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An intimate look at generational change

Lynne Nakano and Moeko Wagatsuma

Introduction

The rising age of marriage has inspired widespread public commentary about the generation of women in their twenties and thirties who are said to be free, selfish, and reluctant to marry. Media representations paint a generation gap between these women and their family-oriented, responsible mothers in their fifties and sixties. This view of generational difference is widespread, although surveys show that the shift to later marriages has been gradual – the average age of first marriage for women has risen from 24.7 in 1975 to 27.0 in 2000 (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2000) – and the overwhelming majority of women (89.1 percent according to a 1997 survey) want to marry (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 1999).

In this chapter, we consider generational change from the perspectives of unmarried women in their twenties and thirties and their mothers in their fifties and sixties. Drawing upon developments in feminist studies that have explored social life – particularly the reproduction of class inequalities – through the intimate relationships of family life (see Stacey 1990; Ortner 1998), we suggest that a close reading of family relationships reveals some of the ways in which people experience generational differences in Japan today. What generational conflicts separate mothers and daughters? What do mothers and daughters have in common? How do changing social contexts play out in the intimate spaces of mother-daughter relationships? We first examine how the media has discussed young, unmarried women and their transition to marriage. In Japan, as in other places, the media powerfully shape ideas and opinions. Generational differences experienced in everyday life cannot be understood apart from the ways in which such differences are articulated in public debates – although they also, of course, transcend such debates.
Public images: young women as free and selfish

Delayed marriage emerged as a social problem in the early 1990s when it became linked, in state-sponsored research, to the declining birth rate. The Economic Planning Agency chose low fertility (shōshika) as the theme of its 1992 White Paper on People's Lifestyles, and identified delayed marriage (bankonka) and non-marriage (hikonka) as the main causes of the trend. By the mid-1990s, social commentators warned that fewer children combined with the rapid aging of society could trigger a crisis in the social welfare system. State planners have thus viewed delayed marriage as a negative development that threatens the future of society.

Social anxiety about whether young, middle-class women will eventually submit to the nuclear family as wives and mothers is not new. In the 1980s, the media coined the term "dokushin kizoku," or the aristocracy of the unmarried, to describe urban, unmarried people who purchased luxury goods, traveled, and preferred to rent apartments rather than invest in condominiums. In the 1990s, media attention continues to focus on unmarried women's wealth, consumer power, and freedoms - to date and have sex, travel, live where they please, and choose not to marry.

The media and an expanding consumer sector have meanwhile celebrated women's lifestyle choices and self-oriented consumption. The women's magazine industry that has emerged since the 1970s urges young women to exercise fully their choices at work, in romantic relationships and in consumption. Magazines articulate the choices available and provide examples of women who have benefited from career and consumer opportunities in Japan and overseas. ALC, a company known for its language learning-related businesses, publishes Chance, a magazine that provides information for women interested in studying or working abroad. The magazine encourages women to pursue their dreams, as in the following captions showing attractive unmarried women in glamorous overseas locations such as Paris and Los Angeles:

"I have the courage to do what I want because I don't want to look upon myself with regret later on."

"To attain a more authentic self, I'll keep pursuing what I want."

(Chance 2001)

Women's magazines encourage women to "live for themselves" (jibun rashiku ikiru) rather than follow convention. State policies since the 1980s have also encouraged the trend toward self-realization (jiko jitsugen) and diverse lifestyles (rafu sotairu no toyōka). The White Paper on People's Lifestyles, known for articulating recent trends, urged in 1995 that society move toward "diverse lifestyles that allow us to live fully" (jutakasa o

jikkan dekinoyō na toyō na ikikata) (Economic Planning Agency 1995). The idea that one may marry at one's own pace or decide not to marry occurs within this larger context.

