

## Childbirth and Social Class in Contemporary Japan

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents data from a larger ethnographic research project on intimacy and reproduction in Japan, a country that faces a “crisis of ultra-low fertility rates” (Jones, Straughan, & Chan, 2009). Proceeding from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the paper analyses the outcomes of interviews with 56 Japanese mothers aged between 29 and 45 from Tokyo and Kanagawa. The analysis identified “maternal instincts” (*honnō*), children’s schooling, and marriage as three major axes along which an understanding of how social class concerns influence the childbirth experiences and decision-making processes of these mothers could be gained.

### KEYWORDS

Japan; gender; biological determinism; consumerism; middle class; meritocracy; pronatalism

### Introduction

Demographic shifts have posed a daunting challenge for policy makers and social scientists in Japan, a fast-ageing society grappling with low birth rates (*shōshikōreika*). Although other industrialised nations may exhibit the same demographic pattern, the transition from an “ageing society” (8 per cent elderly) to an “aged society” (14 per cent) (Allison, 2013, p. 34, p. 35) is particularly pronounced in Japan. The matter is complicated because the Japanese fertility rate first fell below the population replacement level of 2.11 in 1974, and in 2005 reached the record low of 1.26 (Ministry of Health, Labor & Welfare, 2010). Recent data indicate that in 2013, the number of new-born babies fell to the lowest level since Japanese birth statistics were first compiled in 1899 (The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014). Nonetheless, the fertility rate has decreased unevenly, actually increasing among women aged 15–19 and 35 or over (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2014). Increased rates among women aged 35 or over largely reflect two demographic concerns: late-in-life marriage (*bankonka*) and late-in-life pregnancies (*kōrei shussan*). The mean age of first marriage in 2013 for men and women stood at 30.9 and 29.3, respectively, with a mean age of mothers at first birth of 30.4 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2014). Women who had their first delivery at 35 years of age or over accounted for around 27 per cent of births in 2013 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2014). Intriguingly, “[t]he mean duration between the time the parents began their married life and the time of the birth of their first and second children also increased, while the duration until the birth of the third child has been mostly the same”

(Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2010, p. 3). This means that although singleness and childlessness are endemic, there are still couples who want to have more than one child.

The official response to the above demographic conundrum has revolved around pronatalist policies primarily embodied in the “Angel Plan”. The first version of the plan was launched in 1990 to cope with “the problem of the low birth rate” (*shōshika no mondai*) (Roberts, 2002). The plan was in principle a 10-year strategy chiefly directed to improve childcare facilities, encourage parental leave from work, and provide support for working mothers. It has, however, undergone several revisions, up to and through the 2004 “New-New Angel Plan” or “Child Care Support Plan”. The meaning of these strategies, nonetheless, remains elusive because birth rates still follow the same pattern and no contrasting control scenario to verify the plans’ effectiveness has been implemented (Coulmas, 2007).

Yamada (2010) and Shirahase (2010) attribute the general unwillingness to marry and have children to the decrease in the number of men who can support a family. The deterioration in the economic power of young men has become a serious impediment to marriage, particularly because the majority of women stop working to raise their children (Yamada, 2010). Following Nakano (2014, p. 170), “men’s value in marriage markets continues to be associated with income, men’s ability to marry is less closely associated with age, and a man over forty may still marry a younger woman if he has money”.

The period between the 1970s and early 1990s has been identified as “Japan, Inc.” in view of the era’s dependence on corporate dominance of the economy and concomitant social change resulting in a “super stable society” (*chō antei shakai*) in which daily social interactions often centred on permanent jobs, group memberships and lifelong marriages (Allison, 2013, p. 10). Given the national struggle towards recovery after World War II and the need to stoke economic growth during the 1960s, Japan, Inc. espoused the realisation of a long awaited dream: the enjoyment of a middle-class standard of living, wherein women could fully dedicate themselves to management of the home and family, whilst men became absolute breadwinners (Kawanishi, 2009, p. 69).

Japan, Inc. also made it difficult to disentangle issues of social stratification and upward mobility in the country, despite “[i]ncome inequality [being] higher in Japan than in Western countries [and] [t]he overall social mobility rate in Japan [being] basically similar to patterns observed in other industrialized societies” (Sugimoto, 2002, p. 35). Others suggested that the notion of social class applied poorly to the Japanese context because clashes and divisions occur at the level of corporate groups rather than between individuals belonging to diverse social strata. Therefore, Japan could be seen as less class-conscious than other industrialised nations (Sugimoto, 2002); an idea that has been identified as “middle class identity” to refer to the subjectivity of “a broad swath of Japanese society in the high-growth era” (Borovoy, 2010, p. 188).

Kawano and colleagues highlight that until the 1990s, class differences appeared largely inconspicuous because blue-collar families could “emulate a middle-class lifestyle, particularly if wives supplemented their husband’s incomes” (Kawano, Roberts, & Long, 2014, p. 4). This has reinforced the ideology of middle-classness, which is similar to “[t]he phenomenon called ‘samuraization’ in the Tokugawa period when merchant families began to emulate the lifestyle of elites [which produced] an illusion of upward mobility” (White, 2002, p. 224).

