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Shotgun weddings (*dekichatta kekkon*) in contemporary Japan

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The accelerated greying of its population along with birth rates plummeting below replacement levels synergise into one of the most acute social issues in contemporary Japan. Although singleness, childlessness, delayed marriage and late-in-life-childbirth have become endemic, official records nevertheless reveal an increase in childbirth among women aged 15–19 in 2013. Furthermore, official statistics for 2010 show that 50% of Japanese women aged 25 or younger who married were expecting a baby. This paper focuses on 17 Japanese mothers who had a ‘shotgun wedding’ (*dekichatta kekkon*) – a ceremony organised due to an unplanned pregnancy. Aged between 29 and 35 years, the mothers came from Tokyo and Kanagawa and were interviewed for the purposes of exploring their experiences with and viewpoints on unplanned childbirth, contraception and marriage. Grounded in a symbolic interactionist perspective, the analysis of interviews suggested that shotgun weddings largely stem from contraception issues, the will to get pregnant in order to keep a partner and homosocial pressure to prevent the termination of the unexpected pregnancy.

Keywords: intimacy; marriage; pregnancy; shotgun weddings; *dekichatta kekkon*; Japan

Introduction

This paper analyses data from a larger research project on intimacy and reproduction in Japan, a country facing a ‘crisis of ultra-low fertility rates’ (Jones, Tay Straughan, and Chan 2009) and ageing populations. Life expectancy in Japan is the highest in the world, 79.59 and 86.44 years for men and women, respectively (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2011). But this salubrious attainment can at the same time bring about adverse social outcomes, if fertility rates do not increase concurrently. The birth rate has plummeted ‘below the population replacement level of 2.11 in 1974, after which the rate took a downturn and reached the lowest record of 1.26 in 2005’ (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2010, 1). In 2014, children under 15 comprised 12.8% of the total population, ‘the lowest ratio among 30 nations with populations of at least 40 million’ (Takahashi 2014). Demographers estimate that 1 in 2.5 Japanese will be older than 65 in 2060 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2012). Furthermore, the mean age of spouses at first marriage has risen since 1975, to 30.9 and 29.3 for men and women, respectively, in 2013. Likewise, childbirth has been postponed and the mean age of mothers for their first child was 30.4 in 2013 (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2014). Nevertheless, whilst the mean duration between first and second births has also increased, the interval separating the birth of a third child has remained almost unchanged for those families with that many children (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2010).

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The number of newborn babies decreased again in 2013, hitting a new low since the statistic was introduced in 1899 (*The Yomiuri Shimbun* 2014). However, fertility rates increased among women aged 15–19 and 35 years or over. In 2013, the number of child deliveries among women aged 15–19 and 20–24 stood at 12,912 and 91,247, respectively, representing about 10% of the national rate (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2014).

Demographers have identified a tendency to get pregnant before marriage (*konzen ninshin kekkon no dōkō*), which culminates in what is popularly known as ‘shotgun weddings’ (*dekichatta kekkon*).¹ Since a first childbirth is normally reported at least nine months after marrying, a shotgun wedding has been technically defined as a relationship in which the woman has the first delivery within seven months of marriage (Kamada 2012). In 1965, the number of shotgun weddings was about 4.4% of the national marriage rate. However, in 2005 and 2009, the rates stood at 21.8 and 18%, respectively. Currently, one out of five Japanese women in their 20s who marries is expecting a baby (Iwasawa 2013). Although the age of the bride is disclosed in the data, information concerning the age of bridegrooms is not reported. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare concludes that most of these children ultimately reside in a single-parent household, a consequence of an inverse relationship between the age of the spouses and divorce rates: relatively early marriages increases divorce risk (MHLW 2012).

For the last 10 years, media reports have highlighted the conundrum embedded in shotgun weddings. Reports suggest that in 2002, the number of weddings among teenage women and women in their 20s increased by 82 and 58%, respectively. Twenty years ago, the first childbirth in this cohort of women typically occurred within 10 months of marriage, a ‘honeymoon baby’ (*hanemūn babi*); in the 2000s, their first baby was born six months after the wedding (Asahi Shimbun Yūkan 2002). Although the problems of teenage couples hinge largely on their inability to support a new family (Asahi Shimbun Yūkan 2003), media reports also underscore their immaturity and a corresponding inadequacy with parenting responsibilities. The partners are unable to decide how to proceed, but typically allow the pregnancy to come to term because of the influence of family members and work colleagues. Following the birth, the couple usually depend on the assistance of siblings with child-raising duties. A strong opposition to any intention to terminate an unwanted pregnancy comes from young celebrities, television stars and models who themselves had shotgun weddings and champion the ‘delights’ of motherhood. They tend to present childrearing as an outstanding, if unplanned, experience, even if they have had to bring up the child alone (Asahi Shimbun Yūkan 2010). In this light, some young women find the term shotgun wedding (*dekichatta kekkon*) inappropriate and advocate the euphemism ‘happy wedding’ (*omedeta kon*) instead (Asahi Shimbun Yūkan 2006).

