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978-0-521-19227-9 - Women and Family in Contemporary Japan

Susan D. Holloway

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WOMEN AND FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Japanese women have often been singled out for their strong commitment to the role of housewife and mother. But today they are postponing marriage and bearing fewer children, and Japan has become one of the least fertile and fastest aging countries in the world. Why have so many Japanese women opted out of family life? To answer this question, the author draws on in-depth interviews and extensive survey data to examine Japanese mothers' perspectives and experiences of marriage, parenting, and family life. Her goal is to understand how, as introspective, self-aware individuals, these women interpret and respond to the barriers and opportunities afforded within the structural and ideological contexts of contemporary Japan. The findings suggest a need for changes in the structure of both the workplace and the education system to provide women with the opportunity to find a fulfilling balance between work and family life.

Susan D. Holloway obtained a Ph.D. in developmental psychology and early childhood education from Stanford University in 1983. She has been conducting research on Japan since 1980 and was the recipient of a Fulbright Award in 1994 to study and write about family and schooling in Japan. She is the author of *Through My Own Eyes: Single Mothers and the Cultures of Poverty* (with Bruce Fuller) and *Contested Childhood: Diversity and Change in Japanese Preschools*. In addition, she has authored more than fifty articles and book chapters on family and schooling in cultural contexts. Holloway has taught at the University of Maryland, College Park; Harvard University; and the University of California, Berkeley, where she has been a faculty member in the Graduate School of Education since 1996.

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Preface

In 1990, in an article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* entitled “Women’s Voices: Their Critique of the Anthropology of Japan” Mariko Tamanoi argued forcefully that the perspectives of Japanese women have received shockingly little attention in the academic literature:

Before women’s perspectives can be integrated successfully into the study of Japanese culture and history, we must listen to what women have to say about their own experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Their voices, not yet sufficiently explored, may lead to different views of Japanese culture and history. Thus, to focus on women is not to ghettoize them but to include their subjective experience in the study of Japan. It means seeing Japanese culture and history from the vantage points of women, who in recounting their experiences and emotions must talk about the lives of their male partners and/or competitors as well. (p. 18)

Tamanoi’s call for closer study of Japanese women’s perspectives is still relevant today. Although a growing number of anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists have focused on recent changes in the Japanese family, relatively few have focused directly on the voices of contemporary Japanese mothers. As a psychologist, I wanted to focus on women’s perceptions of what the role of mother entails and how they evaluate themselves in that role. In light of the initial evidence that many Japanese mothers perceived themselves as inadequate, I also hoped to uncover what types of experiences bolstered (or diminished) their sense of confidence – referred to by psychologists as self-efficacy – in pursuing this role. And I was determined to see how these self-perceptions set the stage for their actions as parents.

These insights into women’s perceptions, experiences, and emotions lie at the heart of this book, but they cannot be properly understood without a detailed consideration of the social institutions that have created some types of opportunity and denied others. In contemporary Japan, the educational

system and the workplace are the two institutional contexts whose policies and practices most directly affect women's lives. In this book, I attend to the tension between these structural forces and women's individual thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of agency. I also focus on the immediate social context of the family and examine the support that family members provide (or fail to provide) to young mothers. I have been particularly interested in exploring women's perceptions of their husbands, examining the ways that husbands promote mothers' sense of parenting competence as well as the ways that they contribute to its erosion.

Psychologists often ignore the historical dimension of social phenomena in Japan; to address that gap I have directed significant attention to governmental family policies that have shaped women's lives over the past 125 years. At the turn of the twentieth century, officials in the newly reconstituted Japanese government sought ways to bind the citizens together and build their allegiance to a central state. Recognizing that women had a powerful role to play in this nation-building exercise, these officials discarded traditional Confucian perceptions of women and crafted an image of them as capable citizens and mothers. Though it sounds repressive and confining to contemporary ears, women's new identity as *ryōsai kenbo* – good wife and wise mother – signaled an expansion of women's opportunities. The notion of good wife encompassed both contributing to the family and state through productive labor and engagement with civic institutions and fulfilling duties in the home. And the concept of wise mother implied that women could actually be wise!

