

Mothering, Co-sleeping, and Sexless Marriages: Implications for the Japanese Population Structure

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I. BACKGROUND: MARITAL FERTILITY AND UNMET NEEDS FOR CHILDREN

The latest population projections published in January 2012 presented the prospect that the Japanese population will continue to decline over the next 50 years. The projections based on the 2010 census show that by 2060, the total population will be about 33 percent smaller than the 2010 population. In the future population structure, the productive-aged population (15-64 years old) will be only about half (51 percent) of the total population, while the elderly segment will occupy up to 40 percent, leaving less than 10 percent of people younger than age 15 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012a). Triggered by the “1.57 shock” in 1990, which made it publicly clear that Japanese total fertility rates were markedly low and that the Japanese population would soon start to shrink if such low fertility rates persisted⁽¹⁾, the Japanese government introduced various family-friendly policy measures, including enactment of the Childcare Leave Act and the provision of child allowances (Atoh, 2005a). Unfortunately, as shown in the population projections, it appears that raising fertility rates is not an easy task.

Researchers have investigated the causes of low fertility in Japanese society.

(1) Keeping replacement-level fertility (about two children per couple) is important for long-term population sustainability (Ohbuchi, 2005). In 1990, people were surprised at the lowest-ever recorded total fertility rate of 1.57 (Atoh, 2005b).

For instance, Ogawa, Retherford, and Matsukura (2009) found that later and fewer marriages as well as fertility decline within marriage are responsible for lowered fertility since the 1970s. Between the effects of marriages and births, Iwasawa (2002) discovered that from the 1970s to 2000, the impacts of non-marriage were more significant than the decline in marital fertility (70 percent vs. 30 percent)⁽²⁾. Downward changes in marital fertility, however, further depressed the total fertility rates in the 2000s. Data from the National Surveys on Marriage and Birth in Japan confirm that the completed number of children (the average number of children by people who have been married 15 to 19 years) went below 2.0. The completed number of children had consistently been around 2.2 over the past 30 years, declined to 2.09 in 2005, and further decreased to 1.96 in the latest 2010 survey. Interestingly, the couples' ideal number of children⁽³⁾ has been well above 2.0; it was 2.48 in 2005 and 2.42 in 2010. Even the intended number of children⁽⁴⁾ is still above two children: 2.11 in 2005 and 2.07 in 2010 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012b). Thus, what is important here is the fact that married Japanese want an average of two children, but some of them are not able to produce as many children as they hope to.

There are various possible causes for the “unmet needs” for children. Some argue that a depressed macro economy has negatively affected decisions to have a second child (Ogawa, 2005a). Another study indicates that women's employment opportunities have raised the indirect costs of children. Some working women can achieve two or more children while others cannot, depending on the time-flexibility allowed in a particular job environment (Osawa, 2005). In accordance with these explanations, when people were asked about reasons for not having the intended number of children, many said that “it costs too much to raise and educate children” (66 percent) and that “(having

(2) It should be noted that extra-marital births are extremely low (2.1 percent in 2010) in Japan (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012a).

(3) The number of children a couple ideally wants to have.

(4) The number of children a couple actually intends to have.

children) interferes with their job” (18 percent) (Kaneko et al, 2008). However, it should be noted that significant proportions mentioned other reasons for not having child, including “health reasons” (17 percent), “being unable to conceive a child” (16 percent), and “being reluctant to bear a child at an older age” (38 percent) (Kaneko et al, 2008). These answers imply that there may be additional, under-recognized factors for low fertility. This paper sheds light on these elements that have not been well explored by focusing on the issue of sexless marriages and the associated cultural practice of parent-child co-sleeping.