The influence of the wedding industry in the drive to legitimise unplanned pregnancies (Tokyo Shimbun Chōkan 2007) has been central. Shotgun weddings have truly become a new niche market, ‘normalising’ (Foucault 1990) premarital sex and unwanted pregnancies by making them appear an ordinary or ‘natural’ event in everyday life. In line with the findings of Ingraham (2008), the wedding industry has contributed to ‘romancing’ the pregnancy experience and/or the having of children before marriage. Wedding Park (2014), for instance, offers succinct guidance for organising a memorable ‘happy wedding’, including strategies for informing the parents about the ‘delicate’ matter of the unplanned pregnancy and orchestrating details of the ceremony and the honeymoon. Zekkushi (Recruit 2014) has developed a nationwide network of stores that provides support to pregnant women and unmarried mothers interested in organising a hassle-free wedding. By enlarging the symbolism attached to heterosexual marriage and

accommodating current consumer patterns and contemporary sexual behaviour, the wedding industry has moved to secure its consumer market (Ingraham 2008, 11).

The TV romantic comedy *Shotgun Wedding* (Fuji TV 2001) broadcast in 2001, nicely depicts the circumstances of a young Japanese couple grappling with an unwanted pregnancy before marriage. The leading character, in her 20s, becomes pregnant after a 'one-night stand' in the beach with a man in his 30s. After realising the 'joyfulness' of motherhood, she decides to continue with the pregnancy, despite being tempted to have an abortion and incurring her father's opposition. From being complete strangers whose initial sexual encounter was followed by an eight-month fitful relationship, the couple falls in 'love' with each other. The woman's mother intercedes and the offended father finally accepts and consents to their marriage. In the end, all issues are settled, promoting the moral that any attempt to stop an unwanted pregnancy is worthless because 'a newborn baby always brings something good' (*kodomo ga umareru toki ha kanarazu ii koto ga aru*), invoking the social and cultural scenario underpinning shotgun weddings and the significance of childbirth and heterosexual marriage in contemporary Japan.

Against this background, this paper analyses the outcomes of interview with a group of 17 mothers who married because they were pregnant. The aim was to explore the interpersonal and intrapsychic dimensions underpinning their pregnancies. This could offer a fresh insight into how gender, sexuality and health are entangled in unwanted pregnancies, which are largely the result of the desire to become a mother to keep a partner, contraception-related issues and peer pressure. Shotgun weddings are situated in the context of both Japanese and English-language scholarship by emphasising cultural understandings and representations of male/female role in sex, motherhood and homosociality. The paper includes a review of the social imagery attending the gendered and sexual selves of Japanese women, an exposition of the study's methodological stance and the discussion of the results based on three axes: contraception, coaxing and homosocial pressure.

Gendered and sexual selves of Japanese women

'Theories about the Japanese' (*nihonjin ron*) have been extensively used to explain the gendered and sexual selves of Japanese women. The iconic figure of 'the good wife and wise mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*) (Koyama 2012) represents the ideal of womanhood towards which all women should strive. Such an ideal largely implies that women encounter 'natural' restrictions to the labour market because they are expected to perform the superordinate reproductive role in the family and devote themselves to homemaking and childbearing.

Nonetheless, the subjectivity of younger women has been part of the '*gender panic* in twentieth-century Japan' (Kinsella 2012, 72, emphasis in original). Not only do young women delay marriage, have few children and/or remain single or childless, they also exhibit a greater tolerance towards divorce and premarital sex (Muta 2008). Social conservatives have identified them as 'unpatriotic and selfish' (Holloway 2010) because they are unlikely to dedicate themselves to homemaking and childrearing. They veer towards the image of the 'bad girls [who] create and consume the sexually explicit' (Miller and Bardsley 2005, 7), 'girls' (*gyaru*) who challenge 'notions of girlhood, sexuality and independence' (Kinsella 2012, 70).

Academics and journalists have striven to show that the traditional master narrative does not explain current gender relationships because 'interpretations of women's lives are as *diverse* as their lives themselves' (Okano 2009, 5, emphasis added). However, marriage

and childbirth have not lost their social significance, a pair of priorities partly, if iconoclastically, ratified by shotgun weddings. During the 1970s and 1980s, women resisted or refused marriage because they could not find a potential husband with the three-H's – high stature, high income and higher education (*kōgakureki, kōshyūnyū, kōshinchō*) (Nemoto 2008). Currently, women seem to work while waiting for the 'appropriate person' (Nakano 2011), which is a man with the three Cs – comfortable income, communicative skills and a willingness to cooperate the housework and childcare agendas (*kaiteki na, rikai shiaeru, kyōchōteki na*) (Ogura 2003).