Over time, the notion of what it means to be a good wife and wise mother has continued to evolve, and it is still debated in contemporary Japan. I hope to capture these changing and contested images in this book. At the heart of the book is a longitudinal research project that I initiated in 2000. A key aspect of the work is a series of four interviews conducted over a three-year period with each of 16 mothers living in the Osaka area. Additionally, we conducted three surveys with a larger group of 116 mothers in Osaka and Sapporo. All of the major findings that emerged from analysis of the interviews were also supported by results from the surveys.

Overview of the Book

The book is divided into four parts. Part I, Chapters 1 and 2, introduces the theoretical frame of the research and provides an overview of the research site and participants. In Part II, I explore mothers' perceptions about themselves and their family members. Chapter 3 begins with an historical

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overview of societal expectations for Japanese mothers from the mid-1800s to the present time. This analysis forms the backdrop for understanding our participants' views about the nature of mothering. In Chapter 4, I explore several crucial cultural models pertaining to the common practice of *hansei*, or self-reflection, and use them to help understand these women's tendency to reflect carefully on their parenting behavior and to judge themselves harshly for failing to live up to their own standards.

In Part III of the book, I explore the conditions that give rise to women's role definition and evaluation of themselves as parents. Chapter 5 takes a close look at the women's early family experiences, particularly focusing on the ways that their own parents had nurtured – or curtailed – their early dreams about the future. I also examine how these early family dynamics continue to be echoed in their current interactions with their own children. Chapter 6 begins with an overview of the institution of marriage in modern Japan. I then take a close look at what these women expect from their husbands and examine how well their husbands live up to these expectations.

Part IV of the book provides insight into these women's actual behavior, beginning in Chapter 7 with the issue of child rearing and discipline. I illustrate the high standards that mothers set for their own parenting but show that they often do not have a strong network of supportive relations to help them accomplish these goals. In Chapter 8, I focus on the ways that mothers support their children's schooling, both at home and at school. A central theme of this chapter is how the parents' own educational experiences affected their confidence in their ability to provide support for their children's academic achievement. I also show how the demands of the school system shape women's beliefs about their role in supporting their children's achievement. In Chapter 9 I examine the circumstances and motivating factors behind the women's varied trajectories through the world of work. Many of the women began early adulthood with well-formulated aspirations regarding employment but were unable to combine full-time work with parenting. Chapter 10 sums up the major findings of the book and discusses their implications for family policies and practices in Japan. I conclude with an examination of the theoretical implications of this work for the study of parenting, social institutions, and individual agency in Japan.

Author's Background and Acknowledgments

I have been conducting research in Japan since the mid-1980s, when I was a graduate student involved in a cross-national project examining parenting practices in Japan and the United States. Subsequent to receiving a doctorate

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in developmental psychology and early education, I continued to study the role of Japanese parents in preparing children for school. Like many other Western observers, I was intrigued by Japan's postwar economic success and interested in understanding Japanese society's commitment to education. At the time, I was more wrapped up in documenting the instrumental value of Japanese mothers' efforts than in discovering how they themselves constructed and understood their role.

My interest in the personal experiences and perspectives of Japanese mothers began in the 1990s, when I conducted a project on Japanese preschools. In contrast to the positive image of Japanese women that was permeating Western academic literature at the time, the preschool directors that I interviewed frequently characterized mothers as sybaritic tennis players or sake-sloshing shoppers. I sometimes had to suppress feelings of annoyance at these criticisms, but I didn't pay that much attention to them. Then one day, a small event made me think more carefully about the discourses surrounding what it means to be a good parent. I was on my way to an interview at a preschool, accompanied by my research associate, a Japanese woman in her mid-fifties. We had arrived a bit early and stopped in a coffee shop near the school to kill time. Noticing many female customers, my associate casually mentioned that it still surprised her to see housewives hanging around in public during the middle of the day. Unlike the preschool directors, she did not express criticism of women for spending time on leisure activities; still, the fact that they were doing so was noteworthy to her. It made me realize that it wasn't just a few grouchy men who were attending so carefully to mothers' everyday activities. I became increasingly curious about what it would be like to be a mother in a society in which having a mid-morning cup of coffee with a friend made you conspicuous.

