Article

The Japanese Corporate Family: The Marital Gender Contract Facing New Challenges

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Abstract
The analytical prism of *gender contract* is used in this article as a means to conceptualize the cultural construction of the idea of the heteronormative "ordinary" Japanese family, a construct that gained hegemonic dominance over the course of Japan's stable prosperous postwar period (1960s-1980s); and from there, for examining the strength of this normative "contract" against post-bubble economic and social challenges. To further challenge the potential changes in the corporate gender contract,—particularly against the corporate culture—the study purposely sampled the second group of male and female interviewees, who were related to the so-called *ikumen* movement, which calls for greater involvement of men in family life and a better work–life balance. These men and women were not only from younger age cohorts compared to the first group of women and men. They also mostly resided in dual-income households, unlike the first group whose households were mainly based on a male breadwinner.

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"Men should work outside the home for wages and women should protect the household": This is the common survey item used to measure attitudinal changes in Japan's normative differentiation of social roles and the division of labor between the sexes (North, 2012, p. 17). The division between paid work and family responsibilities in Japan has been described as undergirded by pervasive gendered norms (Takahashi, Kamano, Matsuda, Onode, & Yoshizumi, 2014). The "second demographic transition" (see Lesthaeghe, 2010) refers to the marked changes in patterns of fertility, marriage, family formations, and the rates of women's participation in labor markets. These changes that have particularly characterized Western countries since the 1970s have been related to a growing rejection of the gender ideology of "separate spheres." However, Japan is generally considered as an *anomaly* in this respect, given the continuing tendency of young mothers to devote themselves to child care; the enduring "symbolic value" attached to the role of the housewife (Lee, Tufiş, & Alwin, 2010); and the persistent "corporate-centered" breadwinner gender contract, in which women are dependent on income transfers from individual full-time male workers, namely their husbands (Gottfried, 2000, 2013).

The concept of the "postwar Japanese family system" (Ochiai, 2005) has been suggested to describe the standardization process that the Japanese family went through against the background of rapid economic growth. This standardization process coincided with the emergence of the "new middle class" in the Japan of the 1960s, prompting also the emergence of what is commonly described as the "normal" family type: a breadwinning salaryman husband, a dependent full-time housewife, and (two) children (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2017; E. F. Vogel, 1963). A coincident process was the development of standard Japanese "life course patterns" for both women and men. As suggested by Brinton (2011; Brinton, 1992), the established pathways from school to work, and from work to marriage, were emblematic of the culture of security that characterized the period of high economic growth from the 1960s through to the 1980s.

Against this background, Japan, after the dramatic rupture of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, has been described in terms of "risk society," characterized by widening status and expectation gaps (Yamada, 2004). Consequently, the "normal" orderly life course of the earlier high growth period has become less obtainable, and the culture of security has become out of reach for more of the younger generation (Brinton, 2011). These economic and related changes that Japan has experienced since the rupture of the economic bubble, including historically low fertility rates and rapid ageing population (Boling, 2015), have brought about a growing scrutiny with regard to the family. These changes have prompted a rethink of conceptualizations of

the relationship between family and work including the promotion of a growing fathers' participation in parenting and caring (Taga, 2016b).

Based on a qualitative research study, this article takes a constructionist approach highlighting the meanings that research participants ascribed to their gender beliefs and choices with regard to work and family. In-depth interviews with men and women from middle-class backgrounds, with different entry points into work and marriage—either within the period of economic growth or post-bubble—allow for a comparative approach.

The article focuses on intragender relationships and the factors that bind genders rather than on gender roles and seeks to fill in the gap in the research that tends to conceptualize society as "woman versus man" and not as "woman and man." I propose the conceptual framework *gender contract* as an analytical tool to aid our understanding of how gender beliefs, gender ideology and stereotypes are formed, lived, experienced, and reproduced. By coining the normative gender contract that characterized the stable prosperous postwar period the *corporate gender contract*, I highlight the binding relationship between the Japanese family and the corporate sector, in strong alliance with the state (Kimoto, 2000). More generally, the "gender contract" framework underlines the significance of what has been described elsewhere as the "institutional triangle," connecting family, (labor) market and state (Morgan, 2002, p. 274), when considering the definition and reproduction of gender roles and perspectives. The second part of the article discusses and questions the supposed challenges to this ideologically hegemonic "contract" in light of post-bubble changes.

Theoretical Framework and Argument

The analytical framework "gender contract" is mostly used in terms of welfare regimes, social policies, and economic arrangements. The literature that relates to the gender contract as embedded in the idea of the welfare state usually refers to the intersection between the family, the labor market, and the state (Gottfried, 2000; Hirdman, 1991, 1996; Rantalaiho & Julkunen, 1994; Sa'ar, 2009). I propose here an analysis focusing on the *cultural* aspects of the term *gender contract*. In this meaning, the concept refers to a cultural schema that frames women's and men's beliefs and expectations at that significant intersection of family, the labor market, and the state (Sa'ar, 2009, 2016).

Carole Pateman (1988) underlines the preconditions of the sexual contract that produces male superiority. The gender contract, as an analytical tool as used in this article, focuses instead on abstracting and analyzing the *space between* men and women, and the ideas, norms, gender beliefs, and gender ideologies that this space produces. In other words, this concept underlines

the metaphorical nature of the contract, suggesting that it is not Woman that is negotiated about between men, as insinuated by Pateman (1988), but rather a description, a *norm*, about what Man and Woman should do in relation to each other (Hirdman, 1996). Moreover, the gender contract conceptual framework infers that both men *and* women participate in upholding the gender order, albeit without suggesting a concept that is blind to the aspects of power and hierarchy.

