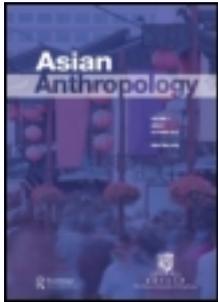


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Intimate expectations and practices: freeter relationships and marriage in contemporary Japan

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Through an exploration of intimate expectations, ideals, and male freeters' romantic relationships, this article examines the ways in which expectations and practices of intimacy are shifting in gendered ways in contemporary Japan. Whilst women's expectations of intimacy and marital roles have changed and expanded, many male irregular workers continue to practice more conventional ideals of intimacy and gender roles, rooted in notions of responsibility, obligation, and duty. This article argues that there is consequently a significant miscommunication between male and female desires relating to the practice of intimacy that is contributing to both a perceived difficulty in getting married, and, after marriage, considerable stress about what is constitutive of intimacy.

Keywords: freeters; irregular labor; intimacy; gender; Japan

Introduction

Intimacy, at its simplest, is a feeling of close connection and the process through which such closeness is created. The subjective experience of being special to another in some way, being "of like mind," and being close, all contribute to the construction and experience of intimacy (Jamieson 2011; Markus 2010; Morgan 2009). Although ideas of what constitutes intimacy vary depending on social, cultural, and historical context, Jamieson (2011, 1) notes that "practices of intimacy," which "refer to practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other,"¹ can be found in all cultures around the world. Consequently, intimacy is created through a variety of component practices that are not exclusively about intimacy, for example, through "giving to, sharing with, spending time with, knowing, practically caring for, feeling attachment to, [and] expressing affection for" (3). Yet, many of these practices, specifically the performance and reception of acts of caring, are underplayed in discussions of what constitutes intimacy.

Whilst acknowledging the various practices and manifestations of non-romantic intimacy across social life, this article focuses on intimacy within romantic relations of men who work in the irregular labor market as freeters in Japan. Freeters are defined most broadly as part-time workers between the ages of 15 and 34, not students, and not married if female. Irregular employment (of which freeters are a part) has expanded since the 1990s and male workers in this sector have considerably increased. In 1990, for example, the ratio of irregular laborers to regular employees was 18.8%, with males constituting 8.8%. By 2006 the ratio was 33% with males constituting 17.9%, and in 2012 the ratio was 38.2% with male figures at 22.1% (Abe 2008; Anon 2013; MHLW 2012). In terms of

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freeteer-specific statistics, although the mid-2000s saw a gradual decrease in male numbers, since 2008 there has been a reversal of this trend with male part-timer numbers gradually increasing, from 660,000 to 750,000 in 2011 (MIAC 2012).²

Although these numbers are relatively small, freeters have been the topic of much debate (and moral panic) in recent years, variously discussed as: layabout youths who lack a work ethic and shirk their responsibilities to the nation (Yamada 1999), victims of the changing employment market and long recession (Genda 2005; Honda 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Kosugi 2005, 2008; Rebick 2006), and contributors to the demographic woes that Japan is facing through their limited social welfare contributions and their low rate of marriage.

Research on delayed marriage points to the fact that men in low-income jobs find it harder to marry than other men (Sweeney 2002), and it is clear in the Japanese context that irregular workers marry less than their regular counterparts. For example, recent surveys suggest that approximately 30% of men in their thirties in regular full-time employment were married whereas just 6% of irregularly employed men were (Cabinet Office 2011). Male freeters often have difficulty maintaining long-term romantic relations and transitioning from dating to marriage, in part because of their irregular employment status and low breadwinning ability (Cook 2013; Miura 2007). However, there have also been changes in what men and women expect from intimate relationships, and the ability to meet such expectations affects perceived marriageability.

In this article I argue, through an exploration of gendered expectations of romantic partners and male freeters' relationships, that there has been a shift in the nature and politics of intimacy in Japan. Although many young men and women discuss the desire for companionate, intimate, romantic, and marital relationships based on ideas of equity, the ways in which these expectations emerge in practice vary considerably. Women's expectations of intimacy and marital roles have expanded and this can be seen in the kind of ideals they discuss as well as the kind of intimate practices they desire. However, many male irregular workers continue to practice more conventional ideals of intimacy and gender roles, rooted in notions of responsibility, obligation, and duty. This article consequently argues that there is a significant miscommunication between male and female desires of intimacy that is contributing to both a perceived difficulty in getting married, and after marriage, considerable stress about what is constitutive of intimacy. Although the material presented focuses on the relationships of those in irregular work, the arguments are not just relevant to irregular workers *per se*, but speak to the ways that the broader concept, and expectations, of intimacy are changing in gendered ways in contemporary Japan.