Official rhetoric and political 'commitment' to gender equality as well as journalistic and academic reports 'inclined to celebrate diversity and fluidity' (Jackson and Scott 2010b, 72) have largely obscured the persistence of hierarchy in heterosexual relations and the tenacity of gender and sexual discrimination. However, cultural and social structures still underpin labour patterns that make women stop working because of the demands of maternity and childrearing. Unwed mothers and unmarried women grapple with a 'sexist' labour market (Sugihara 2011) and married women are mainly responsible for childrearing and housework (Tipton 2008). Furthermore, wives who work full-time spend '30 hours a week doing the housework, their husbands contribute an unprincely three hours of effort' (*The Economist* 2011). In their analysis of current 'marriage hunting' trends (*kon katsu*), Ozawa and Yamada (2010) contend that despite social change being conspicuous, expectations have barely changed: men are still supposed to become the breadwinner, with women bearing and caring for the children. Although the number of men supporting the idea of their partners working outside the home has increased, a large number of them still want women to quit their job after marriage (Ozawa and Yamada 2010).

Gender inequality and the deplorable conditions that limit the active participation of women in the labour market have been identified as two major exacerbations of the long-lasting recession in the Japanese economy. The Japanese female politician Seiko Noda has coined the terms 'mancession' (*danseifukyō*) and 'womenomics' (*ūmanomikusu*); the former term suggests that high rates of men's unemployment cause recession, the latter that raising employment rates among women should help increase gross domestic product (*The Asahi Shimbun* 2013). Should women manage to perform a productive role without forgetting their 'reproductive obligations', they could save the country's economy! (Oi 2012).

Methodology

This research is part of an effort to 'rehabilitate symbolic interactionism' (Jackson and Scott 2010) as a means for understanding reproduction and intimacy in Japan. The construct of 'script' is instrumental to investigating how marriage and pregnancy have become an integral element of the everyday interactions of Japanese women, because scripts 'are involved in the learning [of] the meaning of internal states, organising the sequence of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience' (Gagnon and Simon 2005, 13).

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological framework that helps approach shotgun weddings from their cultural and social scripts and the daily interactions of this group of mothers to explore how practice and subjectivity relate to wider social and cultural contexts. The constructs of self and subjectivity broadly refer to the personal sense of the individuality along with its inner thoughts and desires, which are likewise restricted or enabled by structures, cultural sources and daily interactions (Jackson and Scott 2010b).

Furthermore, stressing the actualities of everyday social life through sexual scripting helps locate agency in social context, in order to avoid reverting to a level of unexplained voluntarism (Jackson and Scott 2010, 821).

Contemporary gender relations are hierarchically constructed, reflecting the power relations that permeate the ways Japanese men and women interact to produce a regime of 'normality' that largely contributes to the reproduction of patriarchy. Liberation and oppression are, therefore, neither uniform nor contradictory processes, but their workings clearly impact on 'the actual contradictions of women's [and men's] lives' (Ramazanoglu 1989, 4).

Aged between 29 and 35, the participants in this study were 17 married Japanese mothers from Tokyo and Kanagawa, who were identified through snowball sampling. Two of the women held a university degree, ten had completed a two- or three-year junior college (*tanki daigaku*) and five were graduate or undergraduate students. Three were full-time employees and, although the rest said that they were full-time housewives, five of these did part-time jobs. Five of the respondents had quit their full-time positions after getting pregnant.

In line with the Ethics Approval granted by the Nanyang Technological University's Division of Sociology ethics committee, the recruitment method included a full explanation of research objectives and methods as well as the assurance that all information given would be treated confidentially and included only as data in published academic manuscripts. To protect their privacy, all participants are identified by pseudonyms in this article.

The mothers were told that information that could result in personal identification would be deleted or changed in any research report. Data were collected through individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews that lasted approximately 60 minutes. All participants were interviewed twice. Upon the agreement of the participants, interviews were conducted in Japanese, fully recorded and included questions about marriage, childbearing, gender, sexuality and contraception, which were not presented in a fixed order but, rather, introduced when appropriate in the course of conversation.

Interviews took place in quiet areas of coffee shops where mothers felt at ease and their privacy could be protected. One thousand Japanese yen was offered as remuneration, but payments did not compromise respondents' right to terminate participation at any stage or to skip any question that might create discomfort. In the event that the interviews became highly disquieting or emotionally charged, the respondent was allowed to define how far certain experiences should be talked about, and the interviewer suggested sources of information and support when they seemed appropriate.