II. SEXLESS MARRIAGES AND MARITAL FERTILITY

According to biological demographers, the frequency of unprotected sexual intercourse is one of the direct determinants of a woman’s monthly probability of becoming pregnant, termed “fecundability.” Wood (1994) mentions that frequency of insemination is one of the proximate factors that affect fertility variations, along with such biological determinants as duration of lactational infecundability (intensive breastfeeding prevents a return of ovulation), length of ovarian cycle, and the probability of fetal loss. Similarly relying on the concept of proximate determinants, Bongaarts and Potter (1983) estimate fecundability based on the average weekly coital frequency⁽⁵⁾. According to their estimate, given once-a-week intercourse, about 13 percent of women will conceive during the first month, leading to an average of 12 months waiting time for conception (the time it takes to conceive). When there is only once-a-month intercourse, however, the average waiting time for conception can be as long as 43 months. Drawing on this socio-biological framework, demographers are starting to pay more attention to the impacts of inactive marital sexual frequencies on Japanese fertility. For example, Sato (2008) argues that Japan is a unique country that has achieved such ultra-low fertility rates without relying on more secure methods of contraception such as birth control pills and infertility operations because of

(5) The estimations assume no medical infertility, no usage of contraceptions, and random timing of coitus during a one-month period.

low marital sexual frequencies. Writing about the relationships between sexual frequencies and the resulting fertility rates, Kono (2007) also wonders why the Japanese do not seem to be too eager to engage in reproductive activities.

The phrase “sexless couples” has become a popular term in Japanese society for describing couples who do not have sexual intercourse with each other over a long period of time. This term was first coined by a Japanese psychiatrist based on his medical practice with patients who felt a need to have a child but who did not want to or could not engage in sexual intercourse. Then in 1994, the Japan Society of Sexual Science formally defined “sexless”: “a couple is categorized as sexless if, despite the absence of unusual circumstances, there has been no consensual intercourse or other sexual contact between them for a month or longer and it is expected that such a state will further persist over a longer period of time” (Abe, 2004:18). The existence of these sexless couples has caught the media’s attention, and it has been reported that the number of sexless people is greater than one might expect (see Kawana, 1995).

Although academically oriented studies on this issue have been scarce, perhaps due to the difficulty of collecting reliable data, one nationally representative dataset presents sexless figures that are high enough to match some people’s speculations. According to the data, the percentage of sexless couples (not restricted to married people) is gradually increasing, from 31.9 percent in 2004, to 34.6 percent in 2006, and to 36.5 percent in 2008. In addition, the 2008 version of the survey further reveals that the major reasons for not being sexually active are “tired from work,” “(stopped having sex) after a birth, without a particular reason,” and “(having sex is) too troublesome” (Kitamura, 2009). The data have been helpful in demonstrating the scale of sexlessness and also in providing a clue to the nature of sexual relations among Japanese couples.

Another national survey entitled “Work and Family,” conducted in 2007 and 2010 by the Nihon University Population Research Institute (NUPRI) with the World Health Organization (WHO) further confirms the high prevalence of sexlessness in Japan. Both rounds of surveys targeted randomly selected men

and women aged 20 to 59 for an interview, and those who were married or cohabitating were asked, along with many other socio-demographic questions, about the frequency of sexual intercourse with their partners over the past one year⁽⁶⁾. According to the results, the prevalence of sexless marriages in Japan is indeed high (Table 1). For both years, nearly one-fourth of the respondents had no sexual intercourse with the spouse over the past one year. On the other hand, about 15 percent of people had sexual intercourse as often as once a week or more. If we apply the definition of “sexless” couples given by the Japan Society of Sexual Science (not having sexual intercourse for over one month), it turns out that almost half of the respondents are in a “sexless” marriage.

Table 1. Frequency of sexual intercourse during the past year

Frequency	2007			2010		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Everyday	0	0	0	0	0	0
2-3 times a week	4	3	3	4	4	4
Once a week	11	11	11	12	12	12
Once in 2 weeks	15	12	13	14	10	12
Once a month	14	13	13	15	12	14
Once in 2 months	6	6	6	7	7	7
Once or twice in 6 months	16	13	15	14	14	14
Not at all	22	26	24	24	26	25
Other	1	1	1	1	1	1
No answer	11	15	13	9	14	11
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	1095	1369	2464	1047	1331	2378

Limited to respondents who are married or who cohabitated for over one year.
Source: Tabulated from a national survey, “Work and Family.”