The material presented in this article is based on ethnographic research and extensive life-history interviews with individuals in Hamamatsu City for 13 months in 2006–2007, with follow-ups done each year between 2009 and 2012. It draws on the narratives of 33 male freeters from Hamamatsu ranging in age from 21 to 42,³ four of whom are now married (12%) and 12 are in heterosexual relationships (36%). Narratives of 36 heterosexual women working in the irregular employment sector (as *haken*, *pāto*, freeter, and *arubaito*)⁴ ranging in age from 20 to 45 serve as comparative examples.

The next section briefly explores core debates about intimacy and modernity, followed by a discussion of delayed marriage in Japan. Subsequently, using ethnographic vignettes, the intimate expectations and beliefs about ideal partners that men and women discussed in Hamamatsu are examined, followed by two case studies of the ways that these ideals are played out (or not) within romantic relationships: one marital, one dating. Whilst these cases cannot be argued to be representative of all freeter relationships they were chosen for

their broad themes and the general representativeness of issues that were raised in discussions about romantic relationships and intimacy.

Intimacy and modernity

Padilla *et al.* argues that the literature on intimacy that has emerged in recent years shows a

global – if uneven – trend away from “traditional” notions of family that emphasize the role of social obligation in the reproduction of kinship systems and toward globalizing models of family that are increasingly based on a “love” that is chosen, deeply felt, “authentic,” and profoundly personal (Padilla, Hirsch, Muñoz-Laboy, Sember, and Parker 2007, xv).

This burgeoning literature argues for the increased individualization at play in relationships and the gradual deinstitutionalization of marriage (Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1991, 1993).

In particular, Anthony Giddens’ (1991, 1993) work has been widely drawn upon in contemporary discussions of intimacy. He argues that intimacy, in societies experiencing late modernity, has undergone a significant shift toward an ideal-type of pure relationship based on emotional and sexual equality, which is contrasted to traditional relationships. He suggests that, although marriages in traditional contexts were significantly influenced by economic considerations and were “anchored in external conditions of social or economic life” this has changed. Moreover, “[m]arriage becomes more and more a relationship initiated for, and kept going for as long as, it delivers emotional satisfaction to be derived from close contact with another” (Giddens 1991, 89).

Much of his argument focuses on individual self-reflexivity and self-making in intimacy: the constant asking of “is everything ok in the relationship?” and “how am I in this relationship?” Specifically, Giddens (1991, 97) argues that pure relationships are places in which “self-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other,” which creates a shared history. These are sweeping claims to make, even in the Western contexts in which his argument is based, and he consequently attempts to provide some qualification by suggesting that some of the traditional characteristics of marriage may remain to a greater or lesser extent.

There has, however, been substantial criticism of the idea that increased individualization and self-making practices are at the heart of changes in relationships from “traditional” to “modern.” These include claims that the arguments are over-generalized (Jamieson 2011) and that they ignore the value placed on interdependence among generations, gender, and family relations (Smart and Shipman 2004). Moreover, in the context of Asia, research has stressed that youth are not whole-heartedly embracing these ideas but rather are combining practices that are associated with individualism, such as choosing their own marital partners and creating nuclear households, whilst still continuing the tradition of looking after elders and ancestors (Adrian 2003; Hansen and Pang 2010; Jamieson 2011; Quah 2008).

Furthermore, despite claims of a move toward equality within intimate relationships this has perhaps been overly optimistic. For example, Jamieson (2011) argues that normative gender differences combined with the amount of institutionalized support for male authority over women not only continue, even in places that are purported to have embraced apparently equal pure relationships, but may be re-inscribed through practices of intimacy (see also, Hochschild and Machung 2012).

In the Japanese context, despite gains in female employment, greater maternity leave and more available childcare, there remain pervasive expectations (outside large cities at least) that women will quit working either on marriage or at the birth of their first child.

Of course, company policies vary and large metropolitan areas such as Tokyo and Osaka have a greater plurality of lifestyles, but in Hamamatsu women regularly talked of the general expectation – individually, from their companies, and within their families – of leaving their jobs once they had children, and returning later to the workforce. Indeed, we continue to see this trend in the enduring M-shaped curve of workforce participation of women in Japan (Kenjoh 2007). These structural considerations significantly affect the kinds of partners women are looking for in terms of marriage, making economic and social factors important elements in marital expectations. However, despite these structural elements we can see changes in the expectations of intimacy both during dating and later in marriage.

Delayed marriage

Throughout the post-war period marriage in Japan has been characterized by the notion of complementary incompetence (Edwards 1990) consisting of gender-segregated marital roles where men are the main (or sole) breadwinner, and women are primarily housewives and child-carers.⁵ Notions of duty and obligation have been in the foreground, with companionate intimacy little acknowledged or discussed. Indeed, Mathews (2003) has noted that Japanese marriages have not emphasized the importance of communication between spouses.

In recent years, however, delayed marriage has increasingly become the norm, though this is not because the majority of people no longer see the value in marriage. Indeed, surveys show that the majority of Japanese men and women want to marry, but struggle to find an “appropriate” person (Nakano 2011; Nemoto 2008). Much of the research thus far has focused on what these shifts in marriage practices and meanings signify in the context of delayed marriage.