Data were analysed by using systemic networks – a linguistic technique (Bliss, Monk, and Ogborn 1983) that generates categories through an interactive process of induction and deduction. Also, the interview transcripts were seen as 'reality narratives' or pieces of informants' life history (Plummer 1995). In the following interview excerpts, P = participant, I = interviewer.

Findings

Contraception

In 2010, a survey conducted by the Japan Family Planning Association (JFPA) (*Shadan hōjin nihon kazoku kyōkai*) showed that in a sample of 1301 (565 men, 736 women), 38.4 and 37.4% of men and women, respectively, always use contraceptives and 19.8 and 18.5% of men and women, respectively, sometimes use them. Among them, condoms

(85.5%), the withdrawal method (15.9%) and the pill (3.4%) were their three principal contraceptive methods (Shadanhōjin nihonkazoku keikaku kyōkai 2010). The 2012 version of the same survey, comprising 1081 respondents (506 men, 575 women), found a similar tendency: condoms and the withdrawal method remain the most commonly used contraceptive methods. However, the rhythm method and the pill became the third and fourth most used methods, respectively (Shadanhōjin nihonkazoku keikaku kyōkai 2012). The analysis of interviews indicated a similar pattern save for recourse to the pill, because none of the interviewees had used it. After withholding approval for about 30 years, the contraceptive pill was officially endorsed in 1999 (Norgren 2001), but its use is still restricted and it cannot be purchased without a medical prescription, turning condoms into a default contraceptive option for most Japanese couples and thus placing contraception largely in the hands of men, a difficult matter for women and the leading cause of unplanned pregnancies, as confirmed by most of the mothers interviewed:

P: Well ... as you could imagine my main problem was contraception.

I: What do you mean?

P: I got pregnant because we did not have condoms.

I: How come?

P: He did not bring condoms with him.

I: And you accepted that?

P: Well, it is not really that I accepted that ... it was a bit unexpected ... we were a bit drunk after a party ... we were not really prepared ...

I: How do you get prepared?

P: Well ... he has to buy condoms.

I: Are condoms the only option?

P: Hmm ... at that time I didn't know about anything else ... well, I think there is also the pill ... but I don't think you can get it easily ... I am not sure but I think you cannot buy them without a prescription ... I think a doctor has to prescribe it, maybe.

I: Does that mean that condoms are still the main contraceptive method?

P: I guess so ... and as you can imagine it is usually men who decide if they want to use them ...

I: Really?

P: Well, if he does not want to wear a condom, she can always say, no, but I don't know ... when you are having sex ... it is not easy to say, no ... maybe ...

I: Why did not you say, no?

P: Hmm ... I don't know ... I guess it was because we were drunk, maybe ... I think that many women in Japan get pregnant because of contraception ... maybe.. (Kumada-san, age 29, mother of a seven-year-old child)

Some of the mothers' reflections clearly illustrate the difference between intellectual empowerment or 'the expectations and intentions that women bring to an encounter, and experiential empowerment ... [or] their ability to manage their embodied sexual practice pleasurably and safely' (Holland et al. 1998, 131). In theory, a woman could reject unprotected sex but, in practice, her chances to prevent an unwanted pregnancy are limited by her circumstances and interpersonal relationships, which suggest her empowerment is

not merely a matter of ‘choice or individual agency’ (131). Some of the mothers thought that the withdrawal method could be a strategy for managing unprotected sex but it often failed as contraception depended on the partner’s capacity to control ejaculation, and consequently often resulted in an unwanted pregnancy:

P: This was not really a planned thing and though I was somehow concerned about getting pregnant ... we both were in the mood to have sex ... I asked him to wear a condom but he did not have any ... and suggested that we could use the withdrawal method.

I: Did you accept that?

P: I was a bit hesitant but agreed ... it somehow worked a couple of times, but then it failed and I got pregnant.

I: Why did you accept to have sex without condoms more than once?

P: Because I kind of enjoy it ... I liked sex ... also, it seemed to be fine ... I didn’t get pregnant ... and he somehow did not want to wear condoms.

I: Did you ask him?

P: No, not really, but he was somehow confident ... and I thought that he could withdraw before ejaculating ... but it was getting more and more difficult.

I: Why was that so?

P: Hmm ... I don’t know I guess that he was just enjoying ... of course it is not something ... I could control because I didn’t know when he was going to ejaculate ...