As marriage is expressed increasingly in public discussion as a woman's choice rather than a social obligation, conservative commentators have attached moral weight to the decision to marry, with marriage and reproduction being the "morally correct" option. Conservative commentators have used sociologist Yamada's popular book, Parasaito shinguru no jidai [The age of parasite singles] (1999), for example, to argue that unmarried people are endangering Japan's future by refusing to accept the adult responsibilities of marriage and family while engaging in a culture of dependence on their parents, conspicuous consumption, and selfish materialism. In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s when moral anxiety coalesced in women's sexual behavior (with conservative observers criticizing married women for having affairs and unmarried women for reportedly having sex freely, particularly with foreigners), since the mid-1990s morality has been tied to the decision to enter into the marital relationship itself.

Magazines have published stories suggesting that unmarried women's mothers also bear responsibility for the delayed marriage trend because they support their daughters' single lifestyle. Recent reports accuse mothers of wanting vicariously to enjoy their daughters' career successes and glamorous lives. An article in the national magazine Aera entitled "Haha wa gūtārū musume o suvere naru" (mothers can't let go of their lazy daughters) featured stories of mothers who pamper their unmarried daughters by cooking their meals, cleaning their rooms, and washing their clothes (Ono 1999).

The moral tone of recent debates has evoked moral counter-arguments. Unmarried women writers have deflected accusations of selfishness by arguing that they are working at their careers and caring for their parents. Sarada (1998) notes that unmarried daughters can become a source of security for their parents as they age. Haruka (2002) argues that unmarried women's lives are not necessarily full of enjoyment and freedom. She describes her experiences of caring for her ailing father while managing her career and trying unsuccessfully to maintain a romantic relationship. Some mainstream mass media have argued that women are living as best they can at their own pace. An Aera special issue entitled "Onna wa watashi de ikiru" (Women live for themselves) (Aera tokubetsu hensha for women 1999) introduces unmarried women's stories sympathetically, explaining that the women are trying to live meaningfully according to their own principles rather than merely "enjoying freedoms."

The themes outlined above, of a woman's right to personal choice combined with criticisms of selfishness, reappear in the mothers' and daughters' narratives we collected from our interviews. These themes
formed the discursive context in which mothers and daughters negotiated generational and personal differences. Central to these inter-generational negotiations is the institution of marriage.

**Changing meanings of marriage**

National surveys show that women want to marry but a growing majority do not believe that marriage is necessary. Tsuwa argues that the institution of marriage does not adequately meet women's needs, as it forces women to carry out domestic chores in addition to paid work. Marriage delay, she suggests, reflects young women's growing ability to control their own lives (2000: 319).

The decline of marriage as a central feature of women's life strategies is also a product of larger social and economic changes. From the 1950s through the mid-1970s, when the mothers in this study were starting families, women achieved middle-class status by making a "good marriage," understood to mean marrying a man with a stable income and salaried job. In the economic recession of the 1990s, however, corporations have been less able to support such families. Ochiai (1994) states that women who married between 1950 and the mid-1970s created the "postwar family system" (kazoku no senko taisei) consisting of families with full-time housewives and few children. She argues that this system is a product of peculiar demographic and economic conditions; namely a large population of young people and a rapidly growing economy. She suggests that in the period of low economic growth beginning in the mid-1970s, young people cannot hope to imitate the marital choices of their parents (1994: 86-7, 202-4). In explaining why young women are delaying marriage, Yamada (1996) argues that because of the difficulties of finding a man capable of providing a lifestyle equivalent to that enjoyed by their mothers due to Japan's economic straits, and with rising expectations of finding love and sexual attractiveness in partners due to the growth of a dating culture, many women are unable to find a man who meets their demands.

As women have gained greater occupational, educational, and marital choices, marriage is no longer the only route to middle-class status and some question whether "middle class" has any meaning for young people at all (see Sato 2000). Marriage has become less important for women's social mobility and economic viability but currently there is no consensus on what constitutes a good life for women. Consequently mothers and daughters were interested in talking about competing approaches to living well.