A number of arguments have been put forward as to why marriage is increasingly being postponed, and these often revolve around the changing situation of Japanese women. For example, it has been argued that women (especially those who are highly educated) are increasingly doubtful that they will be able to find someone who will share the burden of raising a family (Ehara 2005; Nagase 2006; Tsuya and Bumpass 2004); that continued gender inequalities force women to choose either families or careers due to persistent ideas that stipulate that women (and men) take on specific roles at marriage (Nemoto 2008; Ono 2003; Tokuhiko 2010); that the “opportunity cost” of marriage for women who earn well in good jobs has increased, thereby leading to more women delaying marriage; and that women (of varied educational backgrounds) are not interested in low income men but strive to marry those with high incomes, who are becoming scarcer (Honda 2002; Raymo and Iwasawa 2005).⁶

In the case of highly educated men, Nemoto, Fuwa, and Ishiguro (2013) has argued that the loosening of age norms of marriage, the increase in premarital sex, and the demands of work (including long working hours – usually 12 or more per day) are resulting in attitudes of disinterest with a strong focus on the cost and constraints of marriage. Furthermore, they argue that these men continue to consider marriage in terms of traditional gender-segregated roles: men as the breadwinner, women as the housewife and carer. For men in low-income positions, such as freeters and other irregular workers, it is argued that they are unable or find it difficult to marry because of their low incomes (Bumpass *et al.* 2009; Cook 2013; Yamada 2006).

However, looking only at whether people marry or delay marriage obscures what is actually happening within relationships. Consequently, this article, through an exploration

of partner ideals and the actual relationships of male freeters, analyzes how newer ideals of companionate marriage and relationships are being incorporated into intimate relationships in gendered ways. Whilst both men and women in Hamamatsu discussed ideals that correspond to companionate marriage, such as sharing interests and spending time with one another, it is predominantly women who are striving to make this a concrete reality within their marital and romantic relationships, and leaving if they are not able. In contrast, whilst many male freeters in Hamamatsu entertain ideals of companionate relationships they remain, in practice, most focused on traditional ideals of romantic and marital roles, especially their breadwinning (in)ability or on having achieved breadwinning ability.

Intimate expectations and ideal marital partners

With the increasing delay in marriage and the concept that marital roles consist of costs, constraints, demands, and duties, what do individuals imagine for themselves in the context of future partners? We turn first to female expectations. A 24-year-old woman had this to say:

I want to be with a person who is kind, who shares my interests and is trustworthy. If we don't share many interests that is not a big problem if we can communicate well. But I don't want to be with a weak man. He needs to be responsible and able to make decisions. . . . I think I will keep working, at least until I have children, so I want him to be able to share the chores as well. But I don't know how possible that will be! [laughs] I think kindness, communication, responsibility and trustworthiness are the most important for me.

Meanwhile, a 27-year-old woman commented:

I have a long list of what I want! [laughs] I think the most important is responsibility. That means that he needs to be working properly. He should be able to be the breadwinner. I don't want to keep working after marriage. I need to be able to trust him; that he will do what needs to be done. I don't want to look after someone like they are my child.⁷ My father is a bit like a child. If my mother travels she cooks food and leaves it for him or he goes out to eat because he doesn't know how to do things for himself. I want 50-50. I want us to do hobbies together and spend time together on weekends. But I don't want to be with someone that is not independent as well. I like having time to do things on my own too, with friends, so he should be okay on his own too. I don't know if I will find someone like this though!

It has been argued that whilst marriage used to be thought of as a social duty linked to the attainment of full adulthood and something that was nearly universal, today the meanings attached to relationships and marriage are changing (Fruehan Sandberg 2010). Authors argue that women are now prioritizing feelings of intimacy, attachment, mutual understanding, co-operation, and emotional closeness rather than a man who will be a breadwinner. Moreover, if they can't find these things and carve equal relationships they will postpone or refuse to marry (Fruehan Sandberg 2010; Nemoto 2008; Tokuhiko 2010). Ultimately they want a "life-partner." The women I worked with wanted all these things, but they also put stress on wanting a man who was a stable earner.

Women's own aspirations and expectations of their life were clearly linked to what they wanted in a partner. Almost none of the women I worked with wanted a career *per se*. The most common reason that was given was that they did not want to "work like a man," with service overtime, transfers, and long days. Most women expected, as per their mothers' generation, that they would quit work on the birth of their first child, and a few wanted to quit as soon as they married. Some stressed that these expectations were shared by the companies they worked for. They were therefore looking for a partner who would be able to support, sustain, or create a particular lifestyle that they wanted. They were

realistic about the structural constraints that continue to exist in the employment market for women and, considering that working part-time or as a temp (*haken*) can only provide limited, if any, financial security, they wanted to marry men who could provide a stable base for the families they planned to create. Yet they also tapped into newer discourses about the desirability of companionate marriages based on shared interests and communication.