Social scientists and activists, however, have endeavoured to promote a paradigm shift by insisting that the ideology of middle-classness scarcely depicts current circumstances. In fact, class divisions and socioeconomic inequalities are a vivid reality in Japanese society

(*kakusa shakai*) (Ishida & Slater, 2010; Allison, 2013; Kawano, Roberts, & Long, 2014). Around 34 per cent of Japanese workers, for instance, are currently irregularly employed and around 77 per cent of irregular employees are classified as working poor – people who are economically disadvantaged despite being fully employed (Yuasa, 2008). The division between the economic “winners” (*kachigumi*) and “losers” (*makegumi*) has thus become apparent, pointing in turn to an undeniable distinction between the “haves and have-nots” and the understanding that “one can’t get married and have kids on low wages or with a wage level that doesn’t increase as one gets older” (Allison, 2013, p. 51). Despite the relation of economic standing to fecundity being trenchantly correlated and quantitatively (Shirahase, 2010) as well as politically (Takeda, 2005; Ogawa, Retherford, & Matsukura, 2009) explored, there has been no ethnographic investigation into how class concerns impinge on the child-birth decision-making of mothers in contemporary Japan. This paper thus addresses this seeming gap in the academic field and aims to answer two questions: what is the rationale underpinning childbirth from the viewpoint of a group of Japanese mothers? And how is this rationale influenced by social class concerns? To answer these questions, the paper includes three sections: a review of the master narrative scripting the cultural and social understanding of the subjectivity of Japanese women, a description of the methodology, and the results, presented along three axes – instincts, schooling and marriage.

### **The Subjectivity of Japanese Women**

Okano (2009) states that “the dominant portrait” that presents Japanese women as a homogenous group of “middle-class full-time housewives has been gradually replaced by one that emphasises diversity and specificity, in terms of class, occupations, generations and regions” (Okano, 2009, p. 4). Despite this emphasis on diversity, there remains a form of master narrative that largely simplifies gender relations, disregards social conflict and sets the life trajectories of Japanese men and women within heterosexuality and a gender binary: “the good wife and wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) and “the household central pillar” (*daikokubashira*). Heterosexual couples are thought to embody a “perfect complementarity” (Hidaka, 2010) that sustains patriarchy. Whilst men are to perform the productive role in the household, women are cast in turn in the reproductive role.

During the Japan, Inc. era, the master narrative incorporated the image of the iconic middle-class nuclear family through the variant binary of “salaryman” (*sararīman*) and “education mama” (*kyōiku mama*), thus reasserting a gendered division of labour based on the roles of men as wage earners and women as housewives. The images of the absent father dedicated to his company and the “professional housewife” (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012) entrusted with creating the environment for their children to excel at school were locally and internationally disseminated to produce a homogenising view of the patriarchal regime underpinning gender relations and highlighting the unfavourable position of women in society.

The subjectivity of younger women has been largely used to substantiate the view that the homogenising narrative cannot fully explain current demographic concerns and gender relationships, which have been dubbed the “*gender panic* in twentieth-century Japan” (Kinsella, 2012, p. 72, original emphasis). Marriage and childbirth are nevertheless still relevant to some Japanese women, as attested by the increases in fertility rates stated above. Academics hold that women have in general postponed or rejected marriage because they

could not find a husband with the three-Hs – high education, high income and height (*kōg-akureki, kōshyūnyū, kōshinchō*) – during the 1970s and 1980s (Nemoto, 2008). Currently, women work and wait for the “appropriate person” (Nakano, 2011): a man with the three Cs – comfortable income, communicative skills, and a cooperative attitude towards housework and childcare (*kaiteki na, rikai shiaeru, kyōchōteki na*) (Ogura, 2003). Mathews (2014, p. 77) indicates that Japan has effectively changed due to “women’s increasing role in the workplace and wives’ increasing desire for their husband’s emotional commitment and communication as well as paycheck”.

This suggests that women are not necessarily “victims of patriarchy” who struggle with deep-rooted structural discrimination, because “interpretations of women’s lives are as *diverse* as their lives themselves” (Okano, 2009, p. 5, emphasis added). Such emphasis on “diversity and fluidity”, however, could result in a form of “celebration of diversity” that downplays the persistence of hierarchy in heterosexual relations and the tenacity of gender and sexual discrimination (Jackson & Scott, 2010b). By conveying the image of a “society free of conflict”, celebration of diversity largely entails a form of “colonisation of diversity” and the denial of cultural and structural barriers that women face in the job market. For instance, the prevalence of the labour pattern known as the M-shape – a curve with twin peaks in the 20–24 and 45–49 age cohorts and a depression in the 30–35 age bracket – indicates that Japanese women stop working because of maternity and childrearing responsibilities. Unwed mothers and unmarried women struggle in a “sexist” labour market in which one in three single women is “relatively poor” (Sugihara, 2011; The Economist, 2011b). Married women, on the other hand, despite working outside the home, are still chiefly responsible for childrearing and housework (Tipton, 2008). Recent surveys suggest that whilst Japanese wives who work full-time spend “30 hours a week doing the housework, their husbands contribute an un princely three hours of effort” (The Economist, 2011a).

An explanation of the long-lasting recession in the Japanese economy has been linked to gender inequalities and the limited opportunities for women. The female Japanese politician Noda holds that whilst high rates of men’s unemployment cause recession or “mancession” (*danseifukyō*), raising employment rates among women should help to increase gross domestic product or “womenomics” (*ūmanomikusu*) (The Asahi Shimbun, 2013). This implies – as Oi (2012) suggests – that women could “save the country’s economy [!]” by fully subscribing to pronatalism at a young age whilst becoming full-time employees.