This perspective of "gender contract" is influenced by the gender construction model, which questions the naturalness and inevitability of sex categories and suggests that the categories themselves must be created and given meaning through a dynamic process of social construction (Potuchek, 1997, p. 13). There is no biological criterion that neatly divides human beings into the two exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories that we label "men" and "women" (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Gender is regarded as a system of categorization, achieved and constructed through social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The article focuses on the marital contract, looking at how gender is dynamically constructed by husbands and wives. In other words, the perspective of the negotiable contract allows one to see how men and women, husbands and wives, are not simply enacting gender scripts learned during childhood, but are actively constructing gender meaning. Within this dynamic process of negotiation, they must deal both with gender ideologies and with the institutionalization of gender in social structures. Potuchek (1997) has described how within marriage and family *breadwinning*, commonly attached to the idea of being a "man," is used as a "gender boundary" to distinguish men from women. As this article will show, male breadwinning is indeed a central "brick" in the construction of the marital gender contract in the Japanese case at hand. The concept of "gender boundaries" is useful for identifying aspects of power and hierarchy, such as in the distinction between employment and breadwinning. However, the multifaceted character of the concept of "contract" allows the analysis to include other "signatories" to this contract. It is useful for prompting searching questions, including "Who are the signatories?"; "What are their gender rights and obligations?"; "How much space is left for negotiation, confrontation, breaking of the contract?" (Hirdman, 1996).

The article suggests that the heteronormative marital contract, which served as the basis for the "the standard Japanese family" that emerged during the period of economic growth and stability has had three main metaphorical "signatories": the male breadwinner; the dependent wife, usually in the role of a full-time housewife; and the corporate sector, and thus dubbed here "*the corporate gender contract*." But another significant player, who in fact defines the extent of the *contract*'s framework, is the State. The "State"

is viewed as shorthand for several dominant agents and agencies (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012, p. xxii). In this context, it refers to government bureaucracy generally, and the range of agencies and officials engaged with policy affecting family practices specifically (Morgan, 2002, p. 274). These agencies will be discussed later in the article, with regard to government policies promoting the new role of the father in the family.

Being the family provider, namely, the "pillar of the household" (*daikokubasihra*) has become the central gendered expectation of the ideal Japanese male (Roberson & Suzuki, 2002, p. 8). This hardworking male breadwinner archetypically took the shape of the *salaryman* as the strongly ideologically ingrained "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), namely, the most socially and culturally desired form (Dasgupta, 2000, 2013; Hidaka, 2010; Roberson & Suzuki, 2002; Taga, 2005). In the same vein, the role of the housewife, as it evolved in postwar Japan, has been described as being so strongly normative that it practically became synonymous with womanhood (Ochiai, 1996). I argue that this strong "contractual" alliance between the salaryman and the *professional housewife* (*sengyō shufu*) (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012; S. H. Vogel, 1978), cannot be fully understood without pointing to the role of at least two of the metaphorical "signatories": The *Japanese company*, in strong ideological and practical alliance with the State. Adhering to the questions that the "gender contract" concept prompts, as mentioned above, allows us to consider whether and to what level this normative gender contract has been challenged by the rupture of the economic bubble and the changes that has followed thereof.

Background

During the era of rapid economic growth (from roughly the late 1950s until the 1990s), the Japanese state developed and promoted a clear gendered division of labor, assigning all caring labor to the domestic sphere. Family policy was characterized as reinforcing traditional gender roles, as views of women's caregiving roles dominated the political agenda (Lambert, 2007; Takeda, 2005). The economic arrangement between the family and the economy has also been acknowledged as sustaining a corporate–family welfare system and a "family wage" (Gottfried & O'Reilly, 2002; Kimoto, 1997, 2000); or as a strong "male breadwinner reproductive bargain" with the family (Gottfried, 2013; Schoppa, 2010).

The ideological or cultural impact of this economic arrangement was remarkable. Even though the notion that the postwar economic miracle actually created a "new middle-mass" has been justly criticized (Taira, 1993, p. 182), one must nevertheless acknowledge that at least until the beginning of

the 1990s, about 90% of Japan's population *identified themselves* as "middle-class" (Pempel, 1989, p. 23). Specifically relevant to our case is the extensive cultural and ideological force gained by the "folk model," through which the practices and culture of large firms became the focal point of Japanese culture, and the urban middle-class corporate employee—or salaryman—became the "typical" Japanese man (Miller, 1995). Indeed, the figure of the "corporate warrior" (Dasgupta, 2003), the heterosexual, suited urban middle-class white-collar worker, totally devoted to the company—who, in return, offers him a binding "total care" (Borovoy, 2005)—has been described as embodying "the archetypical citizen" (Mackie, 2002, p. 203). In other words, while the "new middle class" salaryman family pattern that emerged during the stable economic postwar era actually coexisted with older forms in social practice, it nonetheless "overwhelmed them in social discourse," Gordon (2000, p. 287).

However, since the burst of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, Japan has experienced a prolonged economic slowdown highlighted by several financial crises, and "shocks" (Kawai & Takagi, 2011) that have no doubt had a significant impact and formed the backdrop for a number of related social phenomena. With the weakening of the strong institutional bonds between schools and workplaces (Brinton, 2011), new forms of non-permanent employment for men have emerged (Genda, 2005); there have also been shifts—although certainly not the collapse—in the lifetime employment system (Matanle, 2006). Japan has also witnessed a worrisome decline in fertility rates (Coulmas, 2007), as well changes in marital patterns (Nemoto, 2008). Since the 1990s, there has been also a gradual decrease in the number of single-income households—defined in government statistics as households in which the man works outside and the woman is a full-time housewife (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2017); an increase in dual-income households has occurred concurrently (Miura & Higashi, 2017). There have also been some reported shifts toward a slightly more egalitarian attitude both among men and women in the response to the long-standing survey item "Men should work outside the home for wages and women should protect the household."[1]

These new trends have certainly prompted significant public, as well as governmental, interest and discourse. Especially from the 2000s onward, the reconfiguration of the relationship between family and work has been a hot topic in the media, government, and workplaces in Japan, mainly with regard to long working hours and to the (relatively late) entrance and progress of women into the workplace (Kawaguchi, 2013). One of the principal topics of this recent cultural as well as governmental discourse has been the participation of fathers in parenting and caring (Taga, 2016b).