(Honda-san, age 30, mother of a nine-year-old child)

The 2012 survey of JFPA shows that in the sample of 1081 (506 men, 575 women), 35.8 and 21% of them sometimes and never talk about contraception with their partners, respectively (Shadanhōjin nihonkazoku keikaku kyōkai 2012). Two of the mothers in the group said that they could talk about contraception with their partners, but the rest of them found the prospect challenging. All of them, however, faced the same issue: unwanted pregnancies. The narratives indicated that deciding on contraception was an element of a ‘social encounter between potentially unequal partners’ (Holland et al. 1998, 31) and the inequality appeared gendered, freighted with the scripts attached to talking about contraception. An open request for safer sex was largely seen as unfeminine and hence damaging to the sexual reputation of the woman involved. A woman able to talk about contraception was most likely a ‘bad girl’ (Miller and Bardsley 2005, 7), that is, a sexually experienced woman. The narratives suggested that a naïve and inexperienced woman was more desirable and some of the mothers actually suggested that men were supposed to lead sexual intercourse and decide on the mode of contraception. Overall, the analysis of the interpersonal dimension underpinning the sexual encounters of these mothers implied an unequal relationship based on the opposition of the protector versus protected: a man is meant to protect a woman, and this protective aegis includes the use of contraception:

P: Now that I am talking to you I realised that I knew I might get pregnant but ... I didn’t know how to ask him to wear a condom ... hmm ... maybe I would not dare ...

I: Why not?

P: It was maybe embarrassment ... I somehow felt that he had to lead and decide on everything including the use of condoms ...

I: Why is that so?

P: Hmm ... I don't know it is maybe a kind of strange common sense but ... I felt that a woman might embarrass a man if she leads the act This might sound like a bit old way of thinking ... somehow asking for condom use is a very difficult thing for a woman ...

I: Why is that so?

P: I don't know ... well, I was only 20 years old ... but somehow I thought that if I asked for condoms and stuff ... he might think that it was because I was playing around ... I don't know ...

I: I see ... but that means that you could get pregnant?

P: Well, that was actually what happened ... I got pregnant ... also ... hmm ... I have this idea that if he loves me he will put on a condom to protect me against pregnancies, maybe Well, I was very young ... things might be different these days ...

I: What makes you think so?

P: I don't know, women are changing ... hmm, I really don't know ... for instance, the lyrics of love songs, TV dramas and even TV talk shows constantly repeat this idea that men should protect women ... and there is still a number of young women marrying or having an abortion because they did not ask for condoms, maybe. (Shingae-san, age 29, mother of an eight-year-old child)

For these mothers, using condoms was clearly not a matter of 'individuals making rational choices about personal safety' (Holland et al. 1998, 31). Negotiating contraception largely revolved around the social correlates of masculinity and femininity: a manly man leads the sexual act and decides on contraception, and a feminine woman allows him to decide. However, this simple binarism did not faithfully mirror the entire interpersonal dimension underpinning the sexual lives of these mothers. For some of them, pregnancy was a strategy to keep a partner.

Coaxing

Some of the conversations became highly emotional when mothers 'inadvertently' acknowledged that contraception unavailability and difficulties in negotiating condom use were only part of the reason why they faced unwanted pregnancies. Some of the mothers implied that the end of their relationship was imminent and that they had used pregnancy as a strategy to possibly help salvage the situation. They were not particularly keen on trying any means of contraception, which eventually resulted in 'unexpected' pregnancies. The situation could be nicely depicted by the popular saying 'children are a bond between their parents' (*ko ha kasugai*):

P: Hmm ... thinking about it carefully ... hmm ... this was maybe not an accident ...

I: What do you mean?

P: Hmm ... how can I put it? [the tone of her voice and gestures indicated that she was a bit uneasy] ... hmm ... do you know the saying *ko ha kasugai*?

I: No, I don't think so. What does that mean?

P: Hmm ... it is a Japanese proverb ... it means something like, for example, when a relationship is not working out, having a child might help the couple settle things down ... do you know what I mean?

I: Yes. Was that your case?

P: Hmm ... yeah ... maybe ... somehow we were having stupid arguments and stuff ... somehow we were about to break up ... I thought that having a baby could be good ...

I: Did he want to have a baby too?

P: Hmm ... well ... he was not really excited about it ... but he accepted somehow ...

I: Did your relationship get better?

P: Well, we got married and had a baby boy ... hmm ... yes, somehow the baby helped ... I think.

(Tanahashi-san, age 29, mother of a seven-year-old child)

Some of the mothers drew on a form of ‘biological essentialism’ (Ramazanoglu 1989) to imply that they became pregnant because the alarm of their biological clock was ringing. They invoked the idea of instincts (*honnō*) or irresistible desires to become a mother in order to describe the situation, and so the expression ‘unplanned’ pregnancy did not fully capture their reproductive context. They appeared willing to become pregnant, neglecting contraception because of their urge to become a mother. Such a putative biological predisposition was largely conveyed by the Japanese verb *sazukaru*, translated into English as to ‘be given’, ‘be rewarded’, or ‘be gifted’. Having a baby has been scripted as an act beyond rational thinking and the expression ‘a wedding because of being blessed or endowed with a child’ (*sazukatta kekkon*) was used to account for the situation. Some of the mothers interviewed actually persuaded their male partners to continue with the pregnancy and then get married because they were endowed with a child:

P: Hmm ... I don’t know how to explain this ... I think it was something inside me telling me that it was time to have a baby ... something that was beyond my control ... I think that it was like an instinct or something like that ... I think that that was the main reason why I got pregnant ... it was something like an instinct ... it was time for me to become a mother ...