## Methodology

This paper includes data from a larger research project on reproduction and intimacy in Japan, one of whose aims is to rehabilitate symbolic interactionism, by limning the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic dimensions underpinning the complexities of contemporary reproduction and sexual life (Jackson & Scott, 2010a). Here, however, the analysis centres on the relationship between childbearing and social class concerns, which is explored through the daily interactions of a group of mothers, thus permitting a theorising grounded in “ordinary lives” (Jackson & Scott, 2010b, pp. 22–23). Following Gagnon and Simon (2005), reproduction is explored vis-à-vis the subjectivities of a group of mothers and their interpersonal relationships in the context of current Japanese culture.

The concept of subjectivity refers to the diverse aspects of the self that cannot be constrained by any particular form of identity or tally of identities. Subjectivity accounts for

a sense of the self in line with its inner thoughts and desires that are equally restricted or enabled by structures and cultural sources, as well as by social interactions in everyday life (Jackson & Scott, 2010b).

In this study contemporary gender relations are seen as hierarchically constructed power relations that permeate the daily interactions of Japanese men and women. Masculinity and femininity, however, are regarded as “opposites in coalition” (Holland et al., 1998), because they conflate to produce a regime of “normality” that enlarges the power of patriarchy. Liberation and oppression are, however, not uniform or contradictory processes, but their implications become apparent through “the actual contradictions of women’s [and men’s] lives” (Ramazanoglu, 1989, p. 4).

Looking at the links between childbearing and social class through daily interactions can cast some critical light on the ways practice and subjectivity relate to wider social and cultural contexts, and allow a reading of human agency without reaching a level of unexplained voluntarism (Jackson & Scott, 2010a, p. 821), because agency is located within a concrete social context. Skeggs (2004) argues that class location through cultural capital availability impinges on the resources an individual can draw on in understanding and fashioning the self. No single correct definition or unique method to quantify social class exists. Nonetheless, the cultural, the economic and the political are three dimensions used to identify the existence of class differences in contemporary societies (Turner, 2006). Here, however, classes are not seen as abstract categories but as real-life groupings continually under construction and closely related to the outcomes of schooling. Classes pose real constraints in the daily interactions of their members, and “their making and remaking is done in the course of the intransigent conflicts that arise in a deeply divided and unequal society” (Connell et al., 1982, p. 33).

Consumerism complicates matters further. Blue-collar families emulating middle-class consumer patterns have chiefly helped sustain the Japanese ideology of middle-classness, which has made the understanding of citizenship problematic as well. Within capitalist societies, citizenship largely refers to “a relatively limited set of rights enabling citizens to engage in the productive activities of the economy and avail themselves of the protection of the legal system ... [however,] citizenship has increasingly focused on the rights of citizens as consumers” (Evans, 1993, p. 2).

The idea that Japan is a meritocratic society (*gakureki shakai*) underpins the link between citizenship and schooling expressed in the construct of “the educated citizen”, which means that “life in terms of health care, housing and employment chiefly depends on the accumulation of academic credentials. [Hence,] those with poor academic achievements have a quality of life indicative of a second-class citizenship” (Castro-Vázquez, 2013, p. 106). Nonetheless, the growing awareness that schooling does not necessarily entail “a guarantee of success in career or life ... especially for those at the bottom of the school hierarchy” (Kariya, 2010, p. 109) has furnished the incentive for parents “to operate as investors and consumers in a market, competitively maximizing gains from education” (Connell, 2011, p. 52).

Aged between 29 and 45, the participants in this study were 56 married Japanese mothers from Tokyo and Kanagawa, who were recruited through snowball sampling. The seed for snowballing was a mother introduced by a Japanese acquaintance of the principal investigator. There were no particular criteria in the selection process and there was a firm intention to include mothers from different backgrounds; nonetheless, the profiles of the participants

appeared rather similar. This could be a major limitation of snowballing sampling, which definitively impacts on the quality and quantity of data collected.

Thirty of the participants hold a university degree, 20 had graduated from a two- or three-year junior college (*tanki daigaku*), and six were graduate or undergraduate students at the time of interview. Fifteen were full-time employees, and although the rest said they were full-time housewives, 23 performed part-time jobs. Thirty of the respondents relinquished their full-time positions after becoming pregnant.

Respondents received a complete explanation of research objectives and methods, as well as the assurance that all information provided would be treated confidentially and included only as data in published academic manuscripts. The mothers were told that information that could trigger personal identification would be deleted or changed in any research report. Data were collected through individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews that lasted approximately 60 minutes each. All participants were interviewed twice. With the agreement of the participant, interviews were fully recorded and conducted in Japanese, addressing these topics: childbearing, gender, sexuality, marriage and childrearing. These were not introduced in a predetermined order but were broached when it was deemed appropriate in the course of conversation.

Interviews were conducted in the summers of 2011 and 2012 and took place in quiet areas of coffee shops where the mothers felt at ease and their privacy could be protected. One thousand Japanese yen was offered as a financial incentive, which did not compromise respondents' right to end their participation at any stage or to skip any question that caused them discomfort. In the event that an interview became highly disquieting or emotionally charged, the mother was able to define the extent to which certain experiences could be discussed, at which point the interviewer would suggest sources of information and support when they seemed appropriate.

