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Contemporary Japanese Career Women: Reflections on Profession, Life, and Purpose

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Abstract

In this article, I explore what motivates Japanese women to pursue professional careers in today's neoliberal economy and how they reconfigure notions of selfhood while doing so. I ask why and how one fourth of Japanese women stay on a career track, often against considerable odds, while the other three fourths drop out of the workforce. Employment trends indicate that more white-collar professional women are breaking through the "glass ceiling" and more women are now filling managerial posts. These trends have been supported by the recession, which has led to the liberalization of career paths that fit with women's tendencies to engage in short-term and part-time work. Through snowball sampling, I carried out in-depth interviews with thirty-eight women in their forties for eighteen months (between 2007 and 2010), and I conducted follow-up interviews with a selected group of these women (between 2014 and 2018). The women in this group had been in their careers long enough to be able to look back on their professional and private experiences. As I show in this article, the forties appear to be a turning point, because this age represents their first opportunity to take the time to reflect on their careers and to redress the imbalance between their professional and private lives.

Keywords

Japan, Career Women, Gender Inequality, Work–Life Balance, Life-Course Trajectories, Ethnography, Fieldwork, Participant Observation

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Contemporary Japanese Career Women: Reflections on Profession, Life, and Purpose

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In this article, I explore what motivates Japanese women to pursue professional careers in today's neoliberal economy and how they reconfigure notions of selfhood while doing so. I ask why and how one fourth of Japanese women stay on a career track, often against considerable odds, while the other three fourths drop out of the workforce. Employment trends indicate that more white-collar professional women are breaking through the "glass ceiling" and more women are now filling managerial posts. These trends have been supported by the recession, which has led to the liberalization of career paths that fit with women's tendencies to engage in short-term and part-time work. Through snowball sampling, I carried out in-depth interviews with thirty-eight women in their forties for eighteen months (between 2007 and 2010), and I conducted follow-up interviews with a selected group of these women (between 2014 and 2018). The women in this group had been in their careers long enough to be able to look back on their professional and private experiences. As I show in this article, the forties appear to be a turning point, because this age represents their first opportunity to take the time to reflect on their careers and to redress the imbalance between their professional and private lives. Keywords: Japan, Career Women, Gender Inequality, Work–Life Balance, Life-Course Trajectories, Ethnography, Fieldwork, Participant Observation

Introduction

What motivates Japanese women to pursue professional careers in today's neoliberal economy and how are they reconfiguring notions of selfhood in this pursuit? The neoliberal global economy is undermining conventional family ties, which is accentuating the fluidity of this process of changing social structures. Japanese women remain underrepresented in advanced career positions in finance, industry, entrepreneurship, government, and academia. This has forced them to creatively define what it means for a woman to have a career in a male-dominated society. While career paths for Japanese white-collar men in these sectors remain fairly standardized, Japanese women are just beginning to define what it means for them to have a career (Nemoto, 2016; Tachibanaki, 2010; Ueno, 2013; Vogel & Vogel, 2013).

Since the 1980s, career options for middle-class women have significantly changed. A select group of women have been able to make use of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOC) of 1985 to embark on full-time careers. During the twentieth century, Japan transformed from an industrial to a postindustrial society, experienced rapid economic development and increased globalization flows, and introduced neoliberal policies. All of these factors transformed the workplace, affecting whether and how women were able to establish careers. Japanese labor markets for women are currently in turmoil. Occupational changes present contemporary professional women with serious challenges as they contest conventional notions of femininity and negotiate new gender roles and cultural meanings. Employment trends in Japan indicate that increasing numbers of white-collar professional women are

breaking through the “glass ceiling” as digital technologies blur and redefine work in spatial, gendered, and ideological terms (Cook & Hayashi, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011; Nemoto, 2016; Senda, 2015; Ueno, 2013; Vogel & Vogel, 2013). In the context of changing gender hierarchies in the post-middle-class Japanese workplace, I focus on the professional women who are at the forefront of these profound changes.

Japanese women have been employed in professional career tracks for decades, thanks in part to the EEOL guaranteeing women equal opportunities and equal treatment. Nonetheless, women still must fight against institutionalized prejudice and struggle to be accepted as equals in the workforce. Since the Japanese economic recession of the 1990s, the female workforce has experienced revolutionary changes as more women have sought to establish careers (Holloway, 2010; Jackson & Tomioka, 2004; Nemoto, 2016; Rowley, 2008; Senda, 2015; Ueno, 2013). In fact, the economic downturn in Japan has brought more women into managerial posts, because it led to a liberalization of certain career paths that fit women’s tendencies to engage in short-term and part-time work. This development raises new questions: How do Japanese working these women view themselves, how do they act in and outside the workplace, and how are they changing this gender hierarchy? In this article, I address these questions by analyzing how these white-collar professional women in Japan fashion their gender identities through the mutual conditioning of structure and self.

The Japanese labor market for women is currently undergoing major changes in terms of improved gender equality policies, a more adequate work–life balance, better maternity leave policies, and improved childcare facilities. Women can finally enter the job market and stay employed, even after marriage and childbirth. Although many women now have long-term careers, they are also culturally bound by the Confucian concept ethos of filial piety. As social psychologist Sumiko Iwao (1993) has noted, for Japanese mothers, much importance is given to the home (both actual and symbolic). The same holds true for taking care of their husbands; wives are expected to make their husbands’ home lives as untroubled as possible. Iwao (1993) has further explained that the age distribution of employed Japanese women forms an M-shaped curve, with the first peak at around twenty to twenty-four years of age and the second peak at around forty-five to forty-nine. After women work for a brief period, they are expected to drop out of the labor force, and only after their children are school-aged do they have the option of working again. Nevertheless, many women are unable to reenter the workforce on a full-time basis, because they might have to take care of aging parents or parents-in-law at home (Coulmas, 2007; Roberts, 2011; Traphagan, 2000).

Japanese women are currently in the process of shaping the meaning of a female career. Career paths for Japanese white-collar men remain fairly standardized; however, Japanese women are just beginning to redefine what it means for them to have a career (Nemoto 2016; Tachibanaki, 2010; Ueno, 2013; Vogel & Vogel, 2013). I approach this phenomenon on three levels. First, I analyze how the changing global economy has impacted Japan and how the country positions itself in that changed environment; second, I discuss how these changes have impacted changing gender hierarchies in the various work sectors; and third, I examine how these changes play out at the individual level for white-collar professional women. My analysis focuses on the life, family, and career cycles of Japanese women, examining how these three cycles interact. In the current situation, these cycles are out of sync, but the major transitions now underway are favorable for many women, including my informants.