**Mothers and daughters**

We interviewed fifty-nine women between the ages of 20 and 65 in 2000 to 2002 and have selected three mother-daughter pairs to feature here. We do not claim that these women represent their generation; we believe that every person represents only herself. However, we have selected six women with diverse experiences and whose narratives nonetheless resonate with those of other women we met. All three pairs would be considered "middle class" by most people and all lived in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Selecting women from Tokyo is appropriate because the city is the center of a vibrant singles' popular culture. The daughters have a variety of educational qualifications: one is a high school graduate, one has a degree from a technical school, and one is a university graduate. Of the mothers, two have qualifications beyond high school and one has a university degree. One mother grew up in Tokyo and two moved to the city as adults. One mother considers herself a businesswoman while the other two see themselves as housewives even as all three have both work and domestic experience.

We introduce their stories in detail because we believe that analyses of lived experience serve as a corrective to studies that rely entirely on statistics and surveys. In-depth interviews that explore discursive interpretations of generational difference provide an alternative means of understanding how generations experience conflict and change.

**Aiko and Keiko**

* A pastor's wife: "I've never regretted this marriage."

* Daughter: "If my mom's okay with [her marriage], then I can't say anything, but I don't think it's fair."

Kodama Aiko (65), Kodama Keiko (28)

Aiko has been a professional housewife for forty years. As a young woman, she wanted to have a career but gave it up to marry a pastor. Keiko, her youngest daughter, became a social worker after graduating from university; she lives with her parents. Mother and daughter are on good terms, yet Keiko is anxious to become independent of her parents. She would like to marry but does not want a marriage like that of her parents.

Aiko obtained the qualification needed to teach kindergarten, but gave up her career to support her husband upon the request of her future father-in-law. Aiko explains, "Without thinking of economic stability, I married him without giving it serious thought." She has not regretted marrying, yet admits she has made sacrifices:

> "When I was young, women's happiness was in marriage, but today, I think only part of our happiness comes from marriage. In marriage, women have given up many things including their individual dreams."

Aiko has contradictory hopes for her daughter. She wants Keiko to be economically independent, yet not so self-reliant that she would lose interest...
in spending time with her mother. Aiko has encouraged Keiko to acquire some sort of professional qualification that would insure she could make ends meet, yet Aiko also enjoys seeing Keiko pursue her less practical interests. She financed Keiko's foray into art school, for example, in spite of her husband's opposition.

Keiko admires her parents' closeness but views their relationship critically. When Keiko's paternal grandmother fell ill, Keiko's father announced that as the eldest son, he would look after her. In practice, however, the caregiving duties fell entirely upon Aiko. Although seeing her mother care for her grandmother inspired Keiko to study social welfare, she felt that her mother unfairly ended up doing all the work. Keiko explains:

"My dad says, 'You should do things in your own way,' but my mom ends up doing the work. And when my dad says, 'No,' it's 'No,' and 'Yes,' it's 'Yes.' He makes the decisions and my mom has to follow.... This is what I don't like about my parents' generation - their gender relationship (danjokan). If my mom's okay with it, I can't say anything, but I don't think it's fair."

Just as Aiko gave up her career to marry, Keiko was convinced by her parents to give up her plans to study art. She described how her father persuaded her to study social welfare instead:

"My dad said, 'I don't know whether you're really serious about art, but it would be hard to make a living and you wouldn't be able to enjoy your life. If you want to draw as a hobby, that's fine, but it would be better to have some sort of [professional] qualification.' That persuaded me to change my plans."

After working at a social welfare center and living away from home for four years, Keiko decided to quit and enroll in a vocational school of illustration: "I told my parents, 'Before getting married, I'm going to do what I want.'" After studying at the school, however, Keiko realized that she was not suited to such work. She returned to social work after completing the art course. Now living with her parents again, she wants greater distance from them, explaining that she has become overly dependent upon them.