Every spoken word was transcribed, with pauses, interruptions and hesitations noted but not measured. Data were scrutinised for support, or the lack of it, for the initial concepts, and for those generated during this process. A series of themes and ideas was produced and sorted into key and subsidiary codes, which were attached to the transcripts. After that, systemic networks for text analysis (Bliss, Monk, & Ogborn, 1983) were employed. The networks generated categories through an interactive process of induction and deduction, but rather than regarding the interview transcripts as direct representations of reality, they were seen as “reality narratives” or pieces of informants' life histories (Plummer, 1995).

## Results

### *Instincts*

Since the 1960s, feminists have challenged any form of “biological essentialism” that supports the notion that social behaviour is ultimately determined by the genetic differences between men and women (Ramazanoglu, 1989). Likewise, Japanese feminists and female social activists have sought to dismantle what is meant to be the “motherly nature” (*bosei gensō*) of women (Borovoy, 2005, p. 171) and the understanding of “motherhood” (*bosei*), which seems to be a force intrinsic to women's subjectivity that triggers an irresistible desire to become a mother (Gurūpu Bosei Kaidoku Kōza, 1991; Amano et al., 2009; Mackie, 2003; Dales, 2009). Debates highlight that motherhood does not refer to any form of “natural

force” because it has been culturally produced and socially propagated to control and confine women to the domestic locus of home and childrearing. Nevertheless, the analysis of the interviews showed frequent allusions to instinctual behaviour (*honnō*) to explain why Japanese women still want to have children, despite prevailing demographic trends.

I don't know if this makes sense to you but I think that women have something inside them ... how can I say this? Hmmm ... like an internal call ... something that makes them want to have children ... it is like an instinct ... do you know what I mean?

*Not really. Please elaborate.*

Hmmm ... you can see it somehow, for example ... when a woman sees a baby ... she most likely thinks the baby is cute ... she feels attracted to and wants to hold the baby in her arms ... her face tells you how happy she is...

*What about men?*

Hmmm ... I am not sure ... but I think that men ... some men might feel the same way ... at least I think my husband does ... but it is more like a woman thing...

*What about women who don't feel it?*

Hmmm ... that is a bit uncommon ... I don't know ... but I think that in general all women feel this way... (Aged 38, mother of 2 children)

Although men may feel attracted to children, it is more likely to be women who are driven towards the childbearing idea. “Paternal instincts” may exist, but a woman who is uninterested in having children is seen as rather “unusual” (*igai*). The subjectivity of a “normal” woman thus revolves around maternity. Some of the mothers underscored that the will to have children is part of the mission of women in life (*shimei*), which is to leave descendants (*kodomo ga nokoshitai*).

This is maybe a bit difficult to understand ... hmmm ... how can I put it? I believe that most women want to have children ... it is something natural ... women normally want to have children ... it is like a mission they have...

*What is that mission?*

I think that women's mission is to leave descendants.

*What about women who do not want to leave descendants?*

Hmmm ... I don't know ... hmmm ... of course there are women who don't want to have children ... but something makes me think that that is a bit atypical ... most women have to have children ... well, at least most of the women I know... (Aged 42, mother of 1 child)

In the life “sciences”, maternal instincts have been generally referred to as “women's biological clock”, which is an integral element of their life cycle. Childless women may be seen as “incomplete”. In illustrating this idea, some of the mothers referred to the expression “demon hags” (*oni baba*) that has been circulating since 2005, and implied that childless, unmarried and post-menopausal women were at high risk of sexually assaulting young men, due to their unreleased sexual and reproductive “energies” (Misago, 2004). The interviewees, however, did not endorse this characterisation, maintaining that childbirth is ultimately a personal “decision”.

Hmmm ... how can I put this? Have you heard the expression demon hags?

Yes

Well ... I think it is a bit odd...

*What is a bit odd?*

Hmmm ... it is a bit odd that the expression applies only to women ... I think it is used to criticise women ... and there are a lot of men who remain single and don't have children either...

*Is there any similar expression that applies to men?*

Hmmm ... I don't think so ... there are still people saying that if you don't have children you are not an adult, a grown-up (*ichinin mae*) ... that can be applied to men too ... anyway, Japan is facing this problem of low birth rates ... which makes me think that having children is becoming a personal decision ... but, at the same time for women the will to have children is just a matter of timing (*taimingu*)...

*What do you mean?*

Hmmm ... I think that most of the mothers I know had children because of the internal call...

*But you said it is a personal decision...*

Hmmm ... it is a personal decision ... I mean women can decide if they want to have children, or not ... but still women have this internal desire that makes them want to have children...

*Do men experience that desire too?*

I guess so ... actually I don't know ... maybe some men...

*Is that a difference between men and women?*

Hmmm ... yes ... but I am not sure... (Aged 42, mother of 1 child)

This idea that the manifestation of the will to have children is a matter of timing appeared in most of the interview transcripts. Some of the mothers alluded to current popular expressions to highlight the existence of women's "biological clock" and to elucidate their position that maternal instincts appear when women are in their 20s. Instincts seem to reach their maximum intensity at around 30 years old, and it is therefore not unusual to see women in their 30s actively looking to marry and become pregnant. As late-in-life childbirth has become conspicuous, women in their 40s might experience a "late-in-life maternal instinct".

How can I say this? Hmmm ... have you heard the expression "around 30"?

*What does that mean?*

It has become very popular and usually refers to women's age ... it is said that women around 20 start feeling the desire to have children, but the desire reaches its peak when they are in their 30s which is why it is very common that around that age most women want to marry and have children.

