PART I

1

"Good Wives, Wise Mothers": Parenting and Family Life in Cultural Context

During the last half of the twentieth century, Western scholars and media experts often singled out Japanese women for their strong commitment to the roles of housewife and mother. Seemingly untouched by the gender revolution occurring around the globe, Japanese women tended to marry young, then drop out of the labor market and devote themselves to raising children and caring for their hardworking husbands. But events in contemporary Japan suggest that this exceptional pattern no longer holds true. Many Japanese women are postponing marriage and bearing fewer children – or avoiding these activities altogether.

In 1947, the average Japanese woman could be counted on to have 4.5 children in her lifetime. Just over 60 years later, the number has dropped to 1.3 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2003). In a few short decades, Japan has become one of the least fertile and fastest aging countries in the world. The country's population, now 127 million people, is projected to drop to 90 million by 2055. By that time, one in four Japanese citizens will be 75 years or older, according to projections by the Japan Center for Economic Research (JCER) (2007; see also Kaneko et al., 2008a).

This drop will undoubtedly have far-reaching effects on the economy of Japan, currently the second largest in the world. The shrinking workforce is one of the government's biggest concerns in light of estimates that the working-age population will drop to 44.5 million people by 2050, less than 70 percent of the 2005 level (Japan Center for Economic Research, 2007). While forecasts by the JCER suggest that initial declines in the labor force will be offset in the next decade by rising participation of women in the labor force, the longer-term picture is not encouraging. Indeed, the JCER predicts that the growth rate of Japan's economy will fall to zero in the 2040s.

Why are so many Japanese women opting out of the business of being "good wives and wise mothers," the role they have been encouraged to take ever since the birth of the modern Japanese state? Analysts from a variety of disciplines have weighed in with possible answers to this question. From demographers we learn that Japanese women are waiting longer to get married, thereby shortening the number of years they are fertile and married, two preconditions to bearing children in a country where only 2 percent of children are born out of wedlock (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2003). From economists, we learn that Japanese worry about the cost of having children (Kaneko et al., 2008b; Ogawa, Retherford, & Matsukura, 2009).[1] And from public policy experts, we learn that Japan ranks 22nd out of 29 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in its ratio of total social expenditures to GDP (OECD, 2003). One result of this fiscal stringency is that child care is in short supply and of uneven quality (Holloway, 2000).

Japanese politicians have pronounced on the birth rate issue as well. Conservatives have criticized women who opt for a career instead of home-making, calling them selfish and unpatriotic. For example, in 2003, former prime minister Yoshiro Mori, a member of a government commission charged with finding solutions to the population crisis, publicly attributed Japan's falling birth rate to the fact that Japanese women were too highly educated (French, 2003). He also expressed his opinion that the government should not provide a retirement pension to women who had dodged their civic duty to have children (Frederick, 2003). Perceiving Western influences as a root cause of Japanese women's "abandonment" of family life, conservative politicians have even pushed to revoke Article 24 of the Japanese constitution, which gives women such things as the right to own property and obtain a divorce. Indeed, a recent government report asserted that the equal rights clause has promoted "egoism in postwar Japan, leading to the collapse of family and community" (Beech, 2005).

For their part, moderates have tried to steer the debate in a different direction. Most official government rhetoric has acknowledged fertility decisions

[1] In fact, at slightly over 13 million yen (roughly $113,000 at the 2005 exchange rate), this cost is not particularly high relative to many Western countries. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2005) estimated the cost for a middle-income family at $250,000 in the United States, and a comparable estimate of raising a child in Melbourne, Australia, is just over $211,000 (U.S. dollars) (Henman, 2006). Although the higher cost of rearing a child is somewhat offset by the relatively higher personal income in the United States (where the personal average disposable income in 2007 was 19,776 international dollars compared to 12,076 in Japan) there is relatively little difference between the personal average in Japan and that of Australia (13,296 international dollars) (World Salaries Group, 2007).

to be a matter of individual choice, and politicians have passed measures providing parents with funds to offset the costs of child rearing. For instance, a law effective in 2005 provided qualified parents of children younger than age 7 with an allowance of approximately $50 a month for the first and second children and $100 a month for every child thereafter. This allowance was doubled for the first and second children in 2007 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare Website, 2008). The government has had less success, however, in compelling employers to eliminate sexist employment practices that prevent women from staying in the labor force after having a child; nor has there been much progress in creating a culture of work that doesn't preclude the worker's active participation in family life (Miller, 2003; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2003; Schoppa, 2006). So far, neither the harsh rhetoric of the conservatives nor the enticements offered by the moderates has succeeded in reversing the birth rate's downward trend.