Career is therefore the central concept through which I understand these women’s lives; it is their white-collar professional careers that set them apart from other women. From the postwar period until about the early 2000s, most women were housewives, with either full-time or part-time jobs, and their careers were framed in more domestic terms; a woman’s primary life goal was to raise a family was the primary life goal of a woman. By definition, the life of a career woman reverses these priorities. Thus, building a career becomes primary, and

although this path is not always straightforward (given the lingering gender hierarchies), establishing an identity is framed by building a career. Thus, these women try to shape a life that balances both includes family around their and career goals. As I show in this article, different historical moments constitute different environments in which this occurs, but all of my informants, regardless of their historical circumstances, have achieved careers.

In Japan, nearly seven in ten highly qualified women (68%) report that they have left work voluntarily at some point in their careers. Among women who have children, that percentage rises to 87%. What impels three quarters of Japanese women to drop out of their careers? The answer to this question is not straightforward, because it involves many factors. Hewlett and Sherbin's (2011) survey on career women in the United States and Germany uses the terms "off-ramping" and "on-ramping." "Off-ramping" refers to taking time out of a career for one reason or another, while "on-ramping" means rejoining the career path. According to these authors, "off-ramping" is the consequence of a complex interplay between "pull factors" (within family, community, and society) and "push factors" (related to work). In Japan, the pull factors of family are considerably stronger than in the United States and Germany. Pull factors other than having children include the demands of caring for elderly parents or other family members and personal health issues. The lack of female role models was another factor noted to me repeatedly by many young professional women in their twenties and thirties, although the older women had the same complaint.

For the past 30 years, more women have been pursuing degrees in higher education, aiming for lifelong careers rather than dropping out of the workforce after marriage and childbirth, only to come back several years later for a part-time job. In fact, in Japan, nearly seven in ten highly qualified women (68%) report that they have left work voluntarily at some point in their careers. Among women who have children, that percentage rises to 87%. As Hewlett and Sherbin (2011) asked in a recent study, what impels three quarters of Japanese women to drop out of their careers? The answer to this question is not straightforward, because it involves many factors. Hewlett and Sherbin's (2011) survey on career women in the United States and Germany uses the terms "off-ramping" and "on-ramping." In other words, "off-ramping" refers to taking time out of a career for one reason or another, while "on-ramping" means rejoining the career path. According to these authors data from Hewlett and Sherbin's (2011) survey on career women in the United States and Germany, "off-rampings" are the consequence of a complex interplay between "pull factors" (within family, community, and society) and "push factors" (related to work). In Japan, the pull factors of family are considerably stronger than in the United States and Germany, whereas push factors, combined with an unsupportive workplace, contribute to women's off-ramping. In this context, push factors lead to taking an off-ramp at some point in one's professional life. Pull factors other than having children include the demands of caring for elderly parents or other family members and personal health issues. Finally, the lack of female role models was another factor noted to me repeatedly by many young professional women in their twenties and thirties, although the older women had the same complaint.

The main deterrent, however, to a lifelong career track is the workplace itself—the push factors. In Japan, Hewlett and Sherbin (2011) have found, three factors keep women from staying on track: "rigid workplace traditions," "salary inequities," and "lack of role models." Japan is still characterized by a largely male-oriented work culture, and companies continue to channel most women into noncareer rather than career tracks. Furthermore, as Yamada Masato, the former deputy mayor of Yokohama noted, women still earn only 72% of what their male counterparts make for equal work. There is an incentive for women to quit, because when parental leave is necessary, couples tend to decide that the woman will look after the children while the husband continues working. This is actually "economically rational" (Hewlett & Sherbin, 2011). Many believe that the main reason Japanese women leave their jobs is a lack

of adequate childcare support, but this is not the case. Surprisingly, only 32% of Japanese women report inadequate childcare, whereas this percentage is 74% in the United States. Another reason given for women quitting their jobs is a lack of eldercare and senior homes, yet only 38% of university educated women report that they would quit their jobs to take care of parents and in-laws (Hewlett & Sherbin, 2011). Ultimately, the main obstacle is the workplace.

Hewlett and Sherbin (2011) join many others, including policy makers and labor scholars (Blair-Loy, 2003; Coughlin, Wingard, & Hollihan, 2005), in posing the issue of Japanese women and careers in the negative: Why don't they stay on a career track? This article reverses the analytical trend. The question I ask is why and how one quarter of women *do* enter and *do* try to stay on a career track. My interest lies not with the three quarters of women who drop out, but with the other quarter, those who do fashion work careers, often against considerable odds. Taking both the past and the present conditions of Japanese female career trajectories into account, in my larger project, I analyze this historical trajectory in the context of multiple work sectors and life-course perspectives by interviewing and interacting with 120 informants ranging in age from their early twenties to their mid-nineties. In this article, however, I focus solely on women in their forties.

Identity & the Shaping of White-Collar Career Trajectories: Crafting “Career Women”

Recent literature has discussed the structural changes in the global economy, how they affect Japan, and the related issues of gender and the position of women in the workplace, ranging from office ladies (OLs) to white-collar professionals. This research has shown that careers for women in postwar Japan were shaped according to the domestic roles of wife and mother, and that paid work was incorporated in ways that enhanced and enabled those primary roles. Over the last past forty to fifty years, much has been written about the salaryman (Dasgupta, 2003; Hidaka, 2010; Okura Gagné, 2010) and the blue-collar worker (Gill, 2001; Roberts, 1994), making the ethnography of work largely male-centered. When it comes to women, we know much a great deal about office ladies and housewives (Borovoy, 2005; Iwao, 1993; Kondo, 1990; Lebra, 1984; Ogasawara, 1998), but less about professional women (Nemoto, 2016; Roberts, 2011).

Of those who have studied Japanese women in the workplace, Dorinne Kondo, Takie Lebra, and Yukiko Ogasawara have discussed social constraints, personal fulfillment, and notions of selfhood. Kondo and Ogasawara have examined selfhood and identity. Kondo's (1990) poststructuralist approach to destabilizing Western notions of Japanese selfhood was an ambitious project, but her emphasis on narrative discourse ended up removing the agency of her sources. Ogasawara (1998), on the other hand, examined the work patterns of office ladies and their structural inferiority vis-à-vis male coworkers. Ogasawara addressed the maintenance of the gender status quo but neglected to discuss signs of change or acts of resistance that defy the status of Japanese office ladies in today's workplace. Nor did she discuss the relationship between the few women in managerial posts and the office ladies.