I: And your partner felt the same way?

P: Hmm ... I think so ... maybe ... he was not that convinced at the very beginning but somehow he understood that the baby was given to us ... hmm ...

I: Were you using contraception?

P: Hmm ... yes, sometimes

I: What were you using?

P: Hmm ... we were using sometimes the withdrawal method ... maybe ... but actually ... I don’t think that my situation was that different from other women ...

I: What do you mean?

P: There is actually this expression in Japanese ... ‘a wedding because of being blessed with a child’ ... I think that that was my situation ... somehow we had to have a baby ...

I: If you wanted to have a baby, why did not you marry first?

P: Hmm ... I don’t know ... he was not sure ... he was not particularly interested in marriage ... maybe ... but the baby somehow helped him decide ... and we got married ... I think that women in general are more interested in marriage and having babies, anyway ...

I: Why is that so?

P: Hmm ... it is maybe an instinct or something like that, I guess.

I: Do men have that instinct too?

P: Some, maybe, but I think that it is more like a women thing, maybe.

(Yamanashi-san, age 34, mother of two children, 7 and 13 years old)

Some of the narratives tended also to situate men and women within the script: men look for sex, women want romantic love (McRobbie 1991) and, similar to the research findings of Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2007), the interpersonal relationships of these mothers were underpinned by ‘mutual testing and monitoring of each party’s assumptions about the other’ (105). Some of the mothers indicated that they were largely coerced into having unprotected sex as it has been scripted as a ‘token of love’, a form of duress that helped them attract and keep their men (Hollway 1984) even when it resulted at times in an unplanned pregnancy:

P: Things are not that simple, you know ...

I: Why not?

P: Hmm ... I don’t think I really wanted to get pregnant but I could not say no, when he wanted to have sex without condoms ...

I: Did he actually ask you?

P: Yes ... well, no ... we had had sex for a while with condoms ... but once he tried it without wearing anything and he asked me ... He said that he loved me very much ... if I loved him ... we could do it without condoms.

I: What did you say?

P: Well ... you know ... I was young and it was the first time a guy told me that he loved me ... I thought that guys were more into having fun ... women were more into doing it because of love ... I don’t know ... I somehow trusted him ... and, yes, sex is different without condoms ...

I: Is it?

P: Yes ... I don’t know how to say this ... but it is definitely different ... it was maybe because I was in love ... but unfortunately got pregnant.

I: Unfortunately?

P: Well, I don’t think it was the best time to have a baby ... I could not go to college ... I am trying to get a degree now, though. (Nishihara-san, age 29, mother of a 10-year-old child)

The interpersonal dimension underneath the unwanted pregnancies of these women became further complicated by the realisation that the decision to terminate or continue with the pregnancy was not confined to the couple involved. The narratives suggested the still-prevalent feminisation of most of the decision-making about childbirth, pregnancy, contraception and abortion: the viewpoints of peers and elder women were a strong influence on the mothers interviewed.

Homosocial pressure

Official statistics show that from 2008 to 2012, the largest number of induced abortions were experienced by women aged between 20 and 24 years (Kōseirōdōsho 2012). Furthermore, a 2012 survey by JFPA found that two out of three women aged 20–24 stated that induced abortions are acceptable under certain circumstances (Shadanhōjin nihonkazoku keikaku kyōkai 2012). Although the majority of the mothers interviewed were actually tempted to terminate their unplanned pregnancies at some point, they decided against the procedure because of the influence of their peers. The experiences of these mothers mirrored Gagnon and Simon’s (2005, 40) assertion that through homosocial daily interactions, girls learn that their value and ultimate status in life depends on their capacity to become a wife and mother. The mothers interviewed stated that the viewpoints

of their peers were absolutely relevant and largely linked the gendered-self of women to marriage and motherhood:

P: Hmm ... at first I didn't know what to do ... I was a bit desperate ... didn't feel like talking to my mother ... my boyfriend was a bit unconcerned ...

I: What did you do then?

P: I felt like having an abortion and started looking for clinics ... but after talking to my friends ... I decided that that was not a good idea ...

I: Why not?

P: I don't know ... they somehow made me understand that having a baby was one of the most important experiences in the life of a woman ... something that makes a woman feel like a complete human being (*ichinin mae*) ...