What Is the Subjective Experience of Japanese Mothers?

In spite of Japanese officials' deep concern about the declining birth rate, they have paid surprisingly little attention to the viewpoint of the women who are to make these important decisions. Nor, until relatively recently, have many scholars attempted to understand women's perspectives either. Over the last several decades, psychologists in Japan and Western countries have focused on mothers' role in supporting children's development more than on understanding mothers' own experiences. As Keiko Kashiwagi (1998) notes, most academics have viewed Japanese women as an "environment" for producing children rather than as individuals whose own beliefs and feelings should be considered apart from their skill in producing high-achieving children. It would be ironic indeed if scholarly attention were again turned to Japanese women only because they are – literally – the "environment" for producing children in a country concerned about the declining birth rate.

In fact, my interest lies less in the declining birth rate per se than in what it reveals about the condition of women in Japan. I suspect that most women in Japan as elsewhere would like to become mothers if societal conditions permitted them to have children and to live a full, satisfying life. The declining birth rate is thus an indicator that women's status is problematic (see also Rosenbluth, 2007). What is going on in Japan that makes many women feel uncertain about becoming wives and mothers? What *is* it like to be a mother in contemporary Japan?

Data from opinion polls and surveys suggest that Japanese women's perceptions of the role of wife are ambivalent at best (Ohinata, 2001). Schoppa (2006, pp. 75–76) cites a comparative survey conducted in the late 1990s by the Ministry of Education finding that only 46 percent of Japanese women were satisfied with their family life, compared to 67 percent in the United States, 72 percent in Britain, and 53 percent in Korea. Findings from Japan and the United States collected in the mid-1990s suggest that Japanese women view marriage significantly less favorably than American women do. For example, only 51 percent of unmarried Japanese women indicated that they expected to be happier married than unmarried, compared to 69 percent of American women (Tsuya, Mason, & Bumpass, 2004).

Compared to their counterparts in the West and in other Asian countries, more Japanese women with children view child rearing as a complex job with few emotional rewards. A recent survey reported by Hirao (2007a, p. 70) found that only 47 percent of Japanese parents thought it was "always enjoyable to raise children," whereas 64 percent of parents in South Korea and 67 percent of parents in the United States responded positively to this question. When asked whether they thought raising children was fun, only 46 percent of Japanese parents agreed, compared to 67 percent of American parents (National Women's Education Center, Japan, 2005). Yet another recent survey comparing child-rearing attitudes in five Asian nations indicated that mothers in Tokyo felt more frustrated about child rearing than mothers in Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, and Taipei (Benesse Educational Research Institute, 2006a).

Furthermore, despite the many accolades that they receive from observers in foreign countries, most Japanese women think they are doing a lousy job at parenting and are plagued by anxiety and self-doubt. For example, nearly half of mothers in one survey described themselves as "not very confident" or "not confident" about child rearing (Shwalb, Kawai, Shoji, & Tsunetsugu, 1995). Comparative studies find that Japanese mothers are less confident about child rearing than are mothers in seven other industrialized countries (Bornstein et al., 1998).

What's the problem with lacking self-confidence as a parent? According to psychologist Albert Bandura, individuals who evaluate themselves as unable to take a particular action – who lack what he calls self-efficacy – tend to become so overwhelmed by negative thoughts and feelings that they are less willing to exert effort when faced with difficult situations, and are likely to give up rather than respond with resilience (1982; 1997). Research findings bear out Bandura's theoretical assertions. People who feel efficacious in rearing their children are indeed better able to cope with challenging

situations than those who lack confidence in their parenting skills (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Oettingen, 1995; Olioff & Aboud, 1991; Silver, Bauman, & Ireys, 1995; Teti & Gelfand, 1991; Williams et al., 1987).[2]

Indeed, some observers view mothers' lack of parenting confidence – a condition the Japanese media call "child-rearing neurosis" (*ikuji fuan*) – as one of the most serious problems facing families in contemporary Japan (Kazui, 1997; Shwalb, Kawai, Shoji, & Tsunetsugu, 1997). In one study focusing on Japanese mothers of toddlers and preschoolers, researchers found that mothers' lack of confidence in their child-rearing practices made them "unable to cope decisively and firmly with their children's opposition and assertion" (Ujie, 1997, p. 482). Kashiwagi (1998) argues that the anxiety and frustration experienced by many Japanese mothers can result in a feeling of detachment from their children. Her studies show that the more women engage in full-time child rearing (thereby fulfilling the "traditional" role), the *less* likely they are to experience a feeling of "oneness" with their children, often purported in Japan to be a "natural" expression of the maternal instinct.