More specifically, as has been recently suggested, Japan can be described as being at the "peak of men's childcare boom" (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013, p. 38). This "boom" has been depicted in popular buzzwords of recent provenance, such as *ikumen*—men actively involved in childrearing (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, & Schimkowsky, 2016)—and *ikuboss* (*sic*) (bosses who are considerate toward the work–life balance of their subordinates) (Mizushima, 2017).

This article will further explore the impact of these new ideas on the gender division of labor at home, mainly by conceptualizing the relationship of family and work. Involving men and women who grew up in different economic and employment circumstances, this qualitative study aims to discern—but not to measure—the potentiality of change and the points of persistence of what I have termed the *corporate gender contract*, which formed the basis for the postwar family arrangement, or the "corporate family."

Study and Method

The article is based on data gathered in an extended qualitative study (2003-2017) that included in-depth interviews with men ($N = 52$) and women ($N = 66$) and multisited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). The research participants were all college-educated and from urban or suburban middle-class backgrounds. The first period of the research (2003-2011) consisted mainly of interviews with women and an extended ethnography of their life in a typical middle-class neighborhood. To suitably address the theoretical framework of this study—underlining intragender relationships and the factors that bind genders rather than on gender roles—I interviewed more men in the second period of the research. Moreover, in an attempt to seriously tackle the question of the potential challenge to the "standard" or corporate family model, I deliberately focused on two different groups of men. The first group was composed mostly of corporate men, generally self-defined as "ordinary salarymen." The second group was purposely constituted by men who actively participated in child care; they generally had experience of child care leave and may have been involved in activities related to raising consciousness about the involvement of fathers in child care. This group was also largely drawn from a younger age cohort, with a varied composition in terms of profession.

A larger group ($N = 40$) of the women who participated in the first research period, in the main full-time housewives born between 1966 and 1970, represented the economic bubble-era generation. This cohort did not struggle to find work, and until their late twenties maintained a high level of labor participation. However, typical of middle-class women of their

generation, most had left their jobs—mainly office jobs—on marriage or childbirth. During the lengthy time span of my research, some "returned" to the work force, albeit to part-time and nonrewarding roles like receptionists or shop assistants. Only one woman returned to her old job, in the public sector, after a year's child leave. A smaller number of the women interviewed in the first phase of the research ($N = 8$) were from a younger cohort, born after 1970.

The second group of women, most of whom were interviewed between 2013 and 2017 ($N = 18$), were typically from a younger age cohort; the youngest was born in 1985, the oldest in 1973. Unlike the first group of women, this second group, who graduated after the rupture of the economic bubble, had experienced the difficulties of the "employment ice-age" (*shūshoku hyōgaki*), the challenge of finding attractive—or indeed, any—full-time postgraduate position (Brinton, 2011). Most of the women of this group were fully or partially employed at the time of the interview. Some of the women in this group were the spouses of activists in the so-called *ikumen* movement, which campaigned for fathers' active participation in child care.

Interviews with women took the form of open-ended conversations, lasting between 2 and 3 hours. The affinity between me as the researcher—a married woman with children, although not of Japanese nationality—and the women may have had an impact on the interviews, which often took form of a dialogue between women rather than a formalized interview. They talked about their life-course choices; the way they were raised as "women"; their experience of the labor market, even if brief or partial; their husbands; the division of labor at home; motherhood and the absence, or more rarely the involvement, of their husbands as fathers. Beyond the interviews, I also visited their homes, and participated with them in a variety of activities like social gatherings, PTA meetings, "Working Mothers Salon," school events and so on.

The first group of men ($N = 19$), interviewed largely between 2012 and 2016, was composed mainly of salarymen from similar middle-class backgrounds. Some of the men were the spouses of the female participants; others I recruited using a snowball sampling method. They were generally from the same age cohort as the first group of women, born between 1962 and 1970. All but one were university graduates; only one was single. Some of the wives of these salarymen were still full-time housewives, while others took part-time jobs after raising their children; very few wives were full-time workers.

In common with the interviews with the women, the men spoke about growing up as boys and men, and also expressed their views about roles

of men and women at home and in society. The interviews included questions about their involvement in child care, household chores, and workforce participation. The interviews also touched on their views about contemporaneous changes in Japanese society, including new forms of fatherhood and the greater involvement of women in the workforce.

The interviews with the second group of men (conducted mainly between 2013 and 2017, $N = 33$) were conducted as part of a larger qualitative study examining a recent phenomenon, the promotion of fathers' active involvement in child care and house chores. Most of the men were activists for the promotion of involved fatherhood. Many of them were members of *Fathering Japan*, a nonprofit association with about 500 members across Japan, which has secured a central position in the current discourse and the evolving practices connected to the phenomenon of involved fatherhood in Japan (see Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; Vassalo, 2018).

This group was more varied in terms of age: the oldest was born in 1962, the youngest in 1983. However, a majority of this group ($N = 26$) belonged to the younger age cohort, born between 1970 and 1983. All were university graduates; however, their occupations varied, the group included salarymen, three house husbands, a part-time worker, NPO (nonprofit organizations) representatives, freelance journalists, and small business owners. Unlike the first group of male interviewees, the wives of most of the men in the second group were full-time workers. One interviewee was a divorced single father. The interviews with this group were slightly more focused on the division of labor with their spouses, their general views about gender equality, and their views on the ongoing public discourse about modern fatherhood.

The men who made up this group mostly resided in dual-income households. My decision to focus on this particular group of men, who openly identified with active fatherhood, related directly to the recent spike in public and governmental interest in men's participation in child care, and the growing public and governmental interest in work–family balance. One of my aims was to examine the real practicalities involved in what was being described, rhetorically, as the "recent" search for a new balance between domestic chores and work obligations. As related to the high rigidity of the Japanese workplace culture, I wanted to discern whether, and to what level, men who sought to achieve such a balance were supported by their employers.

All the interviews were conducted in Japanese and were subsequently transcribed and translated into English. Some participants were interviewed more than once. I use pseudonyms to preserve research participant confidentiality.

