have, health is most important", they have no financial trouble in their lives. I used the train as a means of transportation to travel to fitness club X because of three nearby stations within a 5-min walking distance. Despite the convenience, I felt that the club had a large number of clients, particularly elderly clients, who arrived by car. And the reason became clear during an interview with A; many of the clients at fitness club X were wealthy enough to travel in their own car, despite the convenient club location.

Their interests have common points, such as eating high-class cuisine. Also, according to an instructor, they often act as a group and enjoy themselves in places other than the fitness club. For instance, they have conversations at cafés or go on trips, hiking or domestic travel,

occasionally overseas travel. As seen above, connections between clients are expanded beyond the sports space in this case, but it is not simply friendliness that keeps such relationships together. Their interests, and social classes behind these interests, maintain the communication and social capital within this sports space.

On the other hand, their group has a tendency to dislike and exclude other generations. In particular, they severely criticize young female instructors that work at Fitness Club X.

A : There is a "Comments Box for Instructors" in each locker room, one in the men's and one in the women's. The one in the men's hardly has any complaints written in it. There may be about one a month, at best. But there are four or five in the women's box every week. Interviewer: What kinds of complaints are they?

A : "The student instructors have a bad attitude". "They never give greetings". Those kinds of complaints.

Interviewer: And these are referring to the young instructors?

A : Yes.

Interviewer: Male instructors? Or female?

A : Young female instructors.

Interviewer: So are female clients hard on their own sex?

A : They are hard on females, and particularly young instructors. Especially on how they walk, or phrase things.

Interviewer: And from the clients' perspectives, are these instructors of about the same generation as their own daughters?

A : They're about the same age as their daughters, or sometimes granddaughters.

Interviewer: Even granddaughters!?

A : They always get angry and say things like "Young girls these days are no good!"

Interviewer: I see.

A : They criticize them a lot, along the lines of "Young girls these days talk on their cell

phones while they walk", or "They do their make-up on the train", or "They sit with their thighs open on the train".

Such complaints and displeasure can be seen directed to the young clients, but are particularly focused on female instructors of their daughters' or granddaughters' generation. Each of their behaviors and attitudes becomes the object of criticism, and functions as a conversation topic in their group. According to A, conversations such as those described above were exchanged mostly in the locker rooms and baths. Being a man, I was naturally unable to enter the female locker room and bath, but female instructor A was familiar with conversations among female clients.

While it is certainly not rare for people to assume that people of different generations are "heterogeneous strangers", in this case, the instructors are not only young and female, but employees in the service industry. In other words, based on the principles of the service industry, they are not recognized as simply young women, but as strangers meant to serve them. Therefore, the female instructors are easy for the female client's group to ensure the legitimacy of "abusing", and can easily become the target of criticism.

In the first place, the principle of the fitness club is that anyone at any time can participate if they pay money. Therefore, this has a possibility of creating new human relationships, and broadening individual trust relationships. However, what is notable in X is the camaraderie largely related to class and generation. Furthermore, that camaraderie is shared within the sports space of the fitness club, and functions as a basis for elderly women's groups to thrive comfortably.

2. Pseudo-families Emerging in Sports Spaces

On the other hand, the variation of uses for a sports space does not necessarily follow a pattern like X's. We will next focus on the case of Fitness Club Y in one of the 23 wards of Tokyo. Y was one of the major enterprises in the industry that opened nationwide since the 1990s. The club members do not all have as high social classes as X's. Various people, young and old, men and women, use the facility, and male clients make up 30 percent of the whole. Ms. B says the following about the atmosphere of Fitness Club Y, referencing human relationships including instructors and clients.

B: The usage of the fitness club changes based on the client. Our clients are not only women, but there are also elderly men, and young men. The fitness club is not always used only for the purpose of exercise. For example, there are some people who come just to take a bath.

Interviewer: Almost sounds like using a sauna.

B: There are clients like that, and there are people who use it as a venue for communication. For example, there are people who barely exercise, and just talk with a lot of people, like instructors or other clients, then go home. Basically, we don't prevent them from doing that, but the other members occasionally laugh and say, "She went home without exercising", or "He always comes here only to talk".

Interviewer: Are the clients who leave after talking usually men or women?

B: Both men and women. They're very lonely people, who for example, have been married, but their husband or wife is already dead, and they're living alone.

Interviewer: So that means these clients live a solitary lifestyle and have no one to talk to?

B: There are people who don't have anyone to talk to in their ordinary lives. But of course,

there are plenty of people who come to fitness clubs that do exercise, but find talking more enjoyable than exercising.

