

Order Amidst Change: Work and Family Trajectories in Japan

[Ronald R. Rindfuss](#), *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

[Minja K. Choe](#), *East West Center*

[Maria Midea M. Kabamalan](#), *University of Hawaii at Manoa*

[Noriko Tsuya](#), *Keio University*

[Larry Bumpass](#), *University of Wisconsin at Madison*

Extended abstract:

(Note, the paper is not yet written, but the analyses have been completed. We do not anticipate any problems in having a completed paper to a discussant by the beginning of March 2007.)

Abstract

Substantial family and work change has been and is occurring in Japan, especially affecting young adults. Examples include a decline in the availability of jobs that afford lifetime protection against unemployment, an increase in jobs that do not carry benefits such as retirement benefits, an increase in age at marriage and at first birth, and an increase in marital dissolution. Using life history data from the 2000 National Survey on Family and Economic Conditions, young Japanese appear to have responded in a fairly orderly manner. Marriage and childbearing have been postponed, but marriage still precedes childbearing. Education is completed prior to starting work. For men, once work commences they continue working. For women, the classic conflict between work and family roles is evident. Beneath this apparent order amidst change lies the possibility of a long term realignment of family and work roles. The timing of events is described both across as well as within life domains: as, for example, labor force participation after the completion of schooling but before marriage. While the relationships are reciprocal, delayed marriage provides the opportunity for two very different kinds of young adult experiences. On the one hand, our joint life history data allow us to examine an increase in the number of years prior to marriage spent outside of education, employment, or training (NEET): perhaps creating or reinforcing an evolving orientation towards leisure as a priority. On the other, we observe those who have accumulated extended employment experiences while unmarried: perhaps building among women a greater sense of the adult self as employed and independent. Each of these patterns may facilitate the formation of tastes that compete with marriage and parenthood. As a part of this, we can document the characteristics and attitudes of young men with irregular employment histories (FREETA) that may place them on an employment track lacking an expected stability seen as an essential prerequisite for marriage.

Introduction

Rooted in socio-cultural theories of age and social relations (Elder 1997; Ryder 1965), the life course perspective refers to a sequence of socially defined, age-graded roles that the individual occupies over time. A central premise is that the timing and sequence of occupying these roles, in and of itself, can impact later life course

development; although it is empirically challenging to determine the independent effect of timing and sequence on subsequent life course events. The work and debate on the effects of teenage childbearing in the United States is now perhaps the classic example (Geronimus and Koremann 1992, 1993; Hofferth 1984; Hofferth and Moore 1979; Hoffman, Foster and Furstenberg 1993a, 1993b; Rindfuss, Bumpass and St. John, 1980; Rindfuss, St. John and Bumpass 1984); the contentiousness of this debate is testament to the difficulty in separating the unique effect of the sequence and timing of early life course transitions on subsequent transitions and roles.

For many post-industrial countries, a substantial amount of life course data and analyses exist. From these data sets and analyses we know numerous stylized facts and the field has been making progress understanding the causal relationships among the various life course domains and trajectories. Up until now, Japan has been an exception. Prior to the 2000 National Survey on Family and Economic Conditions (NSFEC), life history data for multiple domains has not existed for Japan. While some specialized surveys collected marriage histories, fertility histories, or work histories, to the best of our knowledge, there had existed no empirical data on the life course, covering multiple domains, including work, schooling, marriage and fertility. Given the importance of Japan from a theoretical perspective, it is critical to descriptively examine various aspects of the life course there.

A set of components of the life course framework revolve around timing of roles and role transitions. Most societies have expectations about the timing of the adoption of such adult roles as worker, spouse and parent, and hence the timing of role transitions can be thought of as early, on time, or late (Elder, 1997; Riley, Johnson and Foner, 1972; Rindfuss 1991). Traditionally, comparing the profile of the timing of transitions to spouse and parent in the U.S. and Japan, those in Japan displayed substantially less variance: fewer had “early” transitions and fewer had delayed transitions (Morgan, Rindfuss, and Parnell 1984; also see Taeuber 1958). Women married and became parents in their 20s, typically their mid-20s; men a few years later. We show that there is less variation in the timing of life course events in Japan than in the U.S., and indeed than in most post-industrial societies. Further, life course roles in Japan were genderized (Tsuya and Bumpass 2004), with women expected to quit work at the time of marriage and manage all household and child rearing tasks. Once the children were grown, the wife/mother might return to part-time work. Men, on the other hand were expected to be the main breadwinner, and little was expected of them around the house.

Timing is an important dimension of the life course framework to the extent that societal expectations are strong regarding timing, to the extent that holding multiple roles simultaneously is difficult (e.g. student and worker, mother and worker), and to the extent that order is valued (e.g. marriage preceding childbearing).

Why Japan?

This section of the paper will discuss the importance of looking at Japan with respect to work and family spheres. Japan as a non-Western society will be discussed and the “*ie*” family system described. The dramatic gains in education, especially among women will be discussed, as well as the restructuring of the Japanese economy.

Data and analytic issues

This section will describe the 2000 National Survey on Family and Economic Conditions, including sampling and response rate issues. We will also discuss selectivity issues with respect to which cohorts are included in the analysis.

Timing of events

This will be descriptive data on timing of leaving school, first job, first marriage, first child and so forth.

Sequences

Here we look at 11 year sequences of family and work trajectories for ages 20-30 and 25-35. The family sequences involve marriage and parenthood; the work sequences involve education, part-time work and full-time work. Compared to the US (Rindfuss 1991), there are proportionally fewer sequences. Women, because of the roles of wife and mother experience more varied work sequences than men.

Order and disorder

This section begins with a discussion of what we mean by “order” and “disorder,” which basically boil down to sequences of work and family events that a mother would approve being termed orderly and the rest disorderly. We document the rarity of disorder in the family sphere for both women and men, which is related to very low rates of non-marital fertility. In the work sphere we document that breaks in schooling are extremely uncommon for both men and women. Once one leaves school it is very unusual to return. Women are much more likely to have interrupted work trajectories, and this relates to the spouse and mother roles.

NEET phenomena

“NEET” stands for not in education, employment or training. This is an issue that has become a concern in Japan in recent years, both in the press and the government. We show that this is not very common, but that it does exist, and it is not confined to the period right after leaving school.

Conclusion

The conclusion will emphasize implications for future trends in marriage, fertility and work.