Lebra's comprehensive ethnography, *Japanese Women: Constraint and Fulfillment* (1984), analyzed the life cycles of fifty-seven women and made a significant contribution to the comparative study of Japanese women in relation to sex polarity, role specialization, gender studies, and aging. Shifting economic and social patterns in Japan have created areas of tension between traditional and modern lifestyles, customs of education for women, and employment options. Lebra's ethnography examined how different generations of Japanese women, ranging in age from their late twenties to their early eighties, have established an awareness of unique self-identity while contesting the social roles of dealing with household affairs and child-rearing despite the prevailing ethos of filial piety and family obligations.

My principal criticism of Lebra's ethnography is that in limiting her ethnographic site to a single company, she failed to capture different layers of historical processes and meanings. If she had analyzed her site as a process, and not only the trajectories progressing from "premarital stage" to "old age," she could have identified the multilayered junctures and subtle nodes of change that lie at the intersections of constraint and fulfillment. This would not have changed her general point, but a more nuanced approach to contextualizing the life cycles of her fifty-seven informants would have created a more fluid map of her research site.

In *Office Ladies and Salaried Men* (1998), Ogasawara discusses how microlevel power dynamics are not a simple reflection of macrolevel power dynamics and attempted to address this oversimplification (Dasgupta, 2003; Hidaka, 2010; Lebra, 2007). Nevertheless, the study failed to reveal the complexity that other studies omitted. Ogasawara described the activities of office ladies as acts of resistance vis-à-vis toward their male superiors but, by doing so, removed the agency of her subjects. The only theory to which she makes reference is James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), attempting to show that "interaction and emotion management on the micro level are not mere reflections of power relations on the macro level. They may, in fact, reverse them" (pp. 156–157). For instance, such strategies may maintain ambiguity of meaning and keep the actor hidden, thus allowing women to engage in dissent while avoiding direct confrontation. Ogasawara (1998) explained that these "acts of resistance" take different forms, such as gossip and gift giving on Valentine's and White Day, but she did not thoroughly flesh out the impact these actions have on men, aside from preventing their promotion and ascension of the corporate ladder. In Japan, Valentine's is typically observed by girls and women presenting chocolate gifts, usually to boys or men, as an expression of love, courtesy, or social obligation. On White Day, the reverse happens: the men who received a chocolate on Valentine's are expected to return the favor by giving gifts. Typically, White Day gifts are jewelry, white chocolate, cookies, and lingerie. Unfortunately, Ogasawara did not thoroughly flesh out the impact these actions have on men, aside from preventing their promotion and ascension of the corporate ladder.

Japanese women have always worked both inside and outside the home; it is just that their labor outside the home was previously less structured and seldom required a university degree, and their main identity was tied to their domestic roles. In the 1870s, prominent Japanese philosopher Nakamura Masanao coined the term *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother). This philosophy was established by the Meiji government to facilitate Japan's transition to modernity. Women were expected to contribute to the new nation by taking a more active role in child-rearing, by engaging in patriotic activities, and by contributing to household income.

The position of office lady is no longer the only professional option available to Japanese women. Several major companies now have full promotion systems for female workers. Japan is now attempting to improve the conditions of female employment, but in comparison to Western countries, very few women in Japan hold managerial positions. As Iwao (1993) has explained, in previous years, most corporations neither expected nor allowed women to work overtime to be recommended for promotion. Iwao added that some corporations have recently revised their rules because more women are staying on the job long enough to be qualified for promotion. In Japan, earnings are based on seniority, not merit. Even though the EEOL dictates that women and men should earn equal wages for equal work, women still earn much less.

After the 1973 oil crisis, Japanese industries began to restructure, resulting in a shift to software and services. Heavy industry, which had experienced sustained economic growth during the 1960s, was at this point slowly declining and being replaced by light industries, such as financial services. At this juncture, the Japanese economy entered the postindustrial age (Ueno, 2009). This shift opened up new opportunities for women in the form of part-time jobs,

which especially appealed to women who had been out of the labor force for more than a decade.

Since the early 1990s, more women have been seeking advanced degrees and lifelong careers. The female career track in Japan is therefore new in terms of the professional life course such women can expect. This does not imply that these women are the first to have careers per se. The career option of “professional housewife” was followed by many Japanese women throughout the 1970s. The Japanese *kyaria ūman* (career woman) seems to represent a trend that is slowly but steadily reshaping the workplace (Mathews, 1996; Nemoto, 2016; Ōsawa, 2006; Roberts, 2011; Ueno, 2009, 2013; Yamaguchi, 2009). As Amy Borovoy (2010b) has put it, the new work environment will better reward the genuinely talented, regardless of gender. Employing significantly more women would be a way out of this impasse. Japan needs to figure out how to employ more women and to keep them employed after they get married or after childbirth. Companies should be concerned with how to establish a “successful” career path for women and how to keep them motivated to pursue lifetime employment. There are many Japanese companies that have improved initiatives for work–life balance and that provide better childcare facilities, but it will take at least another two decades for these changes to percolate through society and mainstream consciousness (Nemoto, 2016; Ōsawa, 2006; Roberts, 2003, 2004, 2011).

In Japan’s recessionary economy, double-income couples would be of great benefit. To achieve this goal, companies would have to create the incentives and the necessity for both men and women to work. Under current circumstances, however, there is still a firmly gendered division of labor justified by the fact that women’s wages are low (Tsuya, Bumpass, Choe, & Rindfuss, 2005). Even though some women are highly educated, their main goal for the future is nonetheless to get married and settle down. Most of my informants in between their twenties, thirties, and early forties complained about the difficulty of finding a partner, and they often explained it the problem in terms of men feeling intimidated by their financial independence. They lamented that Japanese society still expects women to follow a traditional life course and they worried that society would blame them if they deviate from the norm. Most young women want to have a career and a family, but Japanese gender norms seem to bar them from having both. Needless to say, there is a difference between being born during the *ushinawareta jūnen* (lost decade) and entering the job market during that time. The timing is important, because it will shape the life-course experience in significant ways. For instance, what kind of hardship—social, financial, or structural—did one go through while growing up? The decisions these women made ten years ago were different from those they would make today; the social norms have changed significantly.

The crafting of a career woman’s identity is highly contingent on the historical climate, as well as one’s socioeconomic background, education, work sector, family formation, and personal qualities. The factor that probably has the largest impact on career formation is the prevailing set of historical circumstances. Professional women are still establishing a socially sanctioned identity for themselves. To achieve their identity, they might have used the male corporate track as a model in a largely male-oriented work environment, but these women, through their efforts and significant professional achievements, are molding a Weberian “ideal type.” The career-woman pioneers of the 1950s have become the predecessors of the current professional woman and are crafting a socially accepted professional identity. As their profiles show, my informants were invested in crafting professional selves and creating a new life-course trajectory for Japanese women of the twenty-first century (Aoki, 2008).