Becoming "Men" and "Women": The Taken-for-Granted Life Plan

When narrating their experiences of growing up, the interviewees' accounts of moving through life stages seemed to deeply reflect a tendency to follow a carefully prepared script with fixed stages (see Brinton, 1992). More specifically, the sense of what it means to be a "man" or a "woman" in adult society seemed to be very clearly constructed throughout the process of becoming adults. Male and female interviewees, including the younger cohort (who tended to hold relatively more egalitarian views about gender), highlighted the entrenched involvement of social institutions or "stakeholders" (Brinton, 1992), including parents, teachers and especially employers, in educating them in the gendered meaning of becoming "full members of society." The orderly transition from school to "company" (*kaisha*) and then becoming the family provider, or the "pillar of the household" underpinned the accounts of all the men. This was not only the case for the men from the group of "ordinary salarymen" or those who grew up in the time of "security" but also for the younger men, who were or aspired to become involved fathers. As will be further explored, in their case, the constraints of the rigid corporate culture were even clearer and exhorted a twofold pressure on them, as they wished to share household chores and child care in addition to taking for granted their role as the main breadwinners for their families. In common with the case of younger men, most of the younger female interviewees grew up in "ordinary families" and were generally expected to follow the same life course as their former generation, although some of them experienced difficulties both in finding employment and in continuing to work if they so wished, as will be further explained.

Becoming a "Professional Housewife"

Chie (born in 1965) was the mother of two girls, aged 8 and 9 years, at the time of interview (2007). Chie talked about her lifelong yearning (*akogare*) to become a wife and subsequently a housewife:

> From a very young age, my dream was to become a cute wife. It wasn't as though my mother [clearly] told me so, but I was raised in such a family. . . . Since I was a child, I was always told "women should be women, men should be men," so I just thought this is how things should be.

It should be noted that not all the women who defined themselves as "professional housewives" expressed as strong a yearning to become a housewife

as Chie, who came from particularly well-to-do family. Nevertheless, when women, especially those from the older age cohort, narrated their lives and especially as they talked about moving through life stages, it was striking to observe the strength of the "natural order of things" (*atarimae*-ness) that governed these transitions. The way Haruko, a mother of two, described the "natural," or taken-for-granted, transition to a homemaker at marriage was both typical and telling:

> I have never asked myself whether it's okay to always be inside the house, as a housewife only. My mother was there to guard the house. I thought it was so natural to resign [from work] when you get married.

Rika (born in 1979), married to a member of the leading fathering association *Fathering Japan*, lived in a suburban neighborhood near Tokyo at the time of my interview in 2017. After 8 years as a full-time housewife, she recently began working in a part-time job, which she described as "very convenient since my schedule matches that of my kids." Having been raised in the countryside in a family of farmers, the idea of becoming a housewife on marriage felt tempting, as she explained,

> My mom, who used to work hard, always said that she would have wanted to become a professional housewife (*sengyō shufu*). This made me think that it wouldn't be a bad idea to try to become one myself. Farmers are so busy. No holidays. She had to take lunch to the field for [my] two grandmothers, even though she herself was working. So, she wanted to live more slowly, and wanted to become a housewife. . . . Besides, because someone was always at home to receive me when I returned [from school], I wanted to do the same for my kids, at least until they started elementary school.

Because she was not raised in an "ordinary family," and became an adult in the less affluent and secure conditions of the 2000s, Rika's case is particularly illuminating with regard to the overwhelming persistence of the cultural concept of the "professional housewife," as the most suitable and even tempting female identity.

All the women who worked during the Japanese economic bubble era, as well as the younger women, talked about "an atmosphere of quitting the job upon marriage" or explained that it "was natural to quit." The women's narrative highlighted the pressure from their employers to resign. Among the younger generation, even those who made an effort to remain in the workforce were usually a minority; they reported that the majority of their coworkers and friends quit after first child. As recently reported, over 60% of women still choose not to use parental leave system and exit the workforce on the

birth of their first child (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012).

Becoming the "Pillar of the Household"

With the men, the anticipated life trajectory that would earn them full status of an "adult member of society" (*shakaijin*) also seemed clear. For them, becoming a full member of society seemed to consist of becoming a full-time company employee. Just as the narratives of the women's lives underscored the "natural" course, strongly encouraged by parents, teachers, and employers, to become wives and mothers, so too were the life narratives of men shaped by the expectation that they would enter the right academic institution, preferably a well-respected university, which would prepare them to "enter a (good) company." Dasgupta (2013) describes these stages, often marked by ceremonies such as college graduation ceremonies or quasi-ceremonial inductions into the world of permanent work, as markers of *hegemonic masculinity*.

Men knew what "society" expected from them. Manabu (born in 1962), a successful salaryman, still recalled—with a mixture of respect and horror—how during a formal speech at his wedding reception, his company superior advised him that there was "nothing that men should do besides working like horses." Only later, he added, did he realize how arduous the destiny of a married man, as depicted by these words, actually was.

Daikokubashira, literally "the central supporting pillar of the house," is the term used for the breadwinner or the provider for the family, expressing the heavy burden carried by men, who bear the weight of expectation that they will support their families. As will be explained, this heavy duty, axiomatic to the salaryman discourse of postwar Japan—still firmly entrenched, even in the wake of the post-bubble economic slowdown and restructuring (Dasgupta, 2013)—seemed to place even more significant pressure on the younger generation.

Forming a Family: Signing the Corporate Marital Gender Contract

"I was raised in an 'ordinary family'"; "It was normal that fathers went out to work while mothers stayed at home." There was striking concurrence among the interviewees regarding what constituted an "ordinary Japanese family." Megumi (born in 1966), a 4-year university graduate who left her well-paid job when she gave birth to her only child said,

> As my father was a salaryman, I could never imagine myself getting married
> to an owner of a small company or a store, nor with a craftsman. I can
> hardly imagine how they live. It doesn't look like a very easy life to me.

The idea of what constitutes an "ordinary family" seemed very clear to the interviewees, across all age-groups. Akari (born in 1975) was raised in a "self-employed" household, her parents running their own small business. Speaking about her childhood, she recalled how "around us all families were such that the mother was a full-time housewife who would greet the children when they come back from school." For those whose natal families did not follow the normative model, it seemed evident that they were the ones who were "out of the ordinary" and sometimes even "pitiful."