Keiko has decided to move out of her parents' home and rent an apartment. She has a new boyfriend whom she would like to marry although he earns less than she does. Keiko wants to marry to please her parents: "In getting married, I'll be taking my parents' feelings into consideration. Just living together as a couple would be fine, but I think that understanding my parents' feelings is also a part of happiness."

Analysis

Aiko's and Keiko's choices as young women were shaped by the social and economic contexts of their times. Keiko, for example, could delay making a commitment to marriage or to a specific career knowing that she could return to her parents' home if she ran low on funds. She was able to change careers with her mother's financial support. Such an option was not available to Aiko. In other words, a smaller family, wealthier parents, and greater educational and work opportunities for women gave Keiko more choices than her mother had had at the same age. Keiko seems to fit the profile of the "parasite single" described by Yamada (1999), yet living with her parents was not a lifestyle of pampering as his book suggests. Rather, it made Keiko aware of her differences with her parents and reaffirmed her determination to become independent of them.

Keiko's conflict with her parents was based on their different life course perspectives, with the older generation encouraging the younger to make prudent choices. Changing historical circumstances, however, created different kinds of choices for mother and daughter. Aiko chose between having a career and supporting her husband's career. Keiko chose between different kinds of careers measured according to conflicting standards of job security and personal interest. Keiko's main concerns involved work rather than marriage. This perspective is reflected in surveys indicating that the number of women who want to become full-time housewives has fallen to 20 percent, with the majority wanting to work regardless of whether they marry. This conflict also shows that Keiko is not the sole agent of social change. Her parents, even more than Keiko, want her to pursue a career.

Keiko expressed her desires through public discourses ("I'm going to do what I want") that were not available to her mother's generation. She had access to these forms of expression because she saw herself as part of a generation for whom choice and assertion of personal will are allowed and perhaps expected. Her mother may feel equally inclined to "do what she wants," but such talk is seen as inappropriate for women of her generation. We suspect that these discourses of individual choice will remain with women of Keiko's generation as they proceed through their life course.

Hiroko and Mio

A working mother: "I thought, 'That's the way things are.'"
Daughter: "I enjoy having time to myself."

Fukuda Hiroko (57), Fukuda Mio (23)

Hiroko works at a small printing company and looks after her mother at home. Her daughter, Mio, a high school graduate and the youngest of her
four children, works as a “contract staff” for a computer customer service firm. Mio says she feels little pressure from her parents. They approve of her relationship with her boyfriend whom she is thinking of marrying. Hiroko’s husband is uninterested in family matters, but Hiroko hopes that her daughter will marry a man who will participate in family life.

Hiroko met her husband while working as an “office lady.” At the time of her marriage, she said she had not fully considered a woman’s choices in life.

“When I was in my twenties . . . if you worked at one place for a few years, people asked, “When are you getting married?” or “Do you have a boyfriend?” I’m not sure whether by that time I’d already given up [other plans], but there was [an understanding] that that’s the way things were.”

Hiroko’s husband told her before they married that family is of “least importance” to him. Hiroko accepted this at the time, but in thirty years of marriage she has come to understand what he meant:

“We had four children but he wasn’t interested in family at all. He cared about his work, his male buddies and his brothers more than his own family. It was true even with money. He gave his brother money when we hardly had enough [for ourselves]. . . . In our family I realized that I’d become an intermediary between my husband and my children. [Finally, I] told them they’d better talk to one another directly.”

Hiroko now wonders whether she may be to blame for her husband’s emotional distance, because she had never demanded that he give more to his family. She says she would not recommend a person like her husband to her daughters: “A man who’s only interested in work is no longer desirable [as a marriage partner].” Mio is accepting of her father, explaining:

“My father likes to work. That’s what interests him and he feels happy when he gets results. . . . When I was little, I liked him a lot, but when I grew up, he still came home only once a month [due to his business trips]. . . . I’ve eaten with him only twice so far [with just two of us] in my life! I feel it’s too bad [sugoku zannen desu].”