Because of my own experience in wrestling with the best way to balance work and family commitments, I tried to be as conscious as possible of the position from which I conducted my research. I was highly aware of the fact that some scholars "seem to have begun their work with a certain indignation towards the supposed submissiveness of Japanese women to patriarchal authority," as Tamanoi put it (1990, p. 19). How ironic it would have been, if I were to join the noisy chorus of those who criticize Japanese women, albeit from a feminist rather than traditionalist perspective. I tried not to judge these women in terms of my personal and political beliefs, but rather attempted to immerse myself in the task of understanding their own perspectives.

Of course, the fact that I am not Japanese is also a significant factor that shaped not only how I viewed the participants but also how they viewed the

project. One strategy for offsetting the limitations of my outsider status has been to work as closely as possible with Japanese colleagues. As the current research was just getting under way, two talented doctoral students joined the project: Sawako Suzuki, now an assistant professor at Saint Mary's College of California, and Yoko Yamamoto, currently a postdoctoral researcher at Brown University. Both women were involved in every step of the study and were crucial to its success. They participated in the initial phase of recruiting our sample, were involved in developing all the surveys and interview protocols, conducted many of the interviews, and participated in all phases of data analysis and write-up. I count myself as extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with these two talented women.

A number of other undergraduate and graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley, contributed to the project as well. Kazuko Behrens, now a faculty member at Texas Tech University, was deeply involved in early pilot work. She was also instrumental in developing the ideas for the first survey, recruiting the Sapporo sample, and conducting the first round of interviews in Sapporo. I received valuable assistance from a variety of UC Berkeley students, including Melike Acar, Soung Bae, Jamie Chen, Sari Leivant Sanghvi, Jessica Mindnich, Kyoko Onoda, Jessica Taisey Petrie, and Lynna Tsou, all of whom participated in the coding and analysis of the data. Stephanie Lo and Sira Park provided competent and valued assistance with library research and proofread the manuscript. I also benefited from discussion of an early draft of the book with students in my research group at UC Berkeley: Melike Acar, Shana Cohen, Irenka Domínguez-Pareto, Olivia Flint, Manuela Groth, Laura Lara, Ayumi Nagase, David Neufeld, Sira Park, Patti Solomon-Rice, Tanya Soohoo, and Lisa Wadors Verne. I am very thankful to Yoko Yamamoto and Bruce Fuller, who also read and commented extensively on the full manuscript. Sarah Serafim provided much-appreciated assistance with the job of copyediting. I thank Simina Calin and Jeanie Lee at Cambridge University Press for shepherding the manuscript through the publication process.

I am appreciative of a small grant from the Spencer Foundation, which enabled me to begin the project in 2000. Over the subsequent years, Sawako Suzuki and Yoko Yamamoto received additional funding from UC Berkeley to support their work on the project. This project has been largely a labor of love, and it would not have been possible without the willingness of many people to become involved on a volunteer basis, which advanced the work on all fronts.

I deeply appreciate the help of several preschool directors in Sapporo and Osaka prefecture in recruiting women for the study. I do not name them or

their schools in order to preserve the anonymity of the women in the sample. For similar reasons of confidentiality I cannot thank the study participants by name, but I wish nevertheless to extend my heartfelt appreciation to them for participating in this project. I am particularly grateful to the 16 women who invited us to their homes and shared their thoughts and feelings with Sawako, Yoko, and me.

A host of other friends and colleagues have contributed to this work in important ways, both direct and indirect. I owe much to Keiko Kashiwagi, who is a pioneer in the study of Japanese women. I have learned a lot from her research and also from her personal example about what it takes to succeed professionally as a woman in Japan. Professor Kashiwagi, Hiroshi Azuma, and the late Robert Hess were my earliest mentors in this field, and I am truly thankful for all of their wisdom and guidance.

Throughout the last 15 years, I have received good counsel and valuable insights about social conditions in Japan from Noboru Takahashi at Osaka Kyoiku Daigaku. Long discussions during hikes on Mount Tamalpais with Marty Blum, Miriam Kuppermann, and Laura Myers have helped me deal with the problems and opportunities afforded by this project and just about everything else of importance in my life.

During the period in which this project was conducted, my children, Caitlin and Dylan, have grown up and they are now pursuing their own professional and academic dreams. I thank them for their lifelong tolerance of my Japan addiction. Bruce Fuller has listened with apparent interest to every idea I've ever had about Japanese women and has contributed significantly to the interpretations and analysis presented in this book. His steadfast partnership in our family life has enabled me to experience fulfillment in my professional career as well as joy in being a wife and mother.