Japanese women in their forties were my largest group of informants. These women were part of the economic-bubble generation, a time when many companies were feeling no economic worries and when it was fashionable to place a small number of women in career-track positions. Once they were forty, these women had achieved a stable career position for

which they had worked hard. Having attained this status within their company, for the first time in their lives, these women had reached a level at which additional work does not necessarily translate into significant career advancement. Seniority, the Japanese criterion for promotion, is more pronounced at this age. Women who have not yet married might hold out, but their chances are quite low. Men go through a so-called midlife crisis in their fifties; women seem to have this crisis during their forties.

Do women really have a crisis, or do they simply struggle with a contradiction between reality and self-perception? It seems that because career women in their forties live less hectic lives than they did when they were younger, they have more time for reflection. When I asked my informants to think back on their professional and personal experiences, they seemed more reflective and more tentative in their answers than women who were either older or younger. They would respond that their *ikigai* (sense of purpose in life) was gone—a sign of depression, of trying to find a new purpose, or of complete disorientation. This did not mean, however, that younger or older women did not mention these concerns to me; they were more likely to discuss them with a certain lightheartedness and feigned indifference.

The path to managerial posts remains challenging for women. Women are expected to leave work earlier than their male coworkers in order to go home, prepare dinner, and look after the children. However, staying late in the office is a prerequisite for climbing the corporate ladder, and this gives men the advantage of getting promoted while women stay behind (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hewlett & Sherbin, 2011; Nemoto, 2016; Rowley, 2008). The economic costs of preventing women from gaining more power within a company are significant, because each woman's intellectual potential is wasted. Howard W. French (2003) has estimated that women's relative lack of economic participation amounts to a loss of 0.6% in economic growth per year. Japanese men and women should take the opportunity to shape this new environment, because the profound changes Japan is undergoing are also affecting family and social life. Once all workers adapt to the changing environment, a new set of interpersonal work and familial relations will emerge. It is up to the present generation to harmonize traditional, deeply rooted principles with the inevitable contemporary changes in the working environment.

The present study therefore contributes to the current literature on working women in Japan and aims to address the following questions. First, I investigate the new global trend of women pursuing professional careers in finance, industry, entrepreneurship, government, and academia. I give special consideration to how more women are holding senior positions in a male-centered environment. If work is the central axis of their personal identity, does career planning represent the means through which they achieve self-actualization? How does the changing hierarchy of work affect the family, the self, and individual aspirations? Depending on the sector of work, I look deeply into these women's stories, struggles, tensions, family, work, and selfhood, commenting on how gender itself is being reshaped in these contexts. Second, I ask how these women deal with work and family obligations at a time when the very idea of a career is being destabilized, deinstitutionalized, and deterritorialized. Third, I ask what it means to these women to have a career in finance, industry, entrepreneurship, government, or academia given the constraints their career places on them. Fourth, to what extent do they take advantage of these constraints to establish a sense of self in their tenuous career positions, which are constrained by institutional structures and destabilized by the dynamics of a neoliberal environment?

Methodological Approach

The methodologies best suited for this research was ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. The anthropological fieldwork method is appropriate for this inquiry because it enables an extensive, in-depth, and multilayered

understanding of what motivates Japanese women to pursue professional careers and how they reconfigure notions of selfhood in this pursuit. I conducted fieldwork research for eighteen months (between 2007 and 2010) as well as follow-up interviews with a selected group of these women (between 2014 and 2018). I was based in Tokyo and located my ethnographic fieldwork sites among financial institutions, large industrial companies, the National Diet, and universities. The financial institutions are international conglomerates of financial services and consulting companies, whereas the industrial companies are manufacturers of automobiles, consumer electronics, computers, and processed foods. At the National Diet, I included female politicians in the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors. I also included academic professionals from four major universities and several entrepreneurial companies.

My positionality, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity vis-à-vis my informants as a single female graduate student in the United States did not interfere with the type of research I was doing. Because my research focused only on women, I was able to interview them and gain their trust and respect. If I had worked with men, I might have faced more difficulties. Writing about the life paths of professional Japanese women from different generations required overcoming not only substantial age barriers but also different behavioral patterns. As Michael Jackson argued in *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*, the *raison d'être* of ethnography is not to achieve a better understanding of us and the 'other,' but rather serves to negotiate intersubjectivity at the nexus of self and other (1998, p. 208).

Ultimately, the collection of these women's life stories aims to deconstruct preconceived notions of Japanese female submissiveness, contextualizing their agency within multidimensional fields of particular social, economic, and political contexts as they assess their social roles according to their life cycle: the progress from the premarital phase and its constraints to marital transition, postmarital involvement, motherhood, occupational careers, and later years. The overarching argument of this study is based on the connection between individual biographies, institutional cultures, and larger social transformations.

Selection of Informants

Informants were recruited through snowballing sampling during the fieldwork phase. I asked two professional women whom I had met in Tokyo while doing pre-fieldwork research whether they could ask their friends to participate in the research, and they agreed, because it is customary practice in Japan to follow through on an appointment scheduled by a friend.

I interviewed thirty-eight women, from which I chose five to interview in more detail. I met these women on a regular basis. Activities such as accompanying them to family excursions on the weekend, tutoring the son of one informant at night and the son of another informant once a week on a Saturday afternoon, and singing in a medieval music choir once a week gave me the opportunity to meet my busy informants regularly. We talked before and after the activities and often had dinner afterwards. The interactions with the remaining thirty-three women I used for context as all these women in this same age cohort had comparable life experiences and were struggling with similar issues along the life course.

I conducted unstructured life-history interviews with informants previously identified during the summers of 2007 and 2008. Data collection involved a combination of ethnographic methods, such as interviews, engaged conversation, participant observation, and research in government documents. From all of these ethnographic methods I used interviews the most with all my informants, followed by participant observation. I developed a detailed interview schedule to better understand the career positions of white-collar professional Japanese women. Since accompanying these women during a workday or shadowing them during a meeting was not allowed by company policies, I had to find ways to overcome this burden and interact with a few informants outside their office hours. My field research contextualizes my informants'

agency within multidimensional fields of particular social, economic, and political contexts. I also conducted formal interviews with these white-collar professional Japanese women at company or university events and in offices, conference rooms, coffee shops, restaurants, and private homes. These semi-structured interviews revolved around the research questions and objectives described above. The interviews included basic questions about social demographics, such as age, marital status, education, and socioeconomic background; questions about aspects of work history, such as employment, career trajectory assessment, promotion, and income; and questions related to the three research objectives previously outlined, that is, framework requirements to work at the subject's institution, gender-based inequalities in the workplace, constraints on getting promoted, assessments of the quality of work satisfaction, perspectives for the future, and advice for other aspiring career women.