Hiroko worries about Mio’s job security because Mio did not attend university. She suspects that Mio, aware that her parents were experiencing financial difficulties, decided to start working so her parents would not have to pay for her university education. Mio sees the matter differently, emphasizing her desire to work:

“I’d always dreamed of working at a bakery. At first I thought I’d work there for ten or twenty years but after I started, I felt that four years was enough. I wanted to do ceramic art or computers and I wanted time and money [for myself].”

She recently completed a computer course and has started working at a computer firm. Between jobs and wanting to get away after a breakup with a boyfriend, Mio went to England, her first trip overseas. In England, Mio met her current boyfriend, whom she would like to marry. Mio wants him to be a part of her family. She says:

“I don’t think women’s happiness is necessarily in marriage. I feel happy meeting people or having my own time. . . . [After getting married] I definitely want to continue having meals with my husband. If possible, I’d like to do things together on weekends, although we’d still have our own schedules.”

In Hiroko’s view, the idea of following one’s dream prevalent among young women is double-edged:

“I feel envious on the one hand and insecure for them on the other. Young women go after what they want. If they’re not satisfied with work, they’ll look for something else and I think that it’s basically a good attitude. But I worry because a woman should have children if she can, and as she gets older it becomes more difficult.”

Hiroko wants her daughters to take advantage of opportunities available to young women and has encouraged all her daughters to move out because she does not want them to share the burden of caring for her mother. She also worries that with too many choices, her daughters may miss the opportunity to marry and have children.

Analysis

Like many women of her generation, Hiroko married without considering other options. She was not bothered that her husband seemed intent on leaving domestic matters to her. Mio’s primary concern, however, is the willingness of her future husband to participate in family life. This generational difference is reflected in opinion polls showing that increasing numbers of women want a companion rather than a wage-earner for a husband. These different expectations at marriage, however, did not inspire conflict, as Mio and her mother now agree that a husband today should be a companion. Hiroko’s critical reflection upon her marriage is not unusual, as national surveys show that older women feel more dissatisfied with their
spouse than those who are younger. Mio's father's lack of interest in family created an inter-generational alliance between mother and daughter, and Hiroko has appropriated some of her daughter's ideals for herself.

Mio's disagreements with her mother emerged from their different positions in the life course. In urging Mio to receive an education, Hiroko took a long-term view of Mio's future based on her greater life experience. As a young person, Mio talked of pursuing her interests. Both women addressed Mio's choices based on their interpretations of young women today. Hiroko wanted Mio to take advantage of opportunities available to young women to receive an education and pursue a career. Mio resisted by explaining that she wanted to realize her dreams. Public discussions of Mio's generation provided the discursive framework that allowed mother and daughter to agree (in their assessment of spousal choices), and differ (in their opinions of how Mio should prepare for her future). These same narratives of generation allowed social change to occur. Based on her understanding of "young women today," for example, Hiroko urged choices in love, work, and education for her daughter that she had not chosen for herself. Public discussion of generation did not determine action for any individual, but made new forms of action thinkable, and therefore possible.

Satoko and Naoko

A career woman: "Being married means being more trustworthy."
Daughter: "I want to be independent from my parents."

Takagi Satoko (59), Takagi Naoko (31)

Satoko runs her family's pharmacy, passed down to her from her parents, and is married to a retired salaryman. She has made it clear that she wants her daughter to marry a financially stable man. Naoko, the eldest of three daughters, is a vocational school graduate and works as a dietitian at a hospital near her parents' house. After her parents' persistent objection to a former boyfriend whom she had been seeing for ten years, Naoko moved out of their house and says she is satisfied with living alone.