I: Is that true? I understand that many Japanese women are not having children nowadays.

P: Hmm ... yes, many women are not having children ... at first, I did not want to get pregnant either ... but only when I had my son in my arms ... I realised how extraordinary the experience is ... I somehow think that women do not want to have children because they do not fully understand what it means ...

I: Have you ever regretted?

P: Hmm ... yes, especially because my husband was not really supportive but my friends were always there to give me a hand. (Tsuda-san, age 30, mother of two children, 10 and 5 years old)

Hardacre (1997) has showcased the political economy and social relations underpinning Japanese religious rituals for aborted fetuses (*mizuko kuyō*). Abortion is legal in Japan if pregnancy is the consequence of rape, if it jeopardises the life or health of the mother, if there is a risk of foetus malformation and/or for economic reasons. The interview transcripts suggested, however, that although abortion is culturally and legally permitted, daily life interactions make the practice problematic. Some of the mothers' intentions to stop their unplanned pregnancies were thwarted by the script on behalf of 'humanised embryos' that older women in particular deployed. Despite being willing to end their pregnancy in its earliest stages, these women were advised to act with prudence because abortion means killing an innocent 'human being':

P: Luckily, I realised that I was pregnant very early.

I: Luckily?

P: Yes, because I wanted to have an abortion.

I: Why didn't you go ahead?

P: Hmm ... it was a difficult situation ... I did not know what to do ... for some reason, I ended up talking to my mother and an aunt ... it was not a good idea ...

I: Why not?

P: They told me that I should have thought of the consequences before having sex ... I felt as if they were scolding me ... [they] insisted that abortion was killing an innocent human being ... even if it was only a small cell in my womb ...

I: What did you do then?

P: Hmm ... I was trying to find support from my friends and boyfriend ... when I finally got the courage and money to pay for the abortion it was a bit too late ...

I: Do you regret?

P: Hmm ... at that time I did ... Now, I don't ... having a child is a blessing (Kamada-san, age 32, mother of two children, 12 and 10 years old)

Some of the mothers experienced less dramatic episodes after receiving advice from older women. Nonetheless, they were equally persuaded and continued with the pregnancy because the older women always appealed to the script that depicts a newborn baby as a 'blessing' and/or 'gift'. The decision to become a mother, then, could not be understood apart from the social, economic and psychological support afforded by elder women. In particular, the mothers of the study participants always favoured childbearing, even if conception was unplanned. They were certainly advised to marry prior to having the baby and 'we can work it out' (*nantoka naru*) was a recurrent expression of encouragement conveyed to mothers considering a termination of their pregnancy; advice for mothers sceptical about continuing with an unwanted pregnancy; they and their partners were young and without sufficient income to afford a wedding and start an independent life in a new home:

P: Hmm ... that was really a difficult decision ... at first, I didn't know what to do ... my boyfriend did not want to have the baby ...

I: What did you do then?

P: I was a bit scared but talked to my mother ... contrary to my expectations she reacted in a very positive way ... but she did not want me to have an abortion.

I: Did you want to abort the baby?

P: Well, it was not an easy decision ... I was a bit too young ... hadn't finished school ... even if I wanted to look for a job sooner or later I had to stop to have the baby ... I really thought that abortion was the best option.

I: Why didn't you have an abortion then?

P: My mother somehow managed to convince me ... she was always very supportive and optimistic ... she always said to me don't worry 'we can work it out', because a newborn baby is always a blessing ... and she managed to convince my father too ... we had a wedding and she even helped me to raise my child for while as I wanted to go back to school ...

I: What about your partner?

P: When he saw that my mother was supportive his attitude changed ... he looked for a job and we went to live with my parents for a while after the wedding ... I can tell you ... the support of my mother was invaluable (Ueno-san, age 30, mother of an eight-year-old child)

The narratives thus highlighted both the interpersonal dimension and homosocial interactions behind the childbearing and childrearing decisions of the mothers.

Conclusion

The shift to a low-birthrate/fast-ageing society (*shōshikōreika shakai*) has exacerbated fears of Japan's social, political and economic collapse, due to the effects of the inverse relationship between 'productive output (a shrinking workforce and decrease in those contributing taxes) and social productivity (a rise in those needing care in comparison to those who can, or are willing, to give it)' (Allison 2013, 35). This demographic shift, however, becomes harder to understand in view of still-prevalent tendencies towards unwanted pregnancies and shotgun weddings among young women. Furthermore, such

tendencies seem to indicate that the scripts attached to marriage and the social significance of childbearing may remain unchanged.