Data generation was primarily based on the extensive interviews and participant observation and times when I transformed direct experiences and observations into fieldnotes. Reflexivity based on the fieldnotes involves the recognition that an account of reality does not only reflect reality but, instead, creates as real in the first place whatever it describes. I produced, processed, and assembled fieldnotes into texts describing these women's lives, events, and scenes that have given definite shape and substance to these matters. I did not simply work out preconceived ideas but had to construct my descriptions, deciding where to start, what to put first and what later, what to include, and what to ignore.

Thus, data generation is grounded on the representational processes through which the voices of my informants are selected or ignored, connected to one another, and if possible, integrated and reworked to produce compound characters. While writing, I had to determine whose points of view to present, what is significant about a person or event, and what is incidental and can be left out. These decisions are even more relevant for subsequent readers who have no independent access to the reality that is often presumed to lie behind and to have shaped the written account. Thus, from a reader's perspective, the text about these women's lives creates that world as a phenomenon.

I ensure rigor and trustworthiness through use of thick description to show that my research study's findings can be applicable to other contexts, circumstances, and situations. I have written ethnographic fieldnotes that collect and represent my informants' meanings in a rigorous and grounded manner and incorporate not words and phrases abstracted out of context but rather the actual interactional occasions in which these terms are used. For that purpose, the distinctive procedure I use is to observe and record naturally occurring talk and interaction. For example, I interviewed my informants about the use and meaning of specific terms and phrases, such as *ikigai* and in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedures, and my focus lies on the actual, situated use of those terms in ordinary interaction as it requires learning when and how informants actually make such assessments and what knowledge they rely on in doing so.

The reflexive lens helps us appreciate how my own renderings of others' worlds are not and can never be descriptions from outside those worlds but are, rather, informed by, and constructed in and through relationships with those under study. Therefore, based on my fieldnotes, we gain an understanding through subjecting ourselves to the logic of others' social worlds, a logic that comes to constitute the lens through which we view and understand those worlds. In the end, what I present is inevitably my version, informed by theoretical concerns and other priorities. The versions of these women's lives that I construct are negotiated and mediated by their own points of view and constructions of the world as well as by my own.

My informants in their forties were born between 1962 and 1971, ranging in age between forty and forty-nine years. They all had full-time jobs in Tokyo in academia, finance, industry, or government. Sixteen were married and twenty-two were unmarried, of whom sixteen were single and six had partners. Twenty-eight had no children, five had one child, three had two children, and two had three children.

Results

I first met Fukuyama Noriko in 2007, when she was forty-one years old. I constructed Fukuyama-san as a composite character based on several similar participants. In terms of educational background, they had degrees in law, economics, political science, or an MBA and all of these women were married or divorced and had at least one child. The composite character emerged from a process of reflexivity in structuring and communicating the characters to the audience, assuming the producer, process, and product are a coherent whole. In writing this way, what I learned and wrote about occurred on a specific occasion and was shaped by my own methods and mode of participation. The fieldnotes effectively capture and represent my informant's meanings, that is, the perspectives, understandings, concerns, and voices of those studied.

In order to do this effectively, I not only had to clearly understand that I am, in fact, representing the participants' meanings, that is, creating—to paraphrase Clifford Geertz (1973)—“meanings of meanings” or “interpretations of interpretations.” Thus, in creating the composite character, I transformed experiences and observations into text and data and made a number of specific writing choices, but these choices also involve intricate decisions about how to write about what has been observed and experienced. The composite character is therefore not simply a matter of putting observed details in one character but rather, I actively create characters and scenes to depict action and speech, and to convey the meanings of events as perceived by those involved in them.

Fukuyama-san and I had arranged to meet in a park on a Saturday afternoon, and she had mentioned that she might bring her three-year-old son with her. She was an investment banker, and I was thus especially thankful that she had agreed to make time in her busy schedule to meet with me. She was a woman of medium height and short hair, and when I first spotted her, she was holding a curly-haired toddler by the hand. She was dressed casually, in jeans and a white shirt, and adorned with some jewelry.

She introduced me to her son, Ryosuke, and the three of us sat down on a bench so she and I could talk while she kept Ryosuke close by. Ryosuke seemed upset with his mother. We had not talked for more than a few minutes before he threw down the sunglasses he had been playing with. Embarrassed, Fukuyama-san gave him a banana, which he also hurled to the ground. She put him on her lap to calm him, but he soon started pulling her hair and hitting her chest and thighs. Fukuyama-san seemed to be at a loss, and she grew tense as her son became increasingly disruptive. I assumed that Fukuyama-san had not been able to spend much time with Ryosuke or her other son, whose care she entrusted to a nanny. It was not just her son that distracted her; throughout our conversation, she constantly fidgeted and played with her Blackberry. All the same, we talked for about two hours and agreed to meet again the following summer. Both of us kept the promise, and we met a few times over the course of the next year despite her busy schedule. We often had to postpone or reschedule our meetings, and I always met her in the office—never for more than thirty minutes at a time. This was still during the heyday of investment banks; once the Lehman Brothers' crash triggered a worldwide recession, life changed for Fukuyama-san. Regardless, Fukuyama-san was the gatekeeper for many of my informants; she introduced me to twelve new contacts, all of whom worked under her supervision.

Fukuyama-san was a senior vice president and cohead of legal of Japan and Korea at a large American investment bank based in Tokyo. Her office was on the forty-second floor, with wall-length windows that overlooked the city. At the reception on the first floor, I received a name badge. A hypermodern elevator—with a television announcing the latest news about the stock exchange market—brought me to the lobby on the forty-second floor. The waiting area of the investment bank was made of marble, glass, and stainless steel, exuding gaudiness

and arrogance. Briefly smiling at the receptionist, I sat on one of the three white leather chairs, which were more elegant than comfortable. Reaching from the ground to the ceiling, a flat screen stood before the glass windows and showed the same stock market news. Behind the screen, there was a view of Tokyo, with Shinjuku in the background. After fifteen minutes, the female receptionist walked me through the front office, where many of the investment bankers, mostly men, were sitting behind large computer monitors. She showed me into Fukuyama's office. Most of the people working in the front office were men. The outer row of offices right by the window were private rooms with glass walls on both sides, allowing the person inside to look out over the common office space as well as the city. The view from Fukuyama-san's office was spectacular. I could see Mount Fuji in the distance.