Satoko had been told as a child that she would take over the family business. She had not liked the idea but accepted her fate, and attended university to become a pharmacist. At age 27, through her mother's introduction, Satoko married a salaryman trained as a pharmacist who agreed to move into her family home so that Satoko could run the business. She explained that she married relatively late for the time and said she understood the current trend toward delayed marriage:

"In high school [I thought] that I'd marry at 24 but when I graduated from university I was 22. In the next two years I was busy with work and didn't have time to think about marriage. So I'd say that a university graduate wouldn't feel ready to settle down until at least 25. I thought 30 would be about right for me, but by then, most of my friends had married so I guess that's why I did too."

The family's business has declined over the years. The shop that supported two full-time pharmacists when Satoko was a child can no longer support the whole family. Still, Satoko feels satisfied with her life. She explains that although she did not marry for love, it turned out to be good match:

"Whenever he does something for me, I feel grateful. He's such a nice person. Maybe [I feel this way] because I haven't expected anything from him."

Satoko encouraged her daughters to obtain some sort of professional qualification beyond high school: "When we were young, few women attended university, so my husband didn't think our daughters' education was important. But I thought that from now on, this will be an asset [for women] and we argued about it." Satoko had her way, and all her daughters obtained degrees beyond high school.

Naoko has struggled with her mother's attempts to control her life. She describes her mother as "overprotective" (kahogo), recalling that when she was a student, her parents would not allow her to take a part-time job and disapproved of her friends. Naoko sees differences between her own marital ideals and those of her mother:

"I like a person who has his own views and who can reasonably make ends meet. But my mom likes a man who's ambitious in his work and, for example, wants to have his own shop."

This difference became apparent when Naoko introduced her former boyfriend to her parents:

"My parents thought he wasn't good enough in terms of his educational level and his work. Also, he didn't make a good first impression... They didn't like him and I felt that they would never let me marry him."

Naoko explained that despite their efforts, she and her boyfriend could not maintain the relationship and they broke up:

"My boyfriend's mother knew very well that my mom didn't like him... I thought it would be hard for us to get married. Also, our financial situations weren't stable and then we just couldn't make up our minds [about marriage]."
Perhaps in the belief that a pharmacist husband able to take over the family business would be an appropriate match for Naoko, Satoko suggested several arranged meetings (omiai), but Naoko refused. For the past year, Naoko has been living alone in a rented apartment. She is dating a new boyfriend and is relieved that her parents are not opposed to him.

Analysis

Naoko and Satoko both made life choices according to their parents' expectations. Satoko agreed to take over the family pharmacy and marry a man chosen by her parents, and Naoko became a dietitian and broke up with her boyfriend according to her parents' wishes. In retrospect, Satoko appreciates the guidance she received from her parents and similarly attempts to influence her daughter's life. Their conflict was based on their different positions in the life course, since both complained about parental interference as young women. Yet Naoko has had more room to maneuver than her mother had when she was young. Unlike her mother, Naoko refuses to meet men introduced by her parents and has insisted on choosing boyfriends for herself. In addition, Naoko was able to move out of her parents' home to escape their influence. Greater work opportunities and acceptance of diverse living situations for women have allowed Naoko a measure of freedom beyond that experienced by her mother.

Mother and daughter disagreed over the meaning of marriage. Satoko wanted her daughter to marry a man who could provide a financially secure life. Naoko, however, wants to marry a man whom she can respect as a person. Unlike current discourses that see young women as free from constraints, however, Naoko has compromised on her marital choices according to her parents' wishes. Naoko's marriage has been delayed, not because of her personal agenda, but due to parental pressure.

This conflict may be read in several ways. It is grounded in the family's particular socio-economic class standing. Naoko's wish to live as she chooses conflicts with her mother's upper-middle-class aspirations and hopes that one of her children will marry on the family business. Naoko's refusal to follow her parents' wishes may result in a class downgrading and the loss of the family business. Their views of class reproduction emerge from their positions in the life course. As young women, neither was interested in reproducing their family's class position. As a mature woman, however, Satoko has invested much of her life into maintaining the family business, and feels that she would be letting down her parents if the business ends with her generation.