Moreover, Table 2 (only 2010 data are shown) further reveals that even for those who wanted another child, the frequencies of sexual intercourse were not as high as might have been expected. Although younger people in their 20s were

(6) It is the only nationally representative survey, to my knowledge, that asked about the frequency of sexual intercourse specifically *within* a partnership.

more likely to engage in regular sexual intercourse of once a week or more (44 percent), the proportion of the sexless among those in their 30s and 40s was 23 percent and 18 percent respectively. Surprisingly, even for this group of people who wanted a child, the overall percentage of the sexless exceeded one-third (35 percent), while 14 percent had no sexual intercourse at all over the past year.

Table 2. Frequency of sexual intercourse: Respondents wanting a child

Frequency	2010			
	20s	30s	40s	Total
Once a week or more	44	23	18	27
Once in 2 weeks	16	14	8	14
Once a month	15	20	17	18
Once in 2 months	8	9	11	9
Once or twice in 6 months	5	14	13	12
Not at all	9	12	24	14
Other	2	1	2	2
No answer	1	5	5	4
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
N	124	347	122	593

Limited to respondents who are married or who cohabitated for over one year.

Source: Tabulated from a national survey, "Work and Family."

The nationally representative surveys have highlighted the fact that sexless marriages are common in Japanese society and the percentage of the sexless appears to be high even among those who want a child. We then have to question why married people are so sexually inactive in Japan. What are the underlying causes? One of the clues regarding this is given by Genda and Kawakami (2006) who found that for married Japanese the longer the weekly working hours, the lower the frequency of sexual intercourse. Moriki and others (forthcoming) similarly note that long working hours, as well as having a child under three years of age were major determinants of sexless marriages. An obstetrician also stated that the tendency in Japanese medical circles to discourage sexual intercourse during pregnancy may be contributing to sexless conditions before

and after a birth (Kitamura, 2009). In the next section, in order to further clarify the background of “sexlessness,” the nature of sexless marriages in Japanese society is explored using qualitative data from focus group discussions, emphasizing the concept of mothering and a preference for co-sleeping.

III. WHY SEXLESS? IMPACTS OF “FAMILY” VALUES AND THE PREFERENCE FOR CO-SLEEPING

The focus group discussions were organized in order to understand the underlying reasons and processes leading to sexless marriages, which are difficult to study with survey-based quantitative data. A total of 48 married people living in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area (24 males and 24 females) participated in the discussions. Eight groups, four for males and another four for females were organized, each with six people in different age categories. Although the participants were not selected for their sexless status, the discussions revealed that most participants were sexually inactive (at least within marriage). The author led four discussion groups with females and a male researcher from NUPRI led another four male groups. All of the discussions were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed for text analyses.

A significant issue appearing from the discussions is that “having sex” for Japanese married couples is a less important activity in their busy daily schedules compared to child-rearing tasks and/or work responsibilities. What is most important for them is to keep the “family” working; as long as the couple, often with a child or two, functions well as a family, whether there are sexual relations between them is a secondary matter, as indicated by the following quotes.

These days, my child has started to be more independent, but when she was smaller, much more care like breastfeeding was required. As my wife needs to take care of the child from the moment she wakes up and also has to do housework, she is exhausted. I myself need to go to work from early morning,

and after I come home, I have to take care of the child, playing with her, giving her a bath, and feeding her. So, I also become tired late at night. Since both of us are extremely tired, having sex is far from our thoughts. (46-year-old man with a three-year-old child)

Well, I also do not think there is a problem right now as we function well as a family. But it is rather awkward to answer this type of question (on the frequency of sexual intercourse) since we do not have much of it. (35-year-old man with a one-year-old child)

After we started to live together, sex suddenly disappeared from our daily life, and it seems that neither of us is particularly unhappy about it, either. Our emotional distance actually shrank. Our closeness as a couple increased, but the frequency of sex and that (the emotional closeness) are not going in the same direction. I think we have become a family, in a very good way. (32-year-old woman without a child)

Over the course of discussions, several female participants mentioned that the sense of “being a mother” may make them uninterested in sex. As an anthropologist has pointed out, Japanese culture is child-centered (Small, 2000), and these married women may be viewing themselves more as mothers, placing less emphasis on their sexuality as women. It has been also pointed out that in Japan the concept of a “couple” as a social unit is not as important, so “dating culture” is not as fully developed as in Western societies (Atoh, 2000; Sato, 2008). The Japanese mothers, perhaps observing the way their mothers behaved, were enculturated to believe that they should be “sex-free.” The quotes below demonstrate women’s views on “being a mother,” and their understanding of what a proper mother is.