*What about women in their 40s?*

Hmmm ... I guess the desire is still there ... inside them ... but for some reason they did not have children ... they somehow delayed it ... and decided to have children later...

*Does that mean that they could control the desire?*

Hmmm ... I guess so... (Aged 42, mother of 1 child)

Although the mothers underscored that having children should be a personal decision, at the same time they alluded to an internal drive that pushes women towards childbearing. This indeed entailed a major contradiction. In essence the notions of "motherhood", "instinct" and "biological clock" have the same meaning: childbearing is "naturally" embedded in women's subjectivity. This "normalises" the subjectivity of Japanese women, as they are still compared, differentiated, hierarchised, homogenised and excluded (Foucault, 1995, pp. 182–183) based on their capacity for childbirth.



The mothers presented childbearing in terms of the dichotomy between “rational thinking” (*risei*) and instinctual behaviour (*honnō*). The desire to have children is controllable, depending on the circumstances. Intriguingly, some of the mothers suggested that women who were unable to control the instinct were largely “the Other”, women who could be referred to as *yankī*, an expression originally translated as “Yankee”. Yet, depending on context, it could currently be applied to delinquent youngsters (*hikō shōnen*), hoodlums (*chinpira*) or “bad” people in general (*furyō*). The subjectivity of women unable to tame their instincts was thus linked to “the Other”.

Well, yes, I think that there is something inside women that makes them want to have children ... it is like an internal call that most women feel ... sooner or later women want to have children...

*Does that mean that whenever they feel the call they have children?*

Hmmm ... yes, maybe ... well, actually no, if they feel the call but they think that the situation is not good they might not have children ... hmmm ... having children is partly because of the internal call ... but also women can decide ... I think we say *risei* in Japanese ... do you know what I mean?

*No, not really. Please elaborate.*

Hmmm ... *risei* is like thinking and deciding based on the situation ... if a woman thinks it is not good then she doesn't have children...

*What about women who don't think and have children?*

That is a bit *yankī* ... there are circumstances when women should not have children...

*Even if they feel the internal call?*

Yes ... maybe... (Aged 45, mother of 1 child)

Exploring the circumstances that prevent women from following their maternal instincts elicited a belief in the social class determinants of the desire for children.

## **Schooling**

As all the interviewees agreed on the natural force of maternal instincts pushing women towards motherhood, they were equally unanimous that schooling was a serious social factor countering the will to have children and limiting the number of children women should have. The number of children per household thus has to be “rationally” decided, based on the financial capacity to afford school fees and related expenses. That argument vividly corroborated the assumption of Japan as a meritocratic society.

Of course, they cannot have a child whenever they feel the call inside them...

*Why not?*

Well, the main reason is that they cannot send them to school...

*Is that really the main reason?*

Hmmm ... I think so...

*Why?*

Well, the answer is simple ... Japan is still pretty much a meritocratic society...

*What does that mean?*

That everything depends on the school your children graduated from...

*What is everything?*

Basically ... the job they can get ... if you want your children to get a good job later in life ... they need to enter a good senior high school and then a good university ... their life in general won't be as good as those who went to the best schools...

*Who are those who go to the best schools?*

Usually the most intelligent kids ... or better to say ... those who work harder ... children have to make an effort to be good at school and parents need to back them ... if a mother wants her children to go to the best schools, she cannot have more than two children... (Aged 42, mother of 1 child)

Even though the mothers had different academic backgrounds, all were concerned about bringing up educated children who would eventually become educated citizens. Meritocracy has largely become an ideology and, as Ezawa highlights, Japanese “blue collar families recognize the importance of education”, despite lacking the cultural capital to cope with the education system (2010, p. 202). A similar pattern can be found in other East Asian societies where children experience “the high-pressure of educational competition that characterizes these societies” (Jones, 2013, p. 49). Following Takeda (2005) and Shirahase (2010), the analysis of the interviews highlighted the relation of individual academic differences to social class differences in contemporary Japan. The mothers suggested that the number of children in the household could facilitate a middle-class standard of living. The subjectivity of a middle-class mother was therefore linked to her capacity to understand the relationship between childbearing and schooling. Middle-class mothers who are worried about education do not have more than two children; conversely, extremely rich or definitively *yankī* women who are not concerned about education have more than two children.

Things are changing of course, but still schooling makes the difference...

*What do you mean?*

People in general still think that the life of those who can go to the best universities is better ... the life of your kids will most likely depend on the schools they attended ... that is why parents spare no effort to have their children educated ... this means a lot of money as they have to pay for preparatory schools ... if they want to have their children going to top-ranking schools ... the rank of the school is very important to find a job...

*Does that mean that those in top-ranking schools are from rich families?*

Hmmm ... I don't think so ... I think they are middle class (*chūryū*) just like us ... but they are aware of the expenses of schooling and have fewer children...

*What about women with three or more children?*

Hmmm ... that is very rare ... most women in Japan have one or two children at the most ... I really have not seen mothers with three children or more ... they are maybe really rich that is why they do not care about education at all ... hmmm ... or they are maybe sort of *yankī* ... but they are not common... (Aged 44, mother of 1 child)

Some of the mothers were sceptical about the social power of education and suggested that schooling unevenly influenced individuals' position in society. To them, succeeding at school is not solely a matter of individual talents and intelligence; children need the full support of the household, and their mothers in particular. Furthermore, the long economic recession has produced such an atmosphere of uncertainty that Japanese parents' daily interactions emphasise and reinforce the idea that schooling is the only feasible way for children to have

a future. Uncertainty thus largely increases the commodification of schooling and makes parents consider how their investment in the education market can be maximised.