The family's declining class status reflects historical changes such as the erosion of a class of small shopkeepers in the 1970s and 1980s and of salaryman positions in the 1990s. The conflict is also rooted in competing interpretations of what constitutes young womanhood. Satoko explains that marriage can be delayed to allow young women to establish a career and achieve financial stability. Naoko argues that ambition and security are no longer appropriate standards in choosing spouses. Even in their disagreement, both generations speak in a common public language about what it means to be a young woman today.

Discussion

This study of the discursive conflicts between mothers and daughters in the intimate arena of family life reveals that one generation did not impose its will so easily on another in the interest of either status or change. Rather, social changes occurred in complex ways through negotiations between generations. Mothers and daughters both had a stake in reproducing past values and in investing in strategies to face the future. These stories show that the young should not simply be cast as representatives of the future with their parents assigned the role of vestiges of the past. In negotiations between generations, young people made decisions that generated social changes even as they reproduced their parents' values. Their parents tried to impress their values upon their children, even as they too grappled with the historical changes that were shaping society in the present.

Our study shows that young women had many more choices than their mothers had had at the same age. Unlike their mothers, the daughters had had more than one serious boyfriend, and a variety of educational and career options; they could rely on their parents for financial assistance and a place to live. In this sense, young women are the beneficiaries of social and economic changes that have occurred in the thirty years since their mothers married. The increased wealth of society, as well as smaller households, allows families to provide economic and psychological protection for their daughters. The changing job market and rising educational standards have encouraged women's labor force participation and have increased women's power to decide for themselves where and how to live. The rise of a consumer sector targeting women encourages women to view these choices positively.

Young women also faced greater insecurities than did their mothers. Their mothers married with expectations that their lives would improve materially over time. Their daughters faced greater risks, as full-time positions for women are becoming scarce, and as marriage too is less able to guarantee an improved material life. Sato (2000) argues that until the mid-1980s, people believed that if they worked hard enough they could become "middle class," but says that young today people feel that there are no guarantees of success.

As both mothers and daughters believe that marriage is no longer the only means to achieve social status and security for women, generational conflict emerged over how daughters should secure their futures. Mothers
and daughters debated and disagreed over daughters' choices regarding education, jobs, potential marriage partners, and housing. Generational conflicts did not involve daughters wanting to devote themselves to leisure and career while mothers pushed them to marry. Rather, the conflicts involved, more abstractly, different interpretations of what was necessary for women to live well in a changing society.

This said, mothers and daughters often had different interpretations of how to live well. Regarding potential marriage partners, daughters said nearly unanimously that they wanted a man who would make a good companion while their mothers had mixed views. Some talked about emotional compatibility, but many whom we interviewed said that the ideal spouse should provide a financially secure life for their daughters. A similar conflict arose over educational and career choices. Daughters talked about “self-improvement” and “doing what I want,” while their mothers urged more economically and socially secure choices. Are these conflicts a result of life-course positions or historical changes in society? We suggest that it is both. Young women fighting with their parents over the lover of their choice is certainly nothing new. Yet generational conflict is also a site of social change in Japan because it occurs through current discourses urging women to marry for love, to take risks, to improve themselves, and to choose jobs that will allow them to develop their potential. It is only through these recent public discourses that the women's actions become intelligible to themselves and to those around them. These emergent narratives celebrating choice were not available to the mothers in their youth. We suspect that young women today will continue to expect to have choices as they proceed through the life course.