So, given the importance of feeling successful at accomplishing valued tasks, what is it like for a Japanese woman to go through her daily life perceiving that she is failing at the role that many in her society deem to be of utmost importance for women? This is a question that captivated me when I began the research for this book. I was also curious to learn how, if women are indeed lacking in parenting self-efficacy, they have managed to be such good parents. After all, outside observers often look at the high achievement and positive social development of most Japanese children and conclude that their parents must be doing *something* right.

My exploration of these questions draws upon an ecocultural approach to parenting.[3] Within this perspective, parents in a society are thought to develop goals and care strategies (i.e., cultural models) that maximize the likelihood of their children's physical survival and the attainment of

[2]　Self-efficacy is one of several similar psychological constructs that pertain to the individual's perception of agency or control (e.g., locus of control, personal control, mastery, etc.). I use the construct of self-efficacy because it has a well-developed theoretical frame as well as a substantial body of related empirical work. It has made some inroads in the sociological literature as well (Hitlin & Long, 2009), where it is seen as a useful tool for analyzing the possibilities of individual action within a context of institutional power.

[3]　This approach was pioneered by anthropologists Beatrice Whiting and John Whiting, along with their colleagues and former students including Sarah Harkness, Robert LeVine, Sarah LeVine, Charles Super, and Thomas Weisner (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1992, 2002; LeVine et al., 1994; Weisner, 2002; Whiting & Edwards, 1988; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

culturally valued skills and characteristics. The adoption of an ecocultural approach to parenting thus rests upon three analytic levels: individual, cultural, and institutional. With respect to the first level, that of the individual, I am particularly interested in perceptions of agency or self-efficacy as a variable that differs across individual parents. I seek to understand how women conceptualize the role of mother, what criteria they use for self-evaluation, and whether their self-evaluation is stable over time. I am also curious about the factors that contribute to women's perception of themselves as effective or ineffective parents. I look extensively at how their self-perceptions are shaped by their own experiences as children, in the context of their marriages, and by their involvement in the world of work. Additionally, I acknowledge unique personal attributes that shape their response to these experiences – for example, a certain sense of humor might help one woman shrug off criticism from her husband, while another would feel deeply wounded by similar comments. And finally, I am concerned with the ways in which women's self-efficacy is linked to their interactions with their children and support for their achievement in school.

The second level that forms the conceptual foundation of this book is that of *culture*, particularly the collective representations – or cultural models – of family life that are available to Japanese women as they negotiate the demands of daily life. The notion of a cultural model refers to a collectively constructed belief about how things are or how they should be.[4] For example, in the realm of parenting, some Japanese people may believe that children should be indulged up until the age of three years, after which they should be treated more strictly. In addition to beliefs and values, cultural models also include behavior sequences used to deal with routine situations.

Although cultural models of child rearing are collectively constructed, this does not mean that they necessarily emerge at the level of a national group (or an ethnic group); nor do all members of a group necessarily agree with the dominant cultural models (Gjerde, 2004). Even in Japan, a relatively homogeneous country, there are of course many disagreements about how children should be raised and educated (Holloway, 2000). Anthropologists often describe cultural models as being "tacit" or "taken for granted," but the ones that I will be describing are more likely to be a target of conscious reflection. In other work, I have referred to these as "declared" models because they are consciously evaluated and declared as the beliefs held by

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[4] Some writers prefer the terms "cultural concerns" or "discourses" because these terms are associated with a notion of fluidity or "an instability that allows different interest groups to suit their own interest and promote their own representation" (Gjerde, 2004, p. 146).

a certain individual (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997). Parents may sometimes approach child rearing on the basis of tacit assumptions and models, but most parents in modern communities are exposed to other models by observing other parents, talking with their children's teachers, and accessing various forms of media. This is the space in which individual agency comes into play as parents evaluate various approaches and appropriate those they find of value into their own parenting repertoire. To understand why a parent acts the way she does, it is essential to identify the models that are available to members of a certain community but also to acknowledge "individuals' self-consciousness, individuality, and ability to transcend their own culture" (Gjerde, 2004, p. 140).