I don't think that education alone has ever been a guarantee of a better life ... somehow the influence of the family you were born in is strong ... anyway ... I don't think right now we have an option...

*What do you mean?*

Hmmm ... even if you think that schooling is not really decisive ... most parents want to have their kids schooled ... I think the only option for our children is to be schooled ... so they might have better opportunities ... we have to do our best to send them to school even if it is expensive...

*Expensive? I understand that compulsory education is free...*

Yes, it is but that is not enough ... hmmm ... if you want to have your children in the best schools you need to send them to preparatory schools or they would not be able to pass the entrance exams... (Aged 44, mother of 1 child)

The "Othering" of mothers who had more than two children was conspicuous. In the study sample of 56 mothers five reported having had three children, 25 had had two and the rest only one. Nonetheless, they all thought of childbirth in terms of schooling investment. Intriguingly, the five mothers with three children did not think of themselves as belonging to wealthy households; indeed, their third child was most likely the result of an unplanned pregnancy. Two of these women had tried Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) to have their second child and subsequently neglected contraception, assuming that they would not become pregnant again. The other three did not use contraceptives, thinking they were too old to get pregnant.

Of course we are not rich ... we are just like a regular Japanese family ... we are middle class ... I guess ... my third child was not really planned ...

*What do you mean?*

Becoming pregnant for the second time was really difficult ... my first daughter was already in primary school when finally after trying IVF several times I got pregnant ... my second daughter was already 2 years old so I thought that I would not get pregnant anymore ... I was not particularly careful about using contraception or anything ... my sexual life was not that active also ... but one day it happened ... unexpectedly I became pregnant...

*What did you do then?*

It was a very serious decision to make ... we thought that sending the first two girls to school was okay ... we had some savings and stuff ... but we were not really ready for a third baby...

*Did you think of abortion?*

Hmmm ... no, not really ... I thought that the third baby was somehow gifted to us ... and that somehow we could work it out (*nantoka naru*) ... we could send him somehow to school...

*Was schooling such a concern?*

Of course it was ... I don't think you can have children if you won't be able to send them to school ... it was also because I was married...

*What do you mean?*

Well ... I would not have had children alone ... I mean without being married...

*Really?*

Yes, having children when you are married is already difficult ... it is important to have children in a family ... I think that having children out of wedlock is a bit foolish... (Aged 42, mother of 3 children)

The narratives converged on the significance of marriage as requiring rational thinking and highlighting the relevance of social class concerns in the decision-making processes underpinning childbirth.

### **Marriage**

The popularisation of the notion that unmarried and childless women are “the losers” can be largely attributed to the publication of the bestseller *Make inu no tōboe* (*Howl of the loser dogs*) by the female columnist Sakai (Sakai, 2006). Grounded in Japan’s demographic conundrum, the book asserts that the subjectivity of women should be freed from its necessary ties to reproduction, and criticises the perception of older unmarried women who are seen as “unhappy” and largely responsible for low birth rates. Sakai highlights that the losers are perhaps the “winners”, as they are most likely child-free, highly educated women in managerial and executive positions who can have an independent and financially secure life. Critics of Sakai’s views, however, consider that this idea of the winners could misrepresent the circumstances of most Japanese women; only a tiny minority of women are able to enjoy the comforts of such a “glamorous” lifestyle (Yamaguchi, 2006). All of the mothers interviewed for this study agreed that unmarried and childless women are not losers in any way, because childbirth and marriage have become largely an “option”, which again contradicted the idea that childbearing was biologically determined. Nonetheless, some stated that it is still difficult for women to remain single and childless, because daily social interactions often intimate that women without children are largely “incomplete”.

I don’t think that unmarried and childless women are losers at all ... if that is what they want ... they should not marry or have children if they don’t want ... it is a decision they made and it is fine ... but I don’t think that women who want to stay single have an easy life...

*Why not?*

...unmarried and childless women are seen as incomplete...

*Really? But a lot of women are not marrying or having children anyway.*

Hmmm ... well ... it is difficult to tell ... Japan is definitely changing ... women are having fewer children or not marrying, but still ... if a woman is single ... people keep asking and suggesting options for her to get married ... and if she is married she has always to explain why she doesn’t have children ... a traditional way of thinking is still here ... somehow women end up believing that they have to marry and have children...

*Was that your case?*

Hmmm ... it is difficult to say ... I don’t know ... I think that I wanted to marry ... and to have children ... because there was this thing inside me...

*What was that thing?*

I wanted to have a baby ... it was something like an instinct ... I don’t know ... but I knew somehow that I had to get married first...