As already noted, much of the research suggests that the postponement of marriage, and increasing levels of non-marriage, are due to women's increased participation in the labor market and economic emancipation leading to them having less need to find a breadwinner to give them financial insurance. However, just as relevant are the women who want, perhaps especially in these recessionary times, to create a family with the ability to have one primary breadwinner (a man). In many cases women bemoaned the fact that they were unable (perhaps unsurprisingly) to find a man who can embody not only the character attributes they desired but also the economic earning power.

Male expectations

Some male freeters I worked with also subscribed to ideas of equality within romantic and marital roles, but only to an extent, as this 27-year-old man shows:

I want to marry someone who understands me and share my interests. I only date women who I feel that connection with. I think being 50-50 is important. Many women want to keep working so I think marriage roles are starting to change. Personally I want everything to be half and half and want to help raise children. But at the same time, I think we have to be realistic. It will depend on our working situation and money. We might have to split our roles into the traditional way – me being a breadwinner, her looking after the home. It will depend.⁸

Meanwhile, a 25-year-old man stated:

Communication and sharing hobbies is really important to me. My ex-girlfriend always wanted to stay at home and listen to music or watch movies, but I like being active. I wanted us to be out with friends, being social. The other big problem we had was that she hated arguing or discussing. So if she was unhappy she wouldn't say anything. I always felt like I had to guess. But I think this just creates miscommunication. I still don't understand why she doesn't like to talk about problems. So it was often a struggle in that relationship. I think we just didn't fit together. I like her a lot and we're still friends, but it didn't work, so I ended it. I am looking for someone who will share my interests and who will communicate well.

However, most other male freeters in my study did not subscribe so fully to ideals of romantic equality and communication to the extent of the men above, though they did want to share interests with their partners and be understood. Instead, others focused on the perceived individual repercussions of marriage. For example, a 31-year-old freeter worried about how marriage would change his priorities:

It's important for me to keep making my own path. Ideally I want to meet someone that really understands that about me. I want to get married at some point, but when you marry family becomes most important and it would be expected that I was the main provider. At the moment I want to keep focusing on what I am doing. I don't want that pressure at the moment. I am therefore happy to keep dating. It is more flexible. You live apart and meet to have fun. I think it is more enjoyable than marriage!

Interestingly, despite the fact that many men were clearly looking for relationships that incorporated elements of companionate intimacy, none of them talked about how they would realistically be able to carve out different marital roles for themselves regardless of economic or employment realities. Rather they considered marriage as something that came with set responsibilities and ways of behaving rather than something that is

constantly negotiated, or they thought that structural limitations would determine the shape of their marital relationships.

This rigidity of expectation speaks to Nagase's (2006) study in which more than half of her male respondents who were in stable employment gave her only non-positive words when she asked them to describe their impression of marriage. The words and phrases they used were: "duty and responsibility," "reduction of free time," "constraint," "compromising," and "takes much money." Moreover, a recent study of elite men by Nemoto, Fuwa, and Ishiguro (2013) illustrates similar concerns, and highlights the costs and constraints that men considered marriage would impose on their lives and lifestyles.

My research suggests that whilst men and women are, to an extent, discussing potential relationships in terms of some aspects of Giddens' (1991) pure relationships; looking for relationships that prioritize emotional satisfaction over economic or social considerations, individuals in Japan are taking a middle way that incorporates structural considerations and normative expectations (cf. Adrian 2003; Hansen and Pang 2010; Quah 2008). Women in Hamamatsu more expressly wanted partners who they can share interests and time, and build companionate intimacies with, but continued to expect men to be breadwinners, working responsibly in a full-time job (Cook 2013). This reflects continued financial and structural limitations that women face in the workplace and within urban-rural neighborhoods where the influence of social pressure (*seken*) remains more pronounced than in large metropolises such as Tokyo. The ideals of more equal companionate relationships were also discussed by many male freeters I worked with, who professed wanting to find someone who shared their ideals, values, and desire for companionship. However, when exploring the actual relationships of men in long-term relationships the realities are far more contradictory than the ideals they discuss. Moreover, the presence of family expectations significantly affects configurations and practices of intimacy. What emerges is significant miscommunication over what constitutes the practice of intimacy in romantic relationships between men and women. We turn now to a case study that illustrates these issues.

Intimate romance

Taro-san was 38 years old when we first met in 2006. He had recently trained as a Japanese language teacher and was working freelance. While he could be considered a self-employed or skilled freelance worker, he strongly considered himself to be a freeter. As he put it: "I was an original freeter. I have always worked in this way – done service sector jobs and more recently teaching Japanese to save money to travel. I am a freeter." At the time he was without a girlfriend and he often spoke of feeling that he did not fit in Japan:

Now when I return to Japan I think about my next trip . . . I do not fit well in Japan. How do I explain? In Japanese society, I am supposed to get married, be a breadwinner, work full-time and be settled. But, that is not me. I don't want to do that . . . I would like to marry, but . . . not like that.