Inside me, I was a woman before the child was born, but after the child, being a mother is the major part of me. It is like ‘a mother does not do such a thing’ (as having intercourse). (36-year-old woman with five- and two-year-old children)

As I remember my own mother, I have never seen her showing her womanly side. Having observed the way my mother was, perhaps I am feeling that ‘I do not want to show myself as a woman in front of my child. (26-year-old woman with a one-year-old child)

Some non-native Japanese researchers have written about “the Japanese way of mothering” from an *etic* viewpoint. Allison (2008), an American cultural anthropologist, examined the social significance of making and eating *obentos*, based on her initial amazement at the unthinkable time, care, and effort given to these small boxed lunches in Japanese culture. The mother of a pre-school boy, she could not believe that other mothers and school teachers take “lunch boxes” so seriously. However, after making daily *obentos* for her own boy, she realized that the whole issue regarding *obentos* is a ritual to socialize a person to become a proper Japanese who can conform to the social order. Mothers are expected to be responsible makers of *obentos* that children will eat, while children have to learn to eat the food neatly and without wasting time; with this effort together, people are gradually embedded in the world of Japanese culture. As this cultural analysis suggests, people are taught how to behave in a specific culture through such a seemingly small thing as making and eating *obentos*. Thus, it is not surprising that the young Japanese women who participated in the focus group discussions had internalized a way of being a proper mother in the process of growing up through daily interactions with their own mothers. In a sense, these women being sexless and not seeming to care about the sexless state may be a natural consequence of their trying to be “good” mothers.

In addition to the ideological closeness between a mother and a child, another important aspect of being a “good” mother often involves close physical proximity. It has been mentioned that, in contrast to the American style of parenting that focuses on the independence of children, Japanese parenting (i.e. mothering) aims to socialize children to become a part of a community as if they are extensions of the mother. Also, the mutual dependency between a mother and

a child, as symbolized in the *kawanoji*, a sleeping arrangement in which parents and a child sleep together in the shape of the Chinese character *kawa* (川), is understood as a healthy and desirable practice that provides a sense of security for the child (Small, 2000). Moreover, a paper entitled “Who sleeps by whom?” (Caudill & Plath, 1986) provides detailed accounts of sleeping arrangements in 323 Japanese households in Kyoto, Tokyo, and Matsumoto. (The data were collected in the early 1960s.) They argue that the Japanese family life focuses on the nurturing aspect and de-emphasizes its sexual component. Their data clearly suggest that people in three-person households (parents and a child) prefer to sleep in one room even if there is another bedroom available in the house, indicating a preference for parent-child co-sleeping. Couples sleeping alone, by themselves (a conjugal sleeping arrangement) are a minority. Furthermore, it is suggested that children are likely to continue to sleep together with parents(s) until they become fairly old. Children’s co-sleeping rates are 91 percent for those one to five years old, 79 percent for those six to 10 years old, fifty percent for those 11 to 15 years old, and 17 percent for those 16 to 20 years old.

One might think that this preference for co-sleeping might have changed over the years, but the answer is apparently otherwise. A more recent study by Kashiwagi (2011) shows that a majority (82 percent) of three-year-old Japanese children co-sleeps with parents. For American three-year-olds on the other hand, only four percent co-sleep; most American children sleep either alone (70 percent) or with siblings (25 percent). Kashiwagi explains that co-sleeping arrangements are chosen by Japanese parents because it is believed to be “best for their children” to sleep with parents. The fathers, however, are often released from co-sleeping arrangements as he, usually the bread winner, has to sleep well without the disturbance of children to prepare for the next working day. In addition, data from the 2010 round of “Work and Family” provide more support for the cultural ideals for co-sleeping. This survey asked to what degree respondents agree with the opinion that young children should sleep with parents. The results suggest that overwhelming proportions either agree (41 percent) or agree to a certain extent (45 percent) with this opinion, while people

who oppose this view are few (nine percent for disagree to a certain extent and two percent for disagree).