The life narratives of both men and women, as told throughout the extended study, highlight the extent of the social "requirement" of experience as a member of a "company" contributing toward full membership of society, experience to be gained before forming a family. I suggest that we cannot understand the cultural and social basis of Japan's heteronormative marital gender contract without paying close attention to what I wish to describe as a *homology* between "company" and "society."

Securing a permanent position or lifetime employment was indubitably one of the most evocative expressions of the postwar social contract (Matanle, 2006). At the heart of the life narratives of men from all age cohorts, it was a taken-for-granted fact of life that entering a company at the right age before marriage is an indispensable step toward maturing into a full reliable adult member of society. Paradoxically, it is expressly in the stories of men who deviated from the socially anticipated life trajectory, and in the narratives of the younger age cohort who may have dared to have some thoughts of breaching the culturally expected route, that we can see the strength and the persistence of the axiom of homology between company and society. In 2015, I conducted a lengthy in-depth interview with 32-year-old Yasuyuki. Yasuyuki had recently left full-time employment for health reasons, and as a result of his relatively novel views regarding the gender division of labor, which will be further explored later in the article. He recalled, painfully,

> The truth is that whilst studying for my MA degree, I actually wanted to keep
> on studying. But, I felt it was not proper to be involved in academic research
> without actually knowing society. I needed to have the experience of a full-
> fledged member-of-society (*shakai-jin*) first.

Thus, although Yasuyuki studied education, in order to become a full member of society, he took up a role with one of the largest retail corporations in

Japan, working "every day from 8:00 am until the day turns to the next day [after midnight] without taking any break."

Hideo (born in 1970), who at the age of 42 years was still working for the fast-food franchise he had joined as a part-timer while in high school, seemed to have failed to acquire some of the markers of male social maturity, as he never experienced the "job hunting" *(shūshoku katsudō)* in a proper company. This activity, often translated as "seeking career-track employment" has become crucial in Japan, because it may happen only once, at the point of entering adult life (Mathews, 2004). During his interview, Hideo seemed aware of his deviation from the "flow of life," as he bitterly described it. He also admitted that one of the costs of this supposed deviation was that his wife had been obliged to return to work after their kids grew up, because the family could not "maintain itself" on his salary alone. Hideo explicitly compared his family situation with that of most other families in the typical middle-class neighborhood in which they resided. Most of the men, he explained, were full-time company employees, and thus could usually "earn enough to provide for their families and [thus] their wives don't have to work outside the house."

In Japan, marriage and childbearing are still considered the primary markers of social adulthood for women (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012, 2017). However, women of all ages clearly remembered how strongly they were encouraged to enter the corporate world on graduation, before "harmoniously" departing a few years later. Like most middle-class women of their generation, the women who graduated during the economic bubble period had been recruited directly from universities or 2-year colleges to become Office Ladies. The cordial encouragement of Office Ladies to leave work on marriage often included monetary incentives (Ogasawara, 1998). However, even the women who graduated during the less prosperous period of post-bubble Japan related to this same kind of "natural" course of life. Honami, whom I met in late 2017, who was born in 1973, used the term *employment ice-age* (*shūshoku hyōgaki*) to describe the period of her graduation in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, she also related how, "naturally," she joined others in "job hunting":

> At that time, we had no other choice than start working in a company (*kaisha*) when we graduated from the university. I didn't know any other option besides that one.

> Now, I may know that there are other ways of working, but at that time, job hunting (*shūshoku katsudō*) was the only way I knew to get a job. So, everyone was doing the same activity and everyone accepted the job offer in the first

company that accepted them. Around me, there was *no one* who selected a different way.

Practical considerations—earning money for later married life, for instance, or looking for an ideal husband—aside, the main function of entering a corporation appeared to be "social studies," studying society (*shakai benkyō*) where real social life took place: in a Japanese company, the bigger the better. The logic of the "dual labor market"—according to which it has become the "normative" aspiration (and in fact a symbol of middle-class) of men to be employed at the large firms (more than 1,000 employees) that used to offer "lifetime employment" (Brinton, 2011, pp. 68-69; Ono, 2010)—seemed to apply also to women.[2] The women's accounts of their work–life experiences indicated how, for middle-class (and aspiring middle-class) women, the ambition to join a large firm was regarded as homological to "being in (or entering into) society" (*shakai ni hairu*) or "seeing the bigger society."

The Constraints of Corporate Culture: A Case Study

Goro, born in 1969, was among the older men in the second group of interviewees purposely chosen to represent the *ikumen* movement. Goro joined the fathering association *Fathering Japan* a few years before we met, in 2015. In his recollection, after quitting regular full-time employment and looking for "what to do next," he attended some lectures; he then joined a fathers-and-kids camp, and consequently found new pleasure in being a father and a family man. Goro's account of his working life was the one of the most compelling depictions of the constraints imposed on Japanese men by the "Japanese company" I have heard,

> When I was interviewed for my job, it was like 15 years ago; I was asked if I could work 365 days [a year], 24 hours [a day]. I replied "understood!" (*hai*). It was a major company, a high-level company for me to enter. On my first business trip, I met my boss at the airport. It was around 7:00 a.m. He came back from Sapporo and on the same day, without going home he was going to Okayama with me. He explained that he took injections in order to work like that. He was like: "this is our style. You were hired because you said you could work for 365 days [a year], 24 hours [a day] so now you're gonna join this hard working life.

Goro learnt through the attritional experience of working for the corporation, that total devotion not only meant working every day until

around midnight (usually 6 days a week) but also the absence of options for showing any kind of weakness. Typical for a hard-working salaryman, he fell ill as a result of overwork and was hospitalized several times. For this he was firmly reprimanded by his superior, who told Goro that it was unthinkable that he should even dream of placing an extra burden on his coworkers through his absences. Following the advice and the example of his superiors, Goro took injections to put him back on his feet, again and again. But eventually, he was obliged to leave the corporation, acknowledging in our conversation that perhaps he was not "skillful to the level that they required."