When talking about potential girlfriends, Taro suggested that he was looking for someone he could relate to, feel close to, someone who shared his love of travelling, who had opinions, and was independent. He was looking for a particular kind of intimate relationship that was not premised on roles *per se*, but on personal and personality compatibility. I was therefore surprised to learn, via a 2010 New Year's card (*nengajō*) he sent out, that he had gotten married the previous year. When we caught up over coffee in November 2010, roughly a year after his marriage, I was curious to hear all about the

woman he had tied the knot with. I asked how married life was treating him, and he paused before continuing: “Marriage is . . . well, it’s pretty tough (*kekko taihen da yo*).”

They had met at one of his workplaces. She was employed in an administrative role, was friendly, outgoing, his own age, and he gradually felt that he wanted to ask her out. Once he did she made it clear to him that at the age of 41 she was not just looking to date and have fun, but was serious about wanting to marry. As the eldest of three siblings (all female) and in her forties, her parents were very concerned about her unmarried status and she was under substantial pressure to find someone to marry.

When I asked why he had decided to marry her Taro replied:

It was my responsibility. She clearly told me at the beginning that she was looking for a serious commitment, not just dating. So I knew when we started going out that it was going to be serious. It would have been awful if I had just dated her and then split up with her. That would have been terrible. It was my responsibility to marry her, so we did . . .

Given his clear articulation in 2007 about the kind of woman he would one day like to marry, and his adamant stipulation that he never wanted to marry in order to fulfill any role or responsibility, I was therefore surprised that one of his motivations for marrying was derived from such a sense of responsibility. However, although he framed his marriage as being done out of a sense of duty and responsibility to his wife, he also felt the pressures of being unmarried, in his forties, and an eldest son (*chōnan*).

As per his original desires regarding a partner, his wife had travelled a little and was open to travelling recreationally. However, at the time he felt such trips were impossible due to his work schedule: he worked every day of the week except national holidays.

I feel unable to say no to any job that comes up. If I say no I worry that they will not ask me again so I feel I have to say yes. As a result, at the moment I am working every day.

The marital issues they were having stemmed partly from his work schedule:

It doesn’t help that I am working every day of the week. Since I came back from travelling I have lived with my parents, and after we married my wife moved in here with us. That has been causing some problems, indirectly. Before we married my wife knew that I worked every day of the week so she was not surprised by that. But I didn’t really tell her how I spend my free time; that was not good.

Therefore, whilst his intense work schedule did not directly negatively affect their relationship (indeed, having a husband who works long hours is not unusual), it put stress on them. It was, however, his behavior outside of work that was mostly causing the problems:

What she didn’t know before we married, and I should have told her, is that after I get home (usually around 6 or 7 p.m.), I eat with my parents and take a bath. Then if I have to do any preparation for the next day I do it, but otherwise I want to relax on the futon or the sofa with a book and not really talk, and then I go to bed early – at about 9 or 10 p.m. I am a quiet person, and I spend all day talking with people, so when I get home I don’t really want to talk much. This is a really big problem for her. We live with my parents so we don’t get much time alone, and she wants time together, just the two of us. We argue about this a lot, she asks “why can’t you go to bed just one hour later?!” but I have been going to bed at this time for a long time. I need to get my sleep. So we argue.

His inability or lack of desire to change his daily schedule was surprising. In an early interview he discussed at length how he wanted to marry a woman who he could share many things with, could talk and spend time with. Taro had given the impression of wanting a different kind of relationship from what he considered to be the Japanese norm and had clearly expressed not wanting to marry out of expectations. Yet in the case of his wife’s requests to go to bed just an hour later to give them time to talk, to be intimate

without his parents being present, he was unwilling to bend, yet simultaneously lamented the arguments and the difficulties they were having as a result. It seems that for Taro the kind of intimacy that his wife wanted to perform or enact was no longer desirable. The inability to participate in intimate acts such as spending time together talking and relaxing made his wife dissatisfied with their marriage, and as a result of resisting such intimacies Taro was directly enabling and perpetuating this dissatisfaction.

Intimacy and the family

Living with Taro's family exacerbates the issues they are experiencing in various ways.⁹ If they did not eat and spend time with his family they would have more time alone together, which is something that presumably would make his wife happier. However, moving out of the family home was not a possibility. Not only would it create a large financial burden, but as the oldest son they both felt it was his responsibility to care for his parents as they became older. Moreover, he didn't want to shirk that responsibility after having long disappointed his family with his life choices:

When I was younger they really worried about what I was doing. They didn't want me to travel. They wanted me to get a good job and settle down. As the years went by they gradually gave up. But they were disappointed I think. Despite that our relationship became ok. They were overjoyed when I told them I was getting married, really pleased. They had totally given up that I would get married or do anything that is generally expected in Japan. My wife's family too had just about given up. So everyone was very happy that we were marrying.