Fukuyama-san was born into a lower-middle-class family in Osaka, where she lived with her parents and a younger sister. She was educated in Japan, but during her college years, she travelled to the United States, where she met her Japanese-American husband. They returned to Japan together and began working as investment bankers. She was thirty-six years old when they married, and soon gave birth to their two sons. She had not wanted children, but she changed her mind after marrying: "I realized that I needed to have children to feel accomplished. I wanted to be one of the *kachi-gumi* (winners), not the *make-gumi* (losers). So, we tried having a child, as it would add to our happiness. I had no idea how time-consuming it was to raise a child," she told me in a low voice (June 15, 2017). With the social class gap growing larger and dividing society into "winners" and "losers," social class has become prevalent again as a category in the study of Japan (Jinbō, Miyadai, & Yamada, 2009; Satō, 2011; Shirahase, 2011a, 2011b; Yamada, 2004; Yamada & Itō, 2007). It seemed as though she was going down a checklist—marriage, career, children—planning her life as unemotionally, as she would a business strategy.

Fukuyama-san told me about the grueling working hours, which left her exhausted when she got home at night, usually around midnight. She rarely saw her children, except on weekends and sometimes for breakfast. For assistance with housework, Fukuyama-san employed two live-in Filipina nannies. Because her husband was born in the United States, they could obtain work visas for nannies. One of the two nannies had three children of her own, who lived in the Philippines with her husband. The other nanny was taking care of her own children according to what Arlie Russell Hochschild has termed the "nanny chain":

[The] *global care chain* . . . [is] a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. A typical global care chain might work something like this: An older daughter from a poor family in a third-world country cares for her siblings (the first link in the chain) while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a nanny migrating to a first world country (the second link) who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country (the final link). Each kind of chain expresses an invisible human *ecology of care*, one care worker depending on another and so on. A global care chain might start in a poor country and end in a rich one, or it might link rural and urban areas within the same poor country. More complex versions start in one poor country and extend to another slightly less poor country and then link to a rich country. (2000, p. 33)

On weekends, the members of Fukuyama-san's family rarely spent time together; Fukuyama-san and her husband had separate circles of friends. Even though they both played golf, they played with different groups. They also had a weekend house, but Fukuyama-san usually went there alone. I asked her if she took her children along, but she waved her hand impatiently:

I need some quiet on the weekend. My children are too work intensive, and they make me feel even more tired. I sometimes take them with me, but then I cannot relax, so I feel tense during the whole week. My husband would prefer if I stayed at home with the boys. He could do that too, but instead he chooses to play golf and have fun. . . . I am not a regular housewife. I have the same job as my husband; we are both lawyers working at investment banks. I have been called selfish, but I made a choice when I took this job. I am sure the boys will be proud of me when they grow up. They are too young to understand it now, but they will be thankful later. (October 14, 2009)

Fukuyama-san's career ambitions took precedence over her family. After we had met a couple of times, Fukuyama-san confessed that her marriage was suffering from her strenuous workload and that she was often at a loss when interacting with her children. She felt estranged from her sons, who regarded their nannies as their parents. Fukuyama-san lamented that she had not noticed the early signs of her master plan falling apart. This insight left her distressed and unable to focus at work. She was then even tenser at home, which triggered a vicious cycle of discontentment and self-doubt: "You know, having a career and a family at the same time is like holding sand in your hands. Once you think you are holding everything together, the sand starts to trickle down your hands, and you cannot do anything about it," Fukuyama-san added thoughtfully (June 22, 2017). Needless to say, Fukuyama-san lacked the time to do any housework. The two nannies not only cared for her children but also looked after the housework and took turns preparing meals for the family. Fukuyama-san went to work later than her husband, but also came home later. Because of their schedules, they rarely saw each other or ate together. The family ate together only on weekends—unless Fukuyama-san was at the summerhouse. On weekends, they tended to eat out. I did not meet Fukuyama-san's husband or her older son but based on her stories and our frequent meetings over the course of three years, I learned quite a bit about their family dynamics.

Fukuyama-san attended coed public schools and a university in Osaka. She did exceptionally well at school and was encouraged to study abroad for her sophomore year. At first, her parents worried about the costs and opposed it. But after weeks of discussion, they agreed to send her to a liberal arts college in Maine at a significant expense. When Fukuyama-san decided to stay for an extra year, her parents could not afford it, but she managed to obtain grants in Japan. After graduation, she did not want to return to Japan; she intended to pursue a law degree in the United States. Her parents could not support her financially, but they encouraged her. She applied for loans in the United States and for a fellowship in Japan. She received both and entered an American law school on the East Coast in 1989. There were only three foreign students in her cohort; the other two were German and Chinese.

For the most part, Fukuyama-san's school experience abroad represents an exception, since she received a grant to study in the United States. During the 1980s, it was still quite uncommon for students to study abroad, and it was even more uncommon for women. When I asked her why she decided to go to there, she explained that she had done so out of pure curiosity and a spirit of adventure. Very few students were interested in studying abroad, but her professors in Japan were supportive, and she enjoyed speaking English. Her most significant challenges arose from her wish to stay in the United States for another two years and from the subsequent process of applying to law school. She had to forge her own path. Fukuyama-san found a way to apply for grants, although she did not follow in the footsteps of other alumni:

I was afraid of not getting any funding, especially when I stayed for the second year, when my parents no longer were able to support me. I had the option to

come back to Japan, but since I enjoyed being in the United States, I wanted to stay there for a bit longer. Also, my English was making significant improvements, so I wanted to stay for at least one more year. I ended up staying for three more years, including law school. (June 22, 2017)

Because Fukuyama-san had already gone down the grueling path of applying for grants, she dared to do it again, and she gained admission to a prominent law school.

Fukuyama-san described her three years in law school as among the best times in her life. After two years, her English had improved significantly, and she was able to follow the courses, although keeping up with class discussions remained difficult. She became close friends with two other foreign students, with whom she still keeps in touch, especially the one from Germany. Fukuyama-san had gone to class reunions and reconnected with some of her classmates. She had also attended one of her husband's class reunions, because her reunion was scheduled for the following week. Because her husband also graduated from an East Coast law school, they had many experiences in common, even though her husband came from a more affluent family and never had to apply for fellowships. Needless to say, studying abroad also improved her chances of finding employment in Japan, especially during the mid-1990s. It gave her an advantage over other applicants.

After graduating from law school, Fukuyama-san worked at a law firm in Osaka for one year; she then returned to the United States for two years, during which time she worked at a law firm in New York. A family emergency brought her back to Japan, and she soon accepted employment at a well-known American investment bank in Tokyo. In the following three years, she worked at two other American-based investment banks until finally settling down at a fourth institution in the same branch. There, she worked for five years until the worldwide economic crash liquidated most investment banks, including the one where she was working. Her work trajectory is an example of *bricolage*, reflecting the volatile character of financial services as she moved from one job to another. During the heyday of investment banks, this career trajectory was not uncommon, but for the time being, those days are over.