Finally, voices from the aforementioned focus group discussions illustrate the participants' preferences for co-sleeping. Although depending on the stage of their family cycle, some of them are currently sleeping only with the spouse, virtually none of them could think of letting young children sleep without a parent. Many expressed simple fondness for sleeping next to an infant, worries over an infant sleeping alone, or mentioned practical necessities for co-sleeping such as breastfeeding. After a long period of co-sleeping (and an associated infrequency of marital sex), entering elementary school is an often-mentioned timing for bedroom separation between parents and a child. The following conversational excerpts reveal complicated feelings regarding family and couple needs, which tend to require people to behave in different directions.

E (42-year-old woman with children):

At one point, among my friends it became a trend to raise a child in a separate room.

Moderator (author): What did your family do?

E: We continued to sleep in the shape of the river character. After all, my husband also wanted to sleep watching the child's face.

Moderator (author): Did he?

E: Yes, he liked to (co-sleep).

Moderator (author): How about you?

C (33-year-old woman with a child):

Same, the river character shape. But my child is not in the middle; my husband and I sleep next to each other and the child sleeps next to me. When we feel like it (having sex), we try to get up, but...

Moderator (author): A five-year old is there.

C: Exactly. I do not want the child to wake up... Well, there is a plan to rebuild the house within one year and we hope to make a separate room for the child. We intend to have a second child, so we will have two children's rooms, separate from our bedroom. I wonder if then our sexual life will

change or not...

This woman who has a plan to re-build the house with separate children's rooms has a vague idea that their sexual life as a couple *may* change along with changes in the housing structure. It should be stressed, however, that she is not expressing an urgent need to change the current sleeping arrangements. She and many of the other participants, both men and women, did not have a clear desire for a change or specific alternatives to co-sleeping. Sometimes they were facing immediate issues that were probably caused by co-sleeping, such as the practical difficulty of having sex to make another child and the problem of falling asleep too early with a child. The participants did not, however, seem to blame the sleeping arrangements for these problems. In the back of their minds, these women were thinking of the accumulated housework or the need to get up and greet husbands who tend to come home late at night. Between the need to be good Japanese mothers and to perform other responsibilities, including the reproductive ones, these women may be having dilemmas that they do not know how to handle.

IV. CONCLUSION

Japanese women are becoming increasingly expected to work as employees in order to fill the labor shortage that is to occur in the near future as a result of continuing low fertility rates. The current government, for example, is promoting the idea that women are a key element for revitalizing the Japanese economy and has proposed more comprehensive plans to better utilize their work abilities (The Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training, 2012). This political move reflects the reality that Japanese women's labor force participation rates have been uniquely lower than in other developed countries; Japanese women still typically leave the workforce after marriage and the birth of a child (Kono, 2007). It has been said that difficulties in combining productive and reproductive activities within the present Japanese socio-cultural framework are attributable to this work pattern (Nosaka, 2009). Therefore, at one end of the argument, it

should be welcomed that national policy is recognizing women's abilities and is working towards realizing their potential in the workforce. Also, if keeping the current workforce size is a priority, since the Japanese society does not have many other options besides relying on mass immigration and/or elderly workers, then there is an urgent necessity to improve the social environment in order to enable women to continue to work without jeopardizing their fertility intentions.

However, from a different point of view, there are findings that women themselves desire to focus on mothering rather than continued employment, *once they have a child*. Nagase (1999) states that even after the implementation of Childcare Leave Act in 1992, the percentage of women leaving the labor force after childbirth did not change significantly. Rather, it turned out that single women and married childless women became the core of the female labor force. Shirahase (2005) compares norms on housewives across six advanced countries: the United States, Great Britain Sweden, former West Germany, Italy, and Japan. The respondents were asked whether they agree with the statement: "Being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for a pay." The study concludes that Japan has an exceptionally high proportion of people who agree (46 percent "totally agree" while 22 percent simply "agree"). Supporting this norm is the finding that, according to a Mainichi newspaper survey conducted on Japanese women, major reasons cited by Japanese women for not letting their child/ren attend a day-care center were "being a housewife (62 percent)" and "preferring to raise a child by myself (31 percent)" (Ogawa, 2005b).