Having a new person move into the familial home had not, however, been smooth sailing:

Of course, my wife moving in was a bit of an adjustment. My mother still does everything, she is very energetic, so my wife didn't know what to do at first. She quit her job when we married, so she was at home every day. But she felt that there was nothing she could do, and she felt that when she tried to help she was interfering or just unnecessary. Everyone gets on well, but because of this there became some tension. I tried to stay out of it. I don't want to be in the middle. After about three months at home my wife decided to go back to work and now it is peaceful. My mother does everything as normal and we all eat together every day after work. I think my wife is generally ok now, but she still feels like she is in someone else's house. I guess that must be difficult for her too, especially as before this she was living with her family.

Contrary to older reports of daughters-in-law having to do everything (Lebra 1984; Vogel 1963), Taro's mother was content to keep running the household. When everyone was attempting to conform to traditional models of family behavior – of the daughter-in-law assisting – much tension and uncertainty was involved. As a result, for an intimacy between his mother and wife to flourish, not doing the things expected from traditional roles became necessary.

A further point of tension stemming from family was one directed to the future. Given that they are the eldest of their siblings, both Taro and his wife were already concerned about what they would do regarding future care of their parents:

Both sets of parents are healthy now, but in the future this is going to be difficult. Of course my wife feels it's her responsibility to look after her parents, but she also, being the wife of an eldest son, feels she will have to look after my parents. We are trying not to worry about it too much but I don't know what will happen. Maybe she will have to move to her family home at some point.

Unresolved issues and tensions are therefore at the heart of Taro's intimate trouble. After marrying a woman out of a sense of responsibility, he struggled with the repercussions of marriage and his desire to maintain his pre-marriage lifestyle without alteration or

compromise (cf. Nakano 2011). Moreover, his irregular employment had indirect effects – his work schedule meant he was out of the house and unavailable to his wife for much of the time, their tight finances made creating a separate household impossible even if they wanted one, and they had no time to travel or spend time with one another privately. Therefore, Taro’s employment instability, inability to say no to any new contracts, and his desire to maintain his pre-marriage rhythm of life, considerably affected the kind of intimacy he wanted, and was able, to enact within his relationship.

Dating intimacies and stalling strategies

The previous case dealt with a man who had married, despite his financial instability, and the ways in which his ideals of intimacy changed with the reality of marriage. However, the majority of freeters I met were yet to marry and thus could only speak of intimacy within their romantic (non-marital) relationships and what they imagined desiring in a marital partner, as discussed earlier in the article. Dating remains an area where it is thought that the practice of intimacy is more fluid and there is more room to negotiate relationship roles, or to end the relationship if expectations are not met.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Cook 2013), men’s irregular employment status often became a source of conflict for men in serious relationships, with girlfriends making it clear that marriage would be an impossibility without a change in employment status. However, making the shift from irregular to regular employment does not guarantee that marriage becomes a possibility. Indeed, dating men in irregular employment can be a strategy that some women use to enjoy an intimate companionate relationship without the pressure of marriage and children. The next section explores these ideas through a case study of one dating couple.

Hesitations

Kentaro and Mayumi had been together for five years. In 2006, Kentaro worked in the local cinema where I did fieldwork. Mayumi was an elementary school English teacher. At that time, Kentaro often lamented the pressure he was getting from Mayumi to find a “proper” job. She made it abundantly clear to him that marriage would never be a possibility as long as he was working part time. He took this seriously and throughout 2006 and 2007 he attempted to find a full-time (*seishain*) job.

At the beginning of 2008, he found full-time work with a securities company. In 2010 he had been there for two years and was intending to stay despite the fact that he did not like the job. He planned to remain in the company in the hope that he would be able to transfer to a different section. Moreover, one of his main motivations in staying was his desire to marry Mayumi. However, he felt she was hesitating:

I don’t know why. We have talked about marriage a lot, but these days she tries to avoid it. She talks about how she wants to study abroad for a year in Australia to improve her English so now she says she doesn’t want to get married yet. I would be fine for her to go away for a year even if we were married, but I think my family would probably not support that idea. Anyway, I took responsibility. I got a full-time job. I’m ready. But now she is hesitating. It worries me a bit.

Although Kentaro was seemingly unsure why Mayumi was hesitating, he was also rueful (to an extent) about his behavior within their relationship.

We have known each other a long time as we went to school together. So we were friends before we started dating. She knows me better than anyone. In a way we are almost like

a married couple, except that we don't live together. Whenever she comes to my place she always tidies up and cooks. I am really messy and there are always dirty plates and beer cans lying around. I don't mind about it, but Mayumi cares about it, so she always cleans up, often scolding me at the same time [laughs]. I don't ask her to do it, but she always does it. I guess because she always does it I rely on her. I think this is what our marriage will be like.