One feature of Fitness Club Y is that there are many clients, both male and female, who "attend the fitness club to talk", not just to exercise. With respect to enjoying conversation, this is the same as Fitness Club X. However, the characteristic exclusionary human relationships of X, particularly the tendency for elderly clients to criticize young instructors, are hardly there. If anything, there is a familial atmosphere there that includes the instructors.

B: The older clients really treat me with a lot of kindness. My parents are still alive and well, but there are cases where the clients don't have children of their own. These people especially treat me with kindness. My given name is H, but they always call me "H-chan".¹¹ There are many members who think of not only the clients, but also of the instructors, as family. For instance, if an instructor lives alone, they will say "Living alone must be really hard", and bring lunch for them. There are also clients who will say "Thank you so much for everything" and bring presents at the end of the year.

Interviewer: I guess everyone there would have intimate relationships, just like with real family.

B: To give you an idea, there's a sense that the client and instructor just click. There's a wide age gap between the client and the instructor, so of course, there's no romantic relationships between men and women, but it feels like they understand each other's feelings.

Of course, I should point out the good relationships among the instructors and staff members to illustrate the foundation for my discussion. Instructor C who worked at fitness

club Y also talked about good relationships among staff members as a prerequisite for family-like relationships with clients.

Interviewer: Are relationships at fitness club Y better than those experienced at the previous workplace?

C: As far as I am concerned, none of the staff here are unpleasant. It is rare to find a club with no unpleasant staff.

Interviewer: Indeed. Wherever you work, you would find at least one or two individuals who do not have mutual feelings. So, do you go out with other staff members for a drink?

C: Yes, if our schedules permit. I also talk proudly about our good relationships to friends outside of work. I am really happy about it.

Interviewer: Are good relations with other staff members the most important thing at workplace for you?

C: I often have tough times and long overtime hours at work, but I can deal with them because everybody is so nice here.

In fact, C had quit his previous job at a company in the fitness industry because of bad relationships among staff. According to C, regardless of the nature (good or bad), relationships among staff members reflect the relationships with clients. In other words, the relationships between staff members influence the relationships between clients and instructors and the entire atmosphere in the workplace.

The fitness club is fundamentally a non-private area. Of course, the fact is that each client forms their own lifestyle there. However, with a large group of people paying money to exercise in the same place, it is clearly a public area. What's more, as the generation gap between clients and instructors widens, their value sets differ, which makes reciprocal relationships like romance unlikely to form.

Regardless, affectionate relationships like family are formed, overcoming generations. For instance, there are elderly female clients who would bring a lunch for an instructor living alone, and clients who would call instructors affectionately by their given name. This can be thought of as a "pseudo-family" relationship, which is formed involving both clients and instructors. The tendency is particularly strong in the relationship between elderly clients and instructors.

Hochschild once introduced the concept of "emotional labor".¹² "Emotional labor" refers to labor where the appropriate expression or maintenance of emotions is a critical job element, particularly in human services. Flight attendants and nurses are classic examples, and in a broad way, a fitness club instructor is an occupation engaged in emotional labor. However, to the instructors of Fitness Club Y, the clients are not simply subjects of service and the instructors are not simply emotional labourers to the clients, either. The instructors' and clients' feelings waver ambiguously between private and public.

This feature of creating intimate human relationships is not limited to relationships between client and instructors, and not to Fitness Club Y. The next case is Fitness Club Z, which is in an urban area of Kansai. Like Y, Z is one of the major fitness clubs open nationwide. A member of Z named Ms. D and her relationships to other clients is worth noting. Ms. D is a single woman in her mid-20s. Currently, her family lives in Kyushu, and she lives alone in Kansai. She frequently attends Z in the daytime, and mainly uses the pool and studio. There are many elderly female clients at that time of day, and she is in a rather young demographic for that time of day. She frequently communicates with clients in her mother's generation, and says the following

about the objective contents of these conversations.

Interviewer: Do you have the chance to talk with other clients?

D: I often talk to elderly women. Quite often, they initiate the conversation.

Interviewer: What kinds of things do you talk about?

D: For instance, if we're in the pool, the old ladies will be friendly and start talking to me by saying "Your crawl is really fast!" If I'm already acquainted with them, they will explain to me "how to make mayonnaise", even if we are in the pool and in the middle of walking.

Interviewer: Do they talk about amounts, like "how many eggs you use to make mayonnaise"?

D: Yes. They often converse about domestic things like that.

Interviewer: About how old are these old ladies?

D: The young ones are 50. The most elderly is 66.