If mothering is strongly internalized in Japanese society, as has been discussed in this paper, we should pay more attention to this value and the significant implications it carries. As for the issue of sexless marriages, long working hours are probably a part of the story, but a more fundamental point is that the people in sexless marriages do not view the condition as "problematic," especially when they have a child and their daily life is functioning well. Importantly, in order for the family life to work well, women feel the need to be "proper" mothers, often willingly or naturally leaving their sexuality behind. Co-sleeping is also a piece that fills this picture. This practice makes marital

sexual activities practically more difficult (even when there is a desire), which depresses fecundability and the fertility rates which depend on it. The fact that the completed number of children is below two is probably related to the reality that after the first child, having sexual intercourse becomes less of a priority⁽⁷⁾. Even when they desire another child and realize the practical problems of co-sleeping for reproductive activities, Japanese people still seem to prefer to sleep with their young children. In other words, the sleeping arrangement is chosen for the sake of the children.

Perhaps the practice of mothering in Japan is at a crossroads now. A recent newspaper article on couples' relations after a birth calls for creating more time for the couples to be together, citing a French journalist who recommends that Japanese mothers relax their ideal mothering standards (Maeda, 2012). It is questionable, though, whether following "the French way" will work in Japan, which traditionally does not base its social structure on couples. However, it may be true that this ideal norm for proper mothering, a norm that costs time, money and energy, is making the decision to become a mother, to have multiple children, and to continue to work more difficult. Mothering will have to adapt to the emerging socio-demographic conditions in one way or another, so it is necessary to continue to closely examine what happens to cultural values regarding motherhood.

(7) One may question the case in the past when the average Japanese couple had many more children. Some differences from the past are 1) a prolonged courting period (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012b) and more permissiveness in premarital sexual relations (Yamada, 2007), which leads to less novelty in marital sex, and 2) increased age at marriage (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012c), which leads to less biologically available time for multiple pregnancies.

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Mothering, Co-sleeping, and Sexless Marriages: Implications for the Japanese Population Structure

<Summary>

Yoshie Moriki

The latest population projections published in January 2012 presented the prospect that the Japanese population will continue to decline over the next 50 years. Although the Japanese government has introduced various family-friendly policy measures, it appears that raising fertility rates is not an easy task. This paper sheds light on under-recognized factors for Japan's low fertility that have not been well explored, focusing on the issue of sexless marriages and the associated cultural practice of parent-child co-sleeping. It is found that, based on national surveys, sexless marriages are common in Japanese society and the percentage of "sexless" is high even for those who want a child. Focus group discussions conducted with Japanese males and females reveal that sexual relations between spouses are a secondary matter in their busy daily schedules. For Japanese couples, keeping the family, which is said to be highly child-centered, working well is more of a priority. Also, discussion data suggest that given strong cultural values for mothering, the sense of "being the mother" may make women, who themselves grew up seeing their mothers "sex-free," uninterested in sex. In this context, these women being sexless and not seeming to mind this situation may be a natural consequence of trying to be "good" mothers. Besides the ideological closeness between a mother and child, mothering involves close physical proximity as well; there is a marked preference for the *kawanoji*-sleeping arrangement in which parents and a child

sleep together in the shape of the Chinese character *kawa* (川). This sleeping arrangement, which makes spousal sexual activities more difficult in practice, is chosen by the parents, who believe that co-sleeping is good for children. Since mothering work is deeply internalized in Japanese society, it is suggested that more attention should be given to this value and the significant implications it carries with it, including the issue of sexless marriages. It may be true that this ideal norm for proper mothering, a norm that costs time, money, and energy, is making the decision to be a mother, to have multiple children, and to continue to work more challenging. The practice of mothering will have to adapt to the emerging socio-demographic conditions in one way or another, so it is necessary to closely examine what happens to this cultural value.