Given that the cut-off age for study abroad visas is 30 in Australia and Mayumi was 28, her desire to wait before marrying in order to fulfill her dream to travel and study English is understandable. However, with a lack of support to make that dream a reality after marriage and with Kentaro's messy habits, she was presumably aware of what marriage would be like and unwilling to take that step. In early 2011 Kentaro emailed to let me know that they had split up. Mayumi had expressed that she was no longer happy in their relationship, had decided to go to Australia for a year, and wanted to be single after so long in a relationship.

A stalling strategy

Many women I worked with wanted and planned to marry, but as already discussed they made it clear that they considered it to consist of demands and duties. Whilst they hoped to marry men who would be companions, who would be kind and helpful and share hobbies and chores, they were at the same time not convinced that marriage would be a fulfilling experience (cf. Nakano 2011; Nemoto 2008). Moreover, many women in their later twenties and early thirties began to experience pressure from parents, and, in the case of those who had partners who worked full time, from their partners as well regarding when to marry (as the case of Kentaro and Mayumi also illustrates). A 27-year-old woman stated:

I'm almost 28 and many of my friends are getting married. I feel a lot of pressure these days. After you've been with someone three or four years the topic of marriage comes up. People think it's time. I have been with my boyfriend for four years now ... I like dating him – we get on well. But I also like living with my parents and want to keep it that way a bit longer. I want children so I should marry by the time I am 30. Anyway, my boyfriend is not financially stable yet. He is trying to get a full-time post where he works and is studying for their tests. So we don't talk about marriage yet. We can just enjoy dating.

A 31-year-old woman who was adamant that she didn't want to marry in the future said:

I have never wanted to marry. I guess I am strange. All my friends think I am a bit strange. But I love to travel and I like my freedom. I dated a full-time worker for a couple of years and he was a great guy, but then he started to talk about marriage and was starting to be insistent so I broke up with him. Now I tend to date freeters. They don't really put pressure about marriage. ... If that situation happened I would probably say that I couldn't marry him because of money ... I don't know what will happen in the future though.

Some women may therefore date irregular workers for the very reason that they don't want to marry them or that marriage would be difficult. Effectively it constitutes a way of stalling the responsibilities and duties that the role of wife is thought to entail. By dating men in unstable employment, women are easily able to put the onus on men's financial instability as the reason why marriage is not possible or desirable. This consequently obscures their desire to postpone or avoid marriage entirely. Furthermore, to a certain extent it minimizes women's responsibility of not being able to marry and transfers it onto the shoulders of the irregular working boyfriend. After dating for a few years, women do not get pressured from their freeter partners about marriage because the men are all too aware (often largely as a result of their girlfriend's comments) that marriage when in irregular employment is not desired or desirable. Women are therefore able to enjoy relationships based on shared

interests, companionship, and fun without any imminent pressure of conforming to the full-time role of “wife.” Furthermore, if the role of wife begins to be enacted (as the case of Mayumi and Kentaro showed) they are easily able to end the relationship with no social repercussions. In addition, they are able to retain their independence and pursue their own interests without feeling the need to ask permission of anyone.

Mayumi’s hesitance to marry and insistence that she wanted to spend a year abroad, coupled with Kentaro’s comments that his parents would likely be against her studying abroad if they married, speaks to this tension of the internal negotiations of when to marry or not to marry and the intimate expectations that are present in that shift in status. Kentaro was ready – he felt he had stepped up and was now capable of financially providing for a family. As he put it, he “took responsibility.” He consequently wanted Mayumi to do the same, as a wife. She was, however, not ready or not desirous to become that kind of wife. It is somewhat ironic that it was at Mayumi’s urging and threats of the impossibility of marriage that Kentaro found stable work. Whilst the majority of women expressed the undesirability of dating or marrying an irregular worker, it is clear that for some it may be used as a good excuse for postponing or finding reasons not to marry. These examples illustrate that a shift in status from single to married also entails a shift in intimate expectations from the presumed fun and flexibility of dating – and the ability to end the relationship easily if it fails to live up to intimate desires – to the perceived expectations of the marital role in which intimate expectations may become subdued to the gendered roles and responsibilities of “wife” and “husband.”

Conclusions

This article has illustrated that both men and women desire intimate relationships based on shared hobbies, communication, and (often in the case of women) the sharing of household responsibilities. However, marital intimacies were conceived of differently to romantic ones, with marriage continuing to represent a series of expected roles and behaviors. Whilst these can of course be negotiated, many women and men I worked with had clear (and different) ideas of, and demarcations between, intimacies of romance and intimacies of marriage. This was clearly the case with Taro and his wife.

Taro’s story illustrates that his marital issues were not rooted in finances *per se*, but in his inability to compromise with respect to his daily pre-married schedule. His relations with his family had been characterized by disappointment through his prior refusal to do what was expected of him. However, by marrying, he significantly altered the dynamics of his familial relationships. Despite early interviews where he expressed the desire to carve out an intimate relationship based on companionship, shared hobbies, and communication, which his wife also wanted, he instead began to conform to normative and traditional expectations for an elder son and an adult man; through marrying, providing a daughter-in-law to the household, and “being responsible.”