There is no intention to generalise the findings of this study beyond the subjectivities of the mothers interviewed. However, the narratives reveal the salience of daily interactions as well as the scripts attached to contraception, childbirth and abortion in shedding a critical light on the circumstances of this cohort of Japanese women grappling with unwanted pregnancy. Contraceptive availability was undoubtedly a major structural factor that prevented women from controlling reproduction and a leading reason for unwanted pregnancies, with condoms and the withdrawal method thus serving as the most common means of birth control.

Although women's vulnerability and inequality appears deeply ingrained in contraceptive decision-making, a simple gender binarism domination and submission (Castro-Vázquez 2007) does not suffice to explain the interpersonal dimensions underpinning the experiences of some of the mothers interviewed, who purposely neglected contraception in order to become pregnant as a means for keeping a partner or becoming a 'complete woman'. The construct of unplanned pregnancy did not accurately describe their circumstances because the mothers and their male partners colluded in order to reproduce gender inequality (Holland et al. 1998). The mothers who accepted unprotected sex and/or tricked their partners into getting them pregnant as a 'strategy' to sustain their relationships, or who linked the gendered-self of women to motherhood, largely collaborated to buttress male dominance and female subordination; thus, Japanese men and women may contribute to the reproduction of patriarchy.

The unwanted pregnancies likewise cannot be understood independently of the strong influence of daily interactions. Notwithstanding the legal and cultural imprimaturs of abortion, cultural demurrals that intertwine with the sexual and gendered selves of women with reproduction, supported by peer groups, congeal into 'valid' reasons preventing some of the mothers interviewed from terminating their pregnancies. Moreover, the arguments of older women and mothers humanising the embryos exerted another set of pressures militating against the intention to have an abortion.

Finally, the assumption that a newborn baby is always a 'blessing' turns into a form of encouragement for some of the mothers interviewed to continue their unplanned pregnancy. Homosexuality too was a critical element underpinning the pregnancy and childrearing decisions of the participants in this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. A shotgun wedding refers to a father forcing the man who got his daughter pregnant to marry. Nonetheless, the term *dekichatta kekkon* largely expresses the surprise of being pregnant using casual 'feminine' Japanese language.

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Résumé

Le vieillissement de la population et les taux de natalité qui se retrouvent en-dessous des niveaux de remplacement nécessaires entrent en synergie dans l'un des problèmes de société les plus graves du Japon contemporain. Bien que le célibat, le fait de ne pas avoir d'enfant, le mariage retardé et les accouchements tardifs soient devenus endémiques, les chiffres officiels révèlent tout de même une augmentation des accouchements parmi les femmes âgées de 15 à 19 ans en 2013. En outre, les statistiques officielles pour 2010 montrent que 50% des femmes japonaises, âgées de 25 ans et moins, et qui s'étaient mariées dans l'année attendaient un enfant. Cet article rend compte d'entretiens conduits avec 17 femmes japonaises ayant enfanté et ayant eu un mariage précipité – (*dekichatta kekkon* – une cérémonie organisée à cause d'une grossesse non planifiée). Âgées de 29 à 35 ans, ces femmes étaient de Tokyo et de Nagakawa, et elles ont été interrogées pour permettre l'examen de leurs expériences et de leurs points de vue en matière de grossesses non planifiées, de contraception et de mariage. Ancrée dans une perspective interactionniste symbolique, l'analyse des entretiens suggère que les mariages précipités sont la conséquence de problèmes en rapport avec la contraception, la

volonté de certaines femmes de devenir enceinte pour garder un partenaire et la pression homosociale exercée pour empêcher l'interruption des grossesses non désirées.

Resumen

Actualmente la combinación del acelerado envejecimiento de la población y el desplome de las tasas de natalidad por debajo del nivel de reemplazo constituyen uno de los problemas sociales más preocupantes del Japón. Aunque estar soltero, no tener hijos, retrasar el matrimonio y tener hijos tarde se han convertido en conductas endémicas, los registros oficiales de 2013 indican un aumento de partos entre mujeres de 15 a 19 años de edad. Asimismo las estadísticas oficiales para 2010 muestran que el 50 por ciento de las mujeres japonesas de 25 años o menores que contrajeron matrimonio estaban embarazadas. En este artículo analizamos el caso de 17 madres japonesas que se “casaron de penalti” (dekichatta kekkon), en una boda organizada debido a un embarazo no deseado. Las madres entre 29 y 35 años, que venían de Tokio y Kanagawa, fueron entrevistadas con la finalidad de analizar sus experiencias y opiniones sobre el embarazo no deseado, la contracepción y el matrimonio. En base a una perspectiva interaccionista simbólica, al analizar las entrevistas observamos que las bodas de penalti se deben en gran parte a problemas de contracepción, la voluntad de quedarse embarazadas para conservar a la pareja y la presión homosocial por evitar el aborto de un embarazo no deseado.