Fukuyama-san rose through the financial services career ranks—from analyst, to associate, to assistant vice president, to vice president, and finally to senior vice president. There were a few levels remaining, but before attaining them, Fukuyama-san lost her job in the wake of the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy. Fukuyama-san had devoted all her efforts into establishing a career, and her workdays were typically twelve hours long. Because of the favorable times for investment banking and her American law degree, she was able to take her pick of jobs. She was one of the few women in the front office, and she slowly worked her way up the career ladder. Fukuyama-san told me that she rarely encountered prejudice, and when she did, it was mostly from women, especially those who were her seniors:

I often suffered under these women, as they were my seniors, and they were all single. When they were working and climbing the career ladder, they had it even more difficult than I; they suffered from fellow male co-workers. But now, they are resentful of women like me, who seem to have it easier. We are asking for maternity leave and time away from work to attend parent-teacher association meetings and the like, and these senior women cannot stand it. Why should their juniors have it better than they had it? They struggled for many years, and often they had to give up getting married. They don't understand us; no wonder they resent us! [laughs]. (October 14, 2009)

Fukuyama-san often seemed tense, and her eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep. It was clear that she did not have much time for herself. On one hand, Fukuyama-san wore no makeup, and

her cropped hair did not require much grooming; on the other, she wore exquisite jewelry, even on a normal workday. One of my younger informants, Sumi Yukimoto, to whom Fukuyama-san had introduced me, told me that Fukuyama-san would always invite her female colleagues to go shopping for jewelry and designer clothing. Sumi was appalled and would never participate in what she considered frivolous excursions. She could not care less about wearing expensive necklaces and designer clothes; she preferred to save her money. Two months after Sumi rejected such an invitation, Fukuyama-san fired her. Sumi then wondered whether she should have joined these shopping tours, and she considered them potential bonding time with her boss, as salarymen view going out for drinks with their boss and coworkers. Ironically, Fukuyama-san criticized Sumi's laid-back manner, citing her habit of going out to drink with her male and female coworkers and returning home at the same time they did (Ho, 2012). There was an unspoken rule, I was told, that women should return home earlier than the male coworkers whom they joined for drinks after work. Several informants mentioned this tacit rule to me. This must be an instance of the double standard in the workforce.

In October 2008, both Fukuyama-san and her husband lost their jobs due to the collapse of Lehman Brothers. They found new jobs in the industrial sector, which they considered a few steps down from their previous employment: "I was an *amakudari* [retiring government officials taking a lucrative job in a private sector] of sorts, I was ashamed of my current job status, and it was so much less interesting than my previous job. I had to work much less, and I felt at a loss, not knowing what to do with all the extra time." I reminded her that in one of our previous conversations, she had complained about not having enough time for her family, noting that she was still complaining despite now having the time. In fact, she complained so much about her new job that she was thinking about quitting and going back to university. One of her biggest regrets in life was that she had not studied medicine:

Being a lawyer is a despicable profession, especially when working in an investment bank. Before the Lehman crash and when we knew that everything was going downhill, way before the public learned about it, there was so much backbiting going on. Very dirty business, I could not believe that I was in the midst of it. I had to do things I never thought I would do; I had to fight for my survival. (October 14, 2009)

During the last months before the Lehman crash, the relationships at work were strained, and everybody was doing whatever they could to keep their jobs. She continued to work on legal issues in the new job, but she had much less responsibility. She was making fewer business trips than before, and her work hours were cut by 30%. In sum, while Fukuyama-san had experienced a rapid ascent to senior vice president and cohead of legal for Japan and Korea, her fall was just as swift.

Fukuyama-san never had any boyfriends in high school or at university. She was consumed by her studies, which became significantly more difficult once she was in the United States. Fukuyama-san met her husband, a Japanese-American, when she was thirty-three years old and working at her second investment bank in Japan. It was a long courtship, and she had considered breaking it off many times, but he insisted on staying with her. She felt that dating imposed a large time commitment, and she preferred to invest her time in her work. Fukuyama-san eventually told me that she had turned down several suitors while in the United States. She thought that they would distract her from her studies and that they might just want to take advantage of an "exotic" foreigner. When her husband-to-be finally convinced her to go out with him, she consented reluctantly; she worried that dating him might hurt her career.

It almost seems that Fukuyama-san agreed to get married just so she could tick off the box on her checklist. As she explained to me:

My husband and I are not really that close; I always keep my distance from him. I don't know why he was so persistent in wanting to pursue me; I would have probably given up [laughs]. I was so obstinate! But then I figured that I had to get married eventually, but it was not for love. I had more of a pragmatic approach to marriage and raising a family. I knew that it would contribute to my overall happiness, but I did it for selfish reasons. I now understand that much better, ever since I had my children. Something changed in me, and now that I lost my job, I see the utter meaninglessness of my previous work. Not only was I dealing with intangibles, I didn't produce anything. It has no meaning; it is all very depressing. (August 22, 2008)

Fukuyama-san did not marry the man she really loved, whom she was dating while living in Japan at a time when her mother was sick, when she took a job in Tokyo. "He was the love of my life," she said in a low voice, "but I sublimated these feelings by throwing myself into work. I met him at the wrong time, but it would have been the right person. My husband was the wrong person, but the time was right." (August 22, 2008)

Her relationship with her children was equally remote and cold. Unlike many of my informants, Fukuyama-san was uniquely introspective, and despite her lack of time and a busy schedule, she made more and more time for our interviews. She once told me that our interviews were like therapy for her. I had the impression that she genuinely looked forward to seeing me and talking about her life course: "I learned a lot about myself during our conversations; you feel like my confidante. Also, because all our conversations are under confidentiality protection, I can trust you. You know more about me than my husband! [laughs]" (August 22, 2008). Her choices seemed strategic, and they clearly showed that the system that made her feel free—as a neoliberal and self-enterprising individual of sorts—had also trapped her.

The last time I met Fukuyama-san, she complained about her job and how dissatisfied she felt. Moreover, she and her husband were constantly fighting. She explained that she brought her unhappiness at work into her home and took it out on her husband and children. She told me that she had begun to think about quitting her job and leaving Tokyo. When talking about her *ikigai*, she said it was gone and that she was trying to find herself. She was not close to her children, who saw their parents as strangers. Her marriage was falling apart, and she did not enjoy her job. She thought that she might like to be a schoolteacher: "It would feel liberating just giving it all up and starting something new, something meaningful to society" (August 22, 2008). Fukuyama-san seemed to be trying to absolve herself of the "sins" she committed while working at an investment bank. I wondered why she felt such an urge to change careers, but it might have had something to do with her recent conversion to Christianity. Fukuyama-san was now going to church every Sunday, and she showed me a cross with the Virgin Mary on it, which she kept behind a shelf of books in her office. After going to church for a couple of months, Fukuyama-san was convinced that "giving back to society and helping others" (August 22, 2008) is an ethic deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian thought and that she should change her lifestyle accordingly. She was, however, not the only informant who became religious after the economic downturn; Naoko Shimada, also an investment banker, became a Buddhist monk.