Even though 3 years had passed since Goro Tagami had left the company, he still sounded hurt when he disclosed his insights as to why he could not leave the company, in spite of his suffering:

> I recognized that people there [in the company] were not engaging with me as "Tagami" the person, but rather as a worker whose name was Tagami. So being an employee came first. I realized that the worker Tagami got married and had kids. I was a company-employee, I was not "me." Only very recently, I realized that . . . I'm [now] quite convinced by that idea. That's why I couldn't quit because quitting the company meant quitting being a human being, and I was afraid.

At the time of the interview, Goro worked part-time in a job secured through an employment agency. Concerns about his deteriorating health, and his harsh experience as a "company man," prompted him to stop looking for a regular full-time job. His earnings, he admitted, were about "quarter of what I earned before." The modest salary his wife earned as a cashier only helped a little. "We are really poor," he continued, "our dinner is very modest." Goro acknowledged his family now had "financial problems"; but in the meantime, he was happy that he could witness the growth of his children and that communication with his wife had improved.

Is Goro's account—and similar cases that I heard during my research, of men who wanted to become involved fathers but ended up with family incomes sliced to a quarter after being obliged to quit their full-time jobs—a story of success? Can it be interpreted as the victory of a new balance between family life and work, over the constraining style of labor conditions in Japan? Or is it in fact merely another demonstration of the rigidity of the Japanese workplace? Part-time work—still regarded, in effect, as one of post-bubble Japan's "social problems" (Mathews & White, 2004)—can hardly be regarded as a substitute for full-time employment. This is not only due to the meager ability to provide for the family as a nonregular worker but also due to the cultural persistence of the ideological hegemonic hold of the idea of the

salaryman as the pillar of the household, even against the changing economic conditions (see Dasgupta, 2013; Hidaka, 2010; Taga, 2011).

Post-Bubble Challenges to the "Ordinary" Marital Gender Contract

The burst of the economic bubble in the early 1990s has certainly had a larger impact on the employment conditions especially for the younger generation. The Japanese family has been directly and indirectly affected by the subsequent "lost decade" and lingering economic stagnation. The remaining sections of the article will focus on the younger age cohort of participants in this research project. This group of interview partners, especially the men, was purposely sampled to represent the possible impact of the so-called *ikumen* movement on achieving a new and better balance between family life and work. Adhering to the idea that the "Japanese company" is a metaphorical signatory to the marital gender contract, I will attempt to discern whether, and if so to what extent, the Japanese workplace has responded in practical terms (and not merely rhetorically) to the growing governmental and public discourse encouraging men to become more involved in family life and (presumably) a better work–life balance.

The "New Father" as a Promise for Change

The neologism *Ikumen* was coined in 2006 by the advertising company Hakuhōdō. Fathers actively involved in child care (*ikuji*) were depicted as "cool" fathers, in relation to another popular term, *ikemen* (metrosexual). This new buzzword quickly became very popular, taking third place in Japan's Buzzwords-of-the-Year contest in 2010. The popularity of the term indicates the growing cultural and commercial interest in "new" fatherhood and the redefinition of the Japanese family. As further indication of this cultural shift, the industry of publications depicting the roles and responsibilities of fathers in parenting rapidly expanded, as can be seen in popular TV dramas and films and the growing *ikumen* industry (Schimkowsky & Kohlbacher, 2017). Related terms such as *kajimen* (men actively engaged in housework, such as cleaning and cooking), have joined this trend of what has been described as a protest against widespread hegemonic masculine ideals (Taga, 2016a). These new forms of masculinity offer a new place for the father in the family. The caring father and sharing husband stand in opposition to the high social acceptance of the "absence of father from home," that characterized the former economically stable postwar period (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013, pp. 24-35; Nakatani, 2006, p. 96).

Classified as a "lowest-low" fertility country, over the past two decades the Japanese government has developed policies to support women's increased participation in the labor force (Mun & Brinton, 2017). However, it has also, more recently, invested to an increasing degree in promoting the participation of fathers in child care. In 2010, the same year that *ikumen* gained its buzzword fame, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare initiated the *Ikumen* Project. More generally, since the 2003 "Act on Advancement of Measures that Support the Fostering of the Next Generation," the government has recurrently stated its aims to "encourage reaffirmation of the importance of the family" and "strengthening the father's role" in the household[3] and has increasingly incentivized employers to promote family-friendly working conditions (Atsumi, 2007; Mun & Brinton, 2017).

Fathering Japan was founded in 2006, with the principal aim of populating Japan with "smiling dads." The association positioned itself as a "social business company," striving to influence family, society, and the "corporate mind."[4] Throughout a very busy decade of varied activities, including the establishment of the first "fathering schools" in Japan, convening lectures, seminars and workshops, the creation of online and offline networks, and the publication of texts including three book-length textbooks (Fathering Japan, 2013, 2014, 2018)—Fathering Japan has established its public position as Japan's leading Fathers' and Fathering association, a role that includes close cooperation with the Japanese government in the *ikumen* project.

The ikumen *Movement: A Challenge to the Japanese Corporate Culture?*

In 2014, *Fathering Japan* publicly proposed a new catchword, *Ikuboss*. *Ikuboss* refers to bosses who encourage their employees to become *ikumen* or, more generally, are responsive toward the private and family life of their employees. In 2015, the Japanese government, working closely with *Fathering Japan*, launched the *Ikuboss* Award, to recognize corporate managers who facilitated supportive conditions for parenting and caring. This was followed by the growth of "*ikuboss* declarations," employers from the private and public sectors declaring their commitment to facilitating a healthy balance between the commitment to work and the joy of the family and the home.

Based on their interactions with the young men who participated in their activities, and on their own experiences of Japanese corporations, *Fathering Japan* reached the understanding that what was required for real change to take place was "to change the [Japanese] company, the management style or

the consciousness of managers." In an interview in 2016 with a female leading board member, she further explained this move, from "changing men" to "changing the company." *Fathering Japan*, she explained, had decided to extend beyond a "silent revolution by fathers taking childcare leave" and to focus on change within the Japanese workplace itself, in order to work more effectively toward their goal of "changing Japanese society."