A close look at family relationships shows that social change occurs in unpredictable ways. Change does not arise only from young people making decisions different from those of their parents. Change may also occur because young people make the same decisions as did their parents, but in different historical circumstances. Mother and daughter, for example, Aiko and Keiko, both followed the advice of the older generation. Being an obedient young woman for Aiko meant that she became a full-time housewife. For Keiko, obeying her parents meant that she was an unmarried 28-year-old who lived with her parents and had a career. Change may occur even when the older generation acts to reproduce the past. Satoko, in an effort to reproduce her upper-middle-class position, encouraged her daughter to delay marriage until she found a man capable of providing her with this status. This move to preserve social status ironically contributes to the trends toward delayed marriage, fewer children, and greater career prospects for young women. Change may also arise because the older generation, rather than the young, embrace new values. Hiroko encouraged her daughter to attend university, pursue a career, and choose a man committed to family, choices she had not made for herself.

Having grown up in relative comfort, the daughters we interviewed were not worried about maintaining and improving their social status. Their mothers, on the other hand, were members of a generation that expected and experienced continued material improvement. Parents were willing to provide financial support to ensure that their daughters would enjoy a similar life (see Miyamoto et al. 1997; Tsuya 2000), a willingness to help which was grounded in their desire to secure their daughters’ futures in an insecure society. Ortner (1998) makes a similar argument in explaining why “Generation X” parents in the United States are willing to support their “slacker” children in an economy that no longer guarantees the class reproduction of all middle-class children.

Although changing class, economic, and demographic structures in Japan are important in understanding mothers’ perspectives, these structural factors do not explain young women’s hesitation to embrace the middle-class lifestyles of their parents. Here it is useful to consider the ways in which public media, in an active relationship with the women themselves, define young women as part of a generational cohort. As we have seen, public discussion constructs the generation of women in their twenties and thirties as free to explore a wealth of choices. Young women are urged in public discourse to choose a lover and a job that meets their expectations. The idea that young women should rightfully have choices profoundly influenced both mothers and daughters. In practice, young women may have more limited and modest choices than the media declared; yet mothers and daughters believed strongly that the younger generation is entitled to a range of choices. This belief made new choices imaginable, possible, and desirable.

Conflicts between mothers and daughters were shaped by personalities, changing socio-economic class status, experience, relationships within the family, and the ambitions and educational levels of family members. Nonetheless, mothers and daughters expressed conflict in terms of currently popular discussions of generational differences. Mothers expressed their concerns over young women’s selfishness, freedom, and casual view of marriage even as they wanted their daughters to have choices in work, leisure, and marriage. Daughters emphasized the importance of making independent choices even as they were concerned to respect their parents’ wishes. Mothers and daughters negotiated choices within a discursive framework that emphasized women’s freedom of choice and familial responsibility. In this sense, public discussion of the generation gap did appear in women’s lives. It provided the discursive material through which mothers and daughters made sense of their relationship and their place in the world.

Notes

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2 According to a 1998 survey, 65 percent of women chose “people need not marry” over “people should marry.” Over 80 percent of women and about 70 percent of men under age 40 believe that “people need not marry” (NKH hōō bunka kenkyūjo 2000: 32–3).

3 A 1997 survey of unmarried women found that 20.6 percent wish to become full-time housewives, 34.3 percent want to stop work temporarily and return later and, 27.2 percent wish to work throughout their married life (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 1999: 70).

4 We interviewed mothers and daughters separately to elicit their views of one another.

5 All names given are pseudonyms and some details of the informants’ biographies have been slightly altered to preserve their anonymity.

6 A 1997 National Institute of Population and Social Security Research found that over 60 percent of unmarried women intend to work after marriage (1999: 70).

7 “Contract staff” are generally not provided with substantial benefits.

8 In the past two decades, social reasons for marrying such as “to fulfill my parents’ expectations” and “to gain the respect of society” have fallen in surveys, while emotional reasons have risen. In a 1997 survey, the most common reason women gave for wanting to marry was “to have a place of spiritual comfort” (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 1999).

9 An Economic Planning Agency survey found that at age 40, 56 percent of women say their spouse is the person with whom they feel most comfortable and who understands them best. Only 35 percent of married 70-year-old women make this claim (Group Rim 1994: 203).

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