Though this may be obvious, the fitness club is not meant to learn how to make mayonnaise, whether in the studio or in the pool. However, through these domestic conversations, she forms an almost mother-daughter relationship with the other clients. The fact that she accurately knows their ages should be noted as an indication of their intimacy. Finally, according to her, similar conversations are certainly not rare inside Z. This means that "pseudo-family" relationships are formed between customers in Z, as well.

. Bringing the Sports Space into Everyday Life

As seen above, the sports space known as the fitness club was analyzed based on interviews with instructors and members. This study was a

case-study using qualitative research, and may not have clarified the features of all fitness clubs in Japan. However, we believe that we have been able to analyze how fitness club members actually use this space, even for just a portion of them.

Needless to say, fitness clubs were originally a place for exercising. The number of clubs increased from the 1980s, following Japan's bubble economy. At first, the expectation was for each client to be healthy through sports activities. Further, a major goal was likely to obtain a feminine and beautiful figure, or a masculine and muscular figure. Regardless, what was clear in this discussion was the fact that many clients used this sports space for a different purpose. Group formation and reinforcement, or exclusion of others, occurred every day in addition to physical exercise. Sometimes, strong and intimate groups were formed by social class and generation, and other times, feelings of "pseudo-family" are formed. Neither of those were roles a fitness club was meant to serve. Regardless, tastes and interests secured by social class and desires for familial relationships were brought into the sports space. This resulted in the fitness club members arbitrarily rebuilding the social meaning of that space themselves.

In 1999, 48 percent of the women attending fitness clubs were over the age of 40.¹³ While middle-aged and elderly women have occupied the majority of the fitness club, baby boomer men are facing a mass retirement in the 2010s. It can be anticipated that male clients of this generation will rise in Japanese fitness clubs. How will post-retirement men and women go about using the fitness club? There is a possibility that the social meaning of the sports space will continue to change.

Notes

¹ Ministry of International Trade and Commerce's Research and Statistics Department, *Tokutei service sangyo jittai tyosa hokokusyo: Fitness Clubs* [Special Industry Fact-Finding Survey: Fitness Clubs]. International Trade and Industry Statistics Association (1989, 1992, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2005 editions).

² See Graph 1

³ Keiko Itani, Junko Tahara, Kyoko Raita, eds. 2001. *Mede miru josei supotsu hakusyo* [The Visual Women's Sports Papers]. Tokyo: Taishukan Publishing.

⁴ Ministry of International Trade and Commerce's Research and Statistics Department. 1995. *1995 Tokutei service sangyo jittai tyosa hokokusyo: Fitness Clubs* [1995 Special Industry Fact-Finding Survey: Fitness Clubs]. International Trade and Industry Statistics Association.

⁵ After the name "Fitness clubs" was established in Japan, facilities called "Comprehensive Sports Clubs" were introduced. However, there was no strict distinction between the two. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry defines fitness clubs as follows: "Fulfills three conditions. 1) Possesses an indoor pool, training gym, and fitness studio. 2) Has leaders (instructors, trainers, etc.) deployed. 3) Adopts a membership-only management" (Ministry of International Trade and Commerce's Research and Statistics Department. 1989. "1995 Special Industry Fact-Finding Survey: Fitness Clubs" International Trade and Industry Statistics Association".) However, such facilities, staff deployment, and management forms are almost identical to facilities called "comprehensive sports clubs".

⁶ Blake, Andrew. 1996. *The Body Language: the meaning of modern sport*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, p.32.

⁷ Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone Books.

⁸ Ginsberg, Laura. 2000. "The Hard Work of Working Out: Defining Leisure, Health, and Beauty in a Japanese Fitness Club." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 260-281.

⁹ Kazue Kawahara. 2005. "Nitijou karano bunka syakaigaku: Watasirasisano sinwa" [Cultural Sociology from Everyday Life – The Myth of Individuality]. Kyoto: Sekai Shisoshu, p.70.

¹⁰ The materials used in this research are based

on participatory observation and interview research in fitness clubs conducted by the author. This research targets fitness clubs in the Kanto and Kansai region of Japan during the time period from 2005 to 2007. Furthermore, this research has received support from "On Emergent Construction Mode of Gender Identity, which Has Been Cultivated in Fitness Club", Ministry of education, culture, sports, science and technology research fund, 2005 to 2006, "Basic Research ©". The research representative is Tetsuo Nishiyama. The author is a member of this research project.

¹¹ "Chan" is a diminutive suffix which expresses that the speaker finds a person endearing.

¹² Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The managed heart : commercialization of human feeling*. California: University of California Press.

¹³ Itani, et al., *ibid*.