*Why was that so?*

Hmmm ... somehow ... I wanted to marry first... (Aged 42, mother of 3 children)

The idea that marriage should precede childbirth took some of the conversations in the direction of single parenting. Some of the mothers drew on cases of friends or acquaintances who had had children out of wedlock to illustrate the salience of marriage in women's decisions to become a mother. Hertog (2009) and Ezawa (2010) have shown how single mothers overwhelmingly grapple with economic, legal and cultural disadvantages. Despite apparent changes in Japanese family relationships and structures, Hertog (2011, p. 106) underscores that most of the single mothers in her study "have experienced strong pressures to marry or have an abortion". Recent official reports indicate that nearly 80 per cent of employed single mothers receive welfare benefits. Invidious labour conditions, and primarily part-time jobs, push 50 per cent of single mothers beneath the poverty threshold (The Asahi Shimbun, 2014). The mothers interviewed agreed that single mothers were "strong" and "brave" (*tsuyoi, takumashii*) because Japanese society can be absolutely hostile to them. The analysis suggests however that these expressions did not necessarily imply "admiration" or "respect" because the decision to become an unwed mother was depicted as largely "unwise".

I know this sounds a bit old fashioned ... but you know ... I honestly think that women shouldn't have children if they aren't married...

*Why?*

Hmmm ... raising a child is already difficult when you have a husband who provides for the family ... if you are on your own with your baby, life can be harsh ... unmarried women with children are really strong and brave, I think...

*Why?*

Well ... just to find a job ... I think that most single mothers do part-time jobs, but their salaries are not good ... I would say that usually part-time jobs are for mothers who want to supplement the household income or single people who live with their parents ... if you add that single mothers might have to pay for childcare facilities or find someone to take care of the baby whilst they are working ... their life is not easy ... I actually have a personal friend who is single and has a baby ... she struggles coping with life...

*How does she cope with life?*

I know that she had to go back to her hometown to have her mother help her with the baby ... that was a bit of a problem because then she could not find a job ... she moved to Yokohama with her son and found some part-time jobs ... but then the problem was to find someone to take care of her boy ... I believe that she was also receiving some support from the city council or something like that ... but still it was not easy ... last time I saw her ... she complained that she could not spend much time with her son and that she was always tired...

*Do you think that her situation is similar to other single mothers in Japan?*

It could be ... hmmm ... I think I read somewhere that these days some single mothers get together to have a place to live and help each other ... I think it is like an NGO or something like that ... I think that if single mothers did not get some support ... many of them would end up being homeless ... which is a very strange contradiction...

*What is that contradiction?*

Japan is facing this problem of low birth rates but at the same time the children of single women might be facing poverty ... maybe ... also I would not be surprised if many of their children end up being bullied at school because they do not have a father...

*If the situation is so difficult, why do you think unmarried women still want to have children?*

Hmmm ... I really don't know but I would think that most of them are unwanted pregnancies ... they always have the option to abort but they don't do it ... I really don't know ... but

definitely, I think that becoming a single mother is not a good idea ... single mothers are a bit foolish ... maybe... (Aged 42, mother of 2 children)

In emphasising the link between marriage and childbirth, some of the mothers alluded to the boom in the “matchmaking” industry, in which an increasing number of agencies organise events for men and women to meet for the purpose of marriage, as well as the rather popular “group blind dates” (*gōkon*). Analyses of current tendencies towards “marriage hunting” (*konkatsu*) (Shirahase, 2010; Yamada, 2010) imply that social uncertainty and the crisis in the economy have largely contributed to enlarging the economic and symbolic value of marriage (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012), especially because employment for women is still greatly restricted. But the recession has had serious consequences for men as well. Men who are unable to obtain a permanent job at a large company or corporation have mostly turned into “unmarriageable” men (Shirahase, 2010; Cook, 2014). The mothers interviewed implied that the employment situation of a potential male partner has become a crucial element of the rational thinking underpinning women’s decisions to marry and have children. The middle-class mother was thus generally referred to in interviews as a woman who fully understands the relevance of marriage prior to childbearing.

This is maybe something difficult to understand but the truth is that ... it is very difficult for women to have an independent life ... even if they go to school and work for a big company ... their position is always unstable...

*What do you mean?*

Well ... if they need to fire someone it is usually a woman ... it is still pretty much expected that after marriage women quit their job to rear their children ... it is still difficult to keep working after having children...

*Was that your case?*

Hmmm ... yes, I wanted to keep working but taking care of the children and working was very difficult ... I feel that childbirth still changes the life of women radically...

*What about men?*

Hmmm ... men are getting more and more involved in childrearing but still women have the main responsibility ... that is why women are getting a bit more concerned about finding the right partner ... if a woman has to stop working after childbirth or work while rearing her children it is better to have a husband with a decent salary and stable job ... that is why group blind dates and marriage hunting have become very popular ... maybe...

*Was that your case?*

Hmmm ... yes, somehow ... luckily my husband has a good job ... and I can now work from home ... otherwise life would be harsh ... we can have a regular income...

*If you are working from home, does your husband take care of your children too?*

Hmmm ... not really, he is busy and comes back home late almost every day ... when he is at home sometimes he baths the children ... but that is about it...

*Do you think that your situation is different from other mothers?*

Hmmm ... I don’t know ... but something makes me think that men still want to marry because they want to have someone to take care of their stuff ... they want someone to cook for them ... to keep their clothes cleaned ... and stuff ... that is my impression...

*And, women accept that?*

Hmmm ... maybe ... I don’t know ... but I sometimes think that my husband should help a bit more because I am working too...

*Are you doing part-time jobs?*

No, not really. I do financial consultancy and I am a full-time employee working from home ... but this is a bit strange...

*What is strange?*

For some reason ... I ended up taking care of the children and home alone ... it has become somehow natural...

*Have you talked about this with your husband?*

Yes, but still I have the main responsibility ... that is why women might not want to have children ... I don't know...