"New Fathers" Facing the Corporate Culture

Yasuyuki was not alone among the younger group of male research participants, mostly members of fathering associations, who held gender-equal views. However, his early visions of family life stood out. Growing up in a family typically labeled "transfer tribe" (*tenkin-zoku*)—a family who moves every few years, following orders from the husband's employer—his vision for the family he would form was largely related to his position as a father:

> I had a vision of an ideal family when I would get married, including the image of the kind of father I wanted to become. In that vision, taking child care leave was included. So while job hunting, I compared companies looking for how many male employees had taken leave. I think there were not so many people who focused on that.

Since directly asking about such a matter in job interviews "was a taboo," Yasuyuki made his own inquiries, finally joining a large-size company with one precedent of having granted a paternal leave request, in the hope that he would become the second man to take child care leave. However, when the time actually came to ask for paternity leave, his boss's reaction was "terrible." Owing to his determination, Yasuyuki finally succeeded in being granted leave, although only after a long and complicated struggle.

However, eventually, Yasuyuki found himself unable to hold on to his full-time employment, due to physical and mental fatigue caused by over work. Despite their struggles, it was not uncommon for involved fathers, torn between their commitment to sharing child care and family chores and the pressure of work, to quit "regular" employment, which in practice did not offer any flexibility. In many cases, like in Yasuyuki's, this was not an easy choice, because it intensified the conflict between their new commitment and the pressure to be the "pillar of the household."

Japanese government has developed advanced policies and measures that allow men to take parental leave. However, recent surveys suggest that whereas there has been a rise of almost 2% between 2016 and 2017, the percentage of men still stands at about 5%, as compared with more

than 82% of women (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2018). Leave for men also tends to be much shorter, usually lasting only a few days. Research also shows that the main reasons for not taking child care leave among those who wished to were related to the pressure to fulfil workplace responsibilities (Benesse Institute for Child Sciences and Parenting, 2006).

Japanese managers still seem to consider a workplace culture of long working hours and the total devotion of the ideal worker as the rational, normative choice (Kuroda & Yamamoto, 2014); they prefer to see women continuing to bear primary responsibility for the family, while men work full-time (Brinton & Mun, 2016). A striking example of the level to which managers see the idea of fathers taking parental leave as highly nonnormative (Takahashi et al., 2014), came up in an interview with one of the men from the "ordinary salarymen" older age cohort, a manager in an elite company. When I asked him how would he respond to such a request from an employee, he talked about the "level of urgency and importance" when approving any leave request. He added that "we [the management] feel that asking for child care leave is more like asking to go traveling abroad for two months," and thus "highly unacceptable."

Discussion: *Ikumen* and Their Families as the Promise for a New Gender Contract?

The *ikumen* movement, as was found in this study, is ideologically and rhetorically highly committed to leading and supporting processes of change in Japanese family and society. "If fathers change, family will change, community will change, corporations will change and ultimately society will change," was the slogan of *Fathering Japan*'s "Fathering schools mission" (http://www.fathering.jp/school/mission.html). This quest for change is set against a changing economic and social post-bubble condition, as depicted above. A recent survey by the Bank of Japan reported a "remarkable increase" in dual-income households (Miura & Higashi, 2017). The younger cohorts of the research participants—related, mainly through the male participants, to the *ikumen* movement—indeed mostly resided in dual-income households. To what level, if at all, do these "new" Japanese dual-income families pose a real challenge to the firm postwar male breadwinner contract? This question is the focus of the following discussion.

Younger research participants described some new patterns of men's participation in family life, such as fathers taking their children to day care centers or taking time off work to attend scheduled infant health check appointments. It does seem, from this vantage point, that the "pioneering

efforts" of the *ikumen* is encouraging the spread of new family models, at home and in the community as well as in the workplace (North, 2012, p. 29). Undeniably, young men pushing baby strollers and carrying babies in fashionable slings have become a familiar sight, especially in the urban centers of Tokyo and other big cities, primarily at weekends.

However, interviews and informal conversations, mainly with younger women residing in dual-income households, and especially with the wives of activists with fathering associations, introduced a skeptical perspective to the alleged phenomenon of ongoing change. Forty-two-year-old Akari has been fully employed in a large company (about 3,000 employees) since graduating from junior college on the verge of the second millennium. We met in 2017, during her third child care leave from the same company. Akari was, in fact, the one who introduced *Fathering Japan* to her husband. As she explained, she wrote in the application letter: "Because [my] husband's father was the type of father who was always angry and brought home his work stress, I want to break this bad chain and want husband to become a smiling dad." Nevertheless, Akari, who sees herself as a "working mother," was in fact rather critical about the transformative effect of the so-called *ikumen* phenomenon:

> It is taken for granted that wives are responsible for household chores and child care. Husbands only help a little. Even if they say they are *ikumen*, changing the diaper once and they are called *ikumen*. I think that many working mothers feel dissatisfied . . .

Akari's critical tone of the so-called *ikumen* phenomenon was not at all rare among wives of the male members of fathering associations. In fact, their perspective revealed a problematic discrepancy between rhetoric and ideology on the one hand and practice on the other. While some of the wives tried to avoid being judgmental by saying that they were "not interested in such activities," others went as far as to describe their husbands' activism as "theoretical," "not translating into real change in their child care participation," "somewhat dubious," and "giving the impression of lip service."

Many of the other young mothers, especially those working full time, complained that while their husbands were praised, they received criticism. Thirty-two-year-old Emiko, whose husband was their toddler's principal caregiver, elucidated clearly what others had hinted at more subtly: "Now, the whole society is so nice to fathers doing child care, but very harsh to mothers who are not doing child care." Day care centers, where *ikumen* fathers are complimented for even the slightest involvement while working mothers face criticism, are not the only institutional locations for this discriminatory distinction between working mothers and working

fathers. Many mothers related to other kinds of institutional attitudes, such as the reaction of health practitioners when fathers accompany their kids to periodic checks-ups. Often, fathers are asked to notify "the mother" that she must turn up, to answer "some questions for mothers."