The third analytic level pertains to the ways in which *public policies and institutions* help to define the role of wife and mother and shape the opportunities available to Japanese women. Certainly, the rapid changes that have occurred in Japan during the past century have resulted in new institutional forces that press parents to prepare their children for life in a complex, largely urban society. Institutional interests are capable of using cultural models strategically. For example, the Japanese government has worked actively at various points to re-invigorate certain "traditional" values that it deemed crucial to the continued economic success of the country, including thrift, hard work, and docility. When Japanese business leaders, politicians, and bureaucrats encounter opposition on some issue, they frequently accuse the dissenters of being poisoned by "Western individualism" or castigate them for being "un-Japanese" (Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986). This technique has been an effective way for these institutional actors to suppress women's attempts to break out of constraints on their activities as mothers and employees, as we will see later in the book.

In recent years, Gjerde (2004) and others have urged cultural psychologists to identify those in a society who possess the "hegemonic voice" – that is, those who have the power to shape and promote certain cultural models and to suppress others. Writing about Japan, psychologists sometimes assume that Japanese people are homogeneous with respect to cultural values, and that they arrived at this state of homogeneity through processes such as "symbiosis" which are power neutral. In contrast, other scholars have focused on the way that authority is wielded in the family, school, community, and workplace (Holloway, 2000; Sugimoto, 2003), and argue that while it may come in a guise that is ostensibly benign or indirect, Japanese "friendly authoritarianism" can nevertheless be highly effective and demands careful consideration.

What Is a Good Wife and Wise Mother?

The phrase "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) was coined by Masanao Nakamura in the 1870s. It reflects the realization by Japanese government officials in charge of facilitating Japan's swift transition to modernity that women could contribute to the new nation by taking a more active role in child rearing, as well as by engaging in patriotic activities and by contributing to the family's income (Patessio, 2006; Sievers, 1981). Within a few short decades, however, the meaning of the phrase shifted as government officials pushed women out of the public realm, took away the few legal rights they had previously held, and identified child rearing rather than productive labor as their primary role. In the years subsequent to the Second World War, women's rights were instated in the new constitution, but the image of good wife and wise mother retained a conservative flavor. In the postwar years, government prioritization of the maternal role was further underscored by new policies making it difficult for women with children to participate in the labor force. For the men in the "iron triangle" of business, bureaucracy, and politics, the ideal workforce was composed of hard-working men supported at home by "professional housewives." The phrase "good wives, wise mothers" is still heard today, but its meaning has taken on a negative connotation to women who perceive it as emblematic of the ways in which government and business interests have limited women's opportunities to work outside the home.

Indeed, in the twenty-first century, the limits of the government's attempts to promote the more conservative aspects of the good wife, wise mother image have become increasingly apparent. If Japanese citizens were faithfully absorbing the cultural models being promoted by their government, Japanese homes would still be bursting with children, but they are not. This is where our inquiry begins – to examine how, as introspective, self-aware, and creative individuals, Japanese women themselves think about their obligations as mothers, wives, and human beings.

2

Locating the Research in Space and Time

Listening to Women's Voices

Throughout this book, I will focus on the stories of four women – Junko, Chihiro, Asako, and Miyuki. Their narratives illustrate the themes that figure prominently in the accounts of the larger group of participants – their parenting goals and self-evaluation, their struggles to create a life that somehow reflects their childhood dreams and aspirations, their experiences as wives, and their participation in the contexts of school and work. Becoming familiar with the "whole story" of at least a few individuals makes it easier to see how their lifetimes of experiences and relationships are interrelated and also to gain a deeper sense of how the institutional features of work and schooling set the stage for their parenting efforts. In this chapter, I introduce the four women. I then describe the communities in which they were living and characterize the societal and political conditions affecting their lives during the data collection period.

I supplement the narratives of these four focal mothers with material from 12 other mothers in our interview study. These 16 women were in turn selected from a larger sample of 116 women to whom we had already administered a parenting survey. In selecting 16 women for a series of in-depth interviews, the research team's goal was to include some women who were confident in their parenting and others who were less confident. As noted in Chapter 1, my interest in the notion of self-efficacy was sparked by research indicating that Japanese mothers were convinced that they were not good parents, in spite of much evidence to the contrary. Our reading of the literature on self-reflection and self-evaluation in Japan led us to suspect that additional work was needed to tease apart the elements of this important construct in order to understand how it functions in Japan. In