*But you already have two children, don't you?*

Yes, I do ... sometimes I think it was better if we had only one ... maybe... (Aged 42, mother of 2 children)

The interviews revealed the intersection between social class concerns and marriage as a means of understanding the rational thinking underpinning childbirth. Demographics clearly show that the master narrative that situates the subjectivity of Japanese women inside the housewife–breadwinner binary has largely become obsolete. Nonetheless, the mothers implied that the position of women in society could still be bound up with marriage, inhibiting their desire to have children, even given the influence of maternal instincts.

## Conclusion

Demographic changes have impacted on the Japanese political and academic agendas for more than a decade. Plummeting birth rates in particular have represented one of the most serious challenges for government policy makers seeking to reverse their negative impact, and for scholars engaged in tracing their origins and consequences. In exploring the rationale behind childbearing, this paper has presented the viewpoints and experiences of a group of Japanese mothers. There is certainly no intention to generalise the findings beyond the scope of the subjectivities examined in this study, but the insights of the mothers interviewed here can shed some critical light on the social processes underpinning childbirth in current Japanese society.

Returning to the paper's first question, the interviewees suggested that childbearing could be understood as a decision-making process influenced by the dichotomous poles of instincts and rational thinking. Remarkably, all of the mothers drew on a putatively socio-biological account of the will to motherhood as intrinsically embedded in the subjectivity of women: childbirth, they averred, is most likely the result of instinctual behaviour. The desire to have children appeared to them to be an integral element of women's life cycle and thus inevitable. Such an understanding seems to have been reinforced by popular cultural beliefs and daily social interactions that serve to classify women according to their age. While women in their 20s experience the blooming of maternal instincts, those in their 30s are seen to be "desperately" looking for marriage, because their reproductive capacities are at stake.

The narrative implied that maternal instincts embody a powerful "natural" force impelling the subjectivity of women towards reproduction. Nonetheless, instincts can apparently be harnessed, as exemplified by those women giving birth in their 40s. Furthermore, the instincts should be "repressed" should social conditions prove unfavourable to childbearing. The mothers interviewed here described rational thinking as an even stronger force, one

that helps control instincts and remakes the decision to have children into a social, rather than biological, matter.

In relation to the paper's second question, the broader social context underpinning child-birth revealed that social class concerns may exert a strong impact on women's decisions about becoming pregnant and the number of children they should have. Such concerns were chiefly expressed in terms of schooling. Following Shirahase (2010, p. 83), "highly educated [Japanese] couples show high educational aspirations for their offspring, investing a lot of money in bringing up and educating a small number of children".

Although some of the mothers expressed a critical view about the outcomes of education, they insisted that the endemic social and economic crisis has reinforced the idea that schooling is the only means through which a middle-class living standard can be preserved, and that effective citizenship largely depends on academic credentials. As Ezawa (2010, p. 216) holds, mothers with middle-class ambitions prioritise schooling because "higher educational attainment is a central middle-class aspiration and necessary condition for the reproduction of a middle-class status". This viewpoint could equally reflect current "global meritocracy" (Castro-Vázquez, 2013), which is a tendency largely initiated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through the ranking of countries based on academic achievement. Such rankings tend to reinforce the idea that citizenship effectively depends on schooling.

Given that a middle-class family is meant to have only one or two children, women who were willing to have three or more children were seen as "the Other" – either rich or unconcerned mothers. However, interviewees with three children shared the same understanding of schooling, and their third child was most likely the result of an unplanned pregnancy. These understandings of "the Other", however, might not be empirically grounded. The Japanese working-class women in Okano's study produce a perception of female university-graduate colleagues and thus middle-class women based on "stereotypical ideas ... for example, that they were all proper ladies from wealthy families" (Okano, 2009, p. 265). In the same vein, the references of the mothers in this study to the working-class and single mothers might only help to signal "a difference" that is most likely supported by conventional images rather than "real life experience". The subjectivity of a middle-class mother thus largely constitutes a woman who is able to repress her maternal instincts and clearly understands the significance of children's schooling as well as marriage prior to childbearing.

The interconnection between childbirth and marriage exposed the links between "sexuality, class and inequality" (McDermott, 2011), in the sense that the social standing of Japanese women, apparently dependent at least in part on the will to have children, may still hinge strongly on marital status. Following Ronald and Alexy (2011, p. 2), the narratives implied that childbearing in current Japanese society could be seen as a "complex and fragmentary process that reflects transformation and continuity, adaptation and assimilation, function and dysfunction".

Overall, the contradictions evident in the viewpoints of the mothers in the study could show how contemporary Japan grapples with social "differentiation and uncertainty" (Kawano, Roberts, & Long, 2014). On the one hand, the majority of the mothers appeared utterly convinced that the discourses concerning childbearing, marriage and schooling were "correct"; on the other, they undermined their opinions and appeared rather hesitant. They did not express regret. However, they might agree with the discourses because they were married women who identified as belonging to the middle class and had become the main



caretakers of their home and family, despite some of them being full-time employees. For a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between childbearing and social class, the findings of this study need to be teased out and critically analysed in line with the life experiences of women from different social classes, occupations, generations and regions.

Finally, the analysis of interviews did not show how pronatalism had influenced the participants' intentions to become a mother. The relationship between pronatalism and childbearing is complex, and as Gauthier (2013) elaborates, despite the growing global interest among academics and officials, the real impact of policies on fertility remains elusive.

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