So, do these new so-called *ikumen* families challenge the postwar heteronormative gender contract? Recent research suggests that household labor by Japanese men has not been very responsive to the increasing labor force participation of their wives (Nagase & Brinton, 2017). It was also found that that the household division of labor, characterized by the very low participation of men, has barely changed (Benesse Institute for Child Sciences and Parenting, 2016; Taga, 2016b).

Describing American dual-earner marriages in the late 1990s, Potuchek (1997) concluded that one of the main reasons for the persistence of breadwinning as a gender boundary was its institutionalization in the structure of paid work. Gerson, who studied American families of the 2000s, observed a similar distinction between breadwinning and employment. She suggested that in order to maintain their own image as "good providers," men tend to place women's jobs in a different category to their own (Gerson, 2010, pp. 173-175). The institutionalization of male-breadwinning has been very obvious in the Japanese company, who tend to include a "family allowance" in their *male* employees' salaries. As with other measures and benefits, the economic slowdown has affected this allowance, which in any case differed between large and smaller firms (Taga, 2011, p. 45). Moreover, with the recent governmental push for modifying the masculine corporate culture, women, who earn more than their spouses are allowed to redefine their status, only for the sake of this economic benefit, and to be considered as *daikokubasira*, the main providers. However, it seems that like in many other cases, "formal rights" do not necessarily change practices (Hobson & Morgan, 2002, p. 4). As a rare, "brave" woman—who took up this opportunity because her company offered a much better allowance than her husband's—explained, most women in her position, including her superiors, stick to the notion that "only husbands can be family heads"; they choose to give up the benefit in order to "maintain [the right] appearances for appearances sake (*tatemae*)."

Conclusion

The framework of the gender contract was used in this article as a means to conceptualize the cultural construction of the idea of the heteronormative "ordinary" family, a concept that gained hegemonic supremacy over other constructs of the family in postwar Japanese society. Recent research about

Japan has tended to highlight the persistence of the "corporate-centered" male-breadwinner gender contract (Gottfried, 2000, 2013) and the entrenchment of the division of labor between men and women, even against the background of post-bubble changes. This lingering effect has been epitomized in the family wage, tax distinctiveness that continues to keep women from full participation in the workforce (Akabayashi, 2006), and other institutional arrangements and obstacles working against moving toward the equal participation of men and women in the labor force (Gottfried & O'Reilly, 2002; Kimoto, 2000; Taga, 2016b). A major aim of this article was to observe if and to what level have recent changes including a growing diversity of working styles, the increasing fuller participation of women in the working force, and most particularly the *ikumen* movement that calls for new ways for fathers' participation in family life, pose a challenge to what I termed the "corporate gender contract."

With an aim to tackle these challenging questions, the study not only sampled research participants—both men and women—from different age cohorts who have experienced different economic and employment circumstances but also purposely focused both on households with only a male breadwinner and dual-income families. Furthermore, the study purposely focused on younger men who were part of the growing movement of *ikumen*; concurrently, most younger women were full-time employees and not full-time housewives like most women of the older age cohort.

Posing a question about the plausibility and potential of change at the center of the *qualitative* inquiry on which this article is based, was not with the intention of *assessing* the level of such change. There are some "quantitative" indications that the economic and other shifts that occurred since the 1990s have had some impact on gender ideology, in the direction of increasingly egalitarian beliefs both among women and men—and in fact more among men, who may have been pushed by the poor economy to accept another earner in the household (Lee et al., 2010). The huge growth of literature on the topics of masculinity and fatherhood, depicted as a "boom" in men studies (Itō, 2005; Roberson & Suzuki, 2002; Taga, 2005), can also be regarded as "suggestive of a change," in common with similar trends in Western countries (Sullivan, 2006, p. 114). The article was not focused on the state level. However, as explained, the Japanese government, mainly against the background of a troubling decline in the nation's fertility rate, has become aware of the importance of pushing for change, and more particularly, a better balance between family life and work. The most recent of such related campaigns, for "work style reform"

(hatarakikata kaikaku), was introduced in August 2016 by Prime Minister Shinzō Abe.

Focusing on changes in gender practices among heterosexual couples within the domestic sphere, Sullivan (2004, 2006) has suggested a perspective of "slow change." According to Sullivan, changes in the domestic sphere tend to be slow and incremental, rather than revolutionary or disruptive, and thus are too easily overlooked in research. This perspective of slow change, as related also to the equally slow ongoing changes at the ideological and structural level of gender relations, allows us to identify the changes in gender relations, even if this is still at a preliminary stage (Deutsch, 2007).

However, moving away from this so-called optimistic perspective, it is not my intention to discard a critical perspective nor to ignore the persistence of gender inequality in Japan. The perseverance of the male-breadwinner ideology, together with the economic and social practices that it still underpins at home and in the workplace, poses major obstacles to change, as this article demonstrates. We also should not ignore the fact that the younger group of men, who were mostly connected in some form to the *ikumen* movement, were maybe rather exceptionally varied in their employment practices. Some of them were in nonstandard employment; others had left ordinary employment altogether, not necessarily through a change of ideology but rather due to work fatigue and poor health. This may be interpreted as a promising process of a growing diversity of organizational structure in Japan, that with time may lead to changes in the gendered organizational culture that was identified as one of the major obstacles for change. But on the other hand, it may be more pessimistically interpreted as indicating the tentative and modest scale of change.

Notes

1. Whereas in 1992, 65.7% of men agreed (and somewhat agreed), in 2016, only 44.7% agreed that men should work while women stay at home. Among women, the percentage fell to 37% in 2016 from 55.6% in 1992 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2017).
2. Japan's dual labor market structure is usually described as offering lifetime security to a minority of *men* working in large corporations, while discriminating against women, the less educated and the aged (Ono, 2010).
3. The 2003 "Act on Advancement of Measures that Support the Fostering of the Next Generation" http://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/kodomo/jisedai-suisinhou-gaiyou.html; "New Measures to Counter the Declining Birthrates" (2006) http://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/shoushika/family/summary/taisaku.html.
4. Cited from the association's English Page (no longer in use) http://www.fathering.jp/english/ and from an interview with the founder in November 2013.

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