Dissatisfaction within his marriage and on the part of his wife who was very unhappy at his refusal to go to bed an hour later are rooted in conflict between traditional notions of marital duties and obligations, and contemporary romantic ideals of intimate relationships. Whilst Taro felt he had done his duty and had taken responsibility by marrying his wife, she felt they needed time alone together, to be intimate in varying ways. This discrepancy in notions of marriage, duty, and responsibility has led to significant misunderstandings and the erosion of intimacy between them.

Meanwhile, for some, dating an irregular worker may be a means to stall the pressures and expectations of marriage. While Kentaro was a part-time worker, Mayumi

consistently pressured him to find regular work and threatened that if he did not she would be unable to marry him in the future. However, after he found stable work Mayumi began to backtrack as Kentaro pushed for marriage. Their case clearly shows that, after a number of years together, when marriage is on the table, a number of pressures begin to come in: pressures from partners, parents, and potential parents-in-law. It is therefore possible to suggest that, for some, dating men who are considered (and oftentimes consider themselves) unable to marry whilst an irregular employee may have some positives.

Of course, not all women who date men in the irregular labor market are using it as a convenient, no (marital) strings attached, relationship. There are women who want to marry men who work in the irregular employment sector who sincerely feel unable to due to their financial situation, to concerns over the future, or because they worry about what other people might think. However, given women's later marriage and increasing desire to put off or avoid marriage entirely, dating an irregular employee who may find it difficult to become a financial provider can be a good stalling strategy. It may limit the amount of pressure they receive to marry, from their partners at least. Furthermore, it gives them greater control within relationships regarding expected roles and allows for a space where relationships and intimacies are negotiated on different premises, or ended if unsatisfactory.

In conclusion, we can see that the nature and politics of intimacy have shifted. Both men and women want intimate relationships premised on being understood, on sharing time and interests, and therefore theoretically desire (to an extent) what Giddens (1991) has called a pure relationship. Yet, when we look at discussions of marital expectations and the practices of intimacy within relationships, we can see that the ways that intimacy is actually enacted differ. Women were invested in making the practices of intimacy they desired a reality in their relationships, including their marital relationships, and if this was not possible they would be likely to end the relationship (before marriage at least). Male freeters, meanwhile, appeared more resigned to the structural limitations they foresaw and instead slipped into more traditional ideas of marital roles by framing themselves as future breadwinners and putting in the caveat that what would ultimately happen in marriage would be dependent on social and economic factors. These different practices affect not only the kinds of intimacies that can be created, but also serve to re-inscribe normative gender ideals within the (future) marital sphere of male freeters. Perhaps then, male freeters' difficulty in marrying is not solely a result of their low income and limited ability to create a stable life, but partly because they fail to offer women alternative intimate incentives, holding instead to undesirable normative gendered ideals that many women no longer find attractive.

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Notes

1. This concept has been adapted from Morgan's (1996, 2009) idea of "family practices," which was developed to illustrate that contrary to preconceived ideas of family there is considerable cultural and historical variability in the ways that people "do" family.
2. The part-time worker figures refer to freeters only and not other categories of irregular workers such as temporary workers (*haken*) or day laborers. Female freeter numbers also increased between 2008 and 2011, from 830,000 to 870,000. However, the trend since 2004 has been a gradual decrease in female freeter numbers, which in 2004 were at 1,106,000 (MHLW 2012).
3. Although official definitions of freeters define them as being between the ages of 15 and 34, I included self-defined freeters over the age of 34 in my research.
4. *Haken*, short for *haken shain*, is a temporary worker employed by a temping agency and dispatched to companies. A *pāto* commonly describes a woman who is married and working part time. Finally, although *arubaito* is a broad category that has typically been used to describe part-time workers, my informants suggested that it is now used to describe students who work part time.
5. Women working part time to provide supplementary income to the household has also been a feature of this pattern. It is important to note, however, that this is a middle-class ideal that, whilst normative, does not reflect the realities of all Japanese households. See, for example, Martinez's (2004) discussion of female divers (*ama*) in Kuzaki-cho.
6. Recently in popular discourse, however, it is said that women in their twenties are looking for "sanpei" or the three averages – average looks, average wage, and average personality – as opposed to the *sankō* of the bubble era (high income, high education, and tall). It is argued that such "average" men will be the best bet to create a stable (*antei*) life with regard to salary and also to minimize the risk of infidelity (Fuji TV 2013).
7. Alexy (2011) similarly found women complaining that they don't want to be mothers to their husbands.
8. This corresponds to Jamieson's (2011) findings in the UK that, despite a belief in relationship equality and sharing of roles, many couples in reality end up splitting their responsibilities based on financial and employment constraints.
9. Nagase (2006) notes in her study of contemporary attitudes to marriage in Japan that co-habiting with in-laws remains relatively common in non-metropolitan areas although it has become uncommon in large urban areas.

Notes on contributor

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