Fukuyama-san's husband was significantly less satisfied in his new position. The stress they accumulated at work took its toll on their relationship. Their two young sons required a great deal of patience, and despite the help of the nannies, they felt overwhelmed. Between the first time I met Fukuyama-san in 2007 and our last meeting three years later, she had completely changed. Disheartened about her future, she had lost her *ikigai*, despite her careful planning for a career and a family. She admitted that she had been too hardworking and rigid when she was younger, trying to carefully follow her plan but ultimately losing her direction.

The economic environment turned against her. A stoic dedication to her work, combined with a single-minded, even cold, pursuit of her professional and personal goals, might have led her into this downward spiral. Fukuyama-san thought that she could outsource child raising to her nannies while leading a separate life from her husband. As Hochschild has written:

To manage private loves and hates is to participate in an intricate private emotional system. When elements of that system are taken into the marketplace and sold as human labor, they become stretched into standardized social forms. In these forms, a person's contribution of feeling is thinner, less freighted with consequence; but at the same time, it is seen as coming less *from* the self and being less directed *to* the other. For that reason, it is more susceptible to estrangement. (2003, p. 13)

The market value of commercialized care is fraught with estrangement, and thus, the sum total of outsourced care is negative. Hochschild used the term "transmutation" to describe this imbalance:

When I speak of the transmutation of an emotional system, I mean to point out a link between a private act, such as attempting to enjoy a party, and a public act, such as summoning up good feeling for a customer. I mean to expose the relation between the private act of trying to dampen liking for a person—which overcommitted lovers sometimes attempt—and the public act of a bill collector who suppresses empathy for a debtor. By the grand phrase "transmutation of an emotional system" I mean to convey what it is that we do privately, often unconsciously, to feelings that nowadays often fall under the sway of large organizations, social engineering, and the profit motive. (2003, p. 19)

Fukuyama-san's "transmutation" left her at a stalemate: she could afford nannies, but she could not substitute her own care for paid childcare.

Discussion

As this extensive case study demonstrates, all of my informants by definition put their careers first but also found ways to pursue self-actualization by establishing a sense of selfhood in their personal lives. The situation does not look favorable for these women as they struggle to establish a career, sometimes while raising a family. With this in mind, it will take drastic improvements in gender equality in the workplace, less discrimination, better work-life balance policies, more generous parental leave, and more childcare facilities, as well as more family-friendly workplaces. However, I suggest that such measures will not solve the problem entirely, because there can never be a real balance between one's professional and private lives. How can women use this insight to shape an identity?

As shown in the ethnographic vignette, these women are reconsidering their career prospects and their aspirations for marriage and children, the importance of free time, autonomous selfhood, and identity. Women in their forties are experiencing "last chance" anxieties, and they are much more skeptical of and disillusioned with their commitment to a career. Among all the informants, women in their forties seemed to have the most regrets. As the profile of Fukuyama-san shows, she and women like her are constantly in transition, not only because they are not following a predetermined "life-course pattern," but because they are pursuing careers on their own terms.

Women in their forties grew up after the Second World War. During the 1950s and 1960s, women were allowed to contribute to the family income, but their main job was still to be wives and mothers. My informants in this age group wanted lifetime careers. The economic situation was much more favorable for them, and they were actively competing with men. Moreover, there was no EEOL to protect them, and they lacked female role models. Most women in this age group remained single as they focused on building their careers. Despite their extraordinary efforts, they still earned only two thirds of what their male coworkers earned for the same work. As many informants told me, they were reacting against the roles followed by their mothers, who had been full-time housewives. They wanted a career and devoted all of their efforts to this pursuit. These women were still in the minority, although they were setting a new trend for professional women. Most of these women eschewed marriage and motherhood, and this decision had an impact on their image in Japan. Their life-course trajectory set the standard for those women with career ambitions. Moreover, remaining single was the only way to escape being a housewife.

When the women now in their forties established careers, the economy was more favorable. These women experienced the immediate post-bubble years. This group of women was mostly single and had to give up a large part of their private lives to achieve a full-time career. During their forties and early fifties, some women reevaluated their life choices. Once they reached their mid-forties, their fears had largely resolved. This was also partly because women in their mid-forties were less likely to become pregnant, even if they wanted to. They had accepted the fact that they would never get married and have children of their own. Once this possibility falls away, a deeper understanding of their condition sets in. What then sets in is regret, although women seemed to deal better with regret than the anxiety regarding what they should do at the last minute, when the option was still there as a possibility, although they did not know how to resolve the situation. Even though many of them regretted not having chosen marriage and children over a career, after the bubble burst, they had already cleared the highest hurdle. Coupled with experiences from their upbringing and a relatively favorable economic environment while they built their careers, these women were able to endure the emotional hardship of regret and self-doubt later in their careers. In comparison, relatively privileged women in their twenties and thirties were ill-prepared for setbacks later in life. Thus, when the economic crisis struck in 2008, it was more difficult for them to establish a career. This was not the case among women in their forties and fifties, who were regarded as more valuable by their employers.

The women in this age cohort established their careers when the Japanese economy was growing at an unprecedented rate, yet they were less likely to get married than women of the previous generation. Parents were often upset to find that their daughters had chosen a full-time career path over marriage and children. Most women in their forties and fifties were single, and those who had married often asked their mothers or mothers-in-law to help them with housekeeping and childcare. Very few of these women engaged maids or babysitters, because during that time, most held the belief that the mother should be present in the first three years [*sansaijishinwa*] of a child's life. Juggling work and family obligations subjected the women who had a family and children to extreme time pressures. Their work overload often compromised their health, and because this kind of family life was not sustainable in the long term, it did not have a lasting impact on mainstream family structures (Ochiai, 2004). Few women embarked on the path chosen by my informants, but like generations of women before them, they set the tone for what was to come. The fact that they remained single did not have a direct influence on traditional Japanese families, although more women wanted lifelong employment.

Thus, in this article I explore what motivates Japanese women in their forties to pursue professional careers in today's neoliberal economy and how they reconfigure notions of

selfhood while doing so. I ask why and how one fourth of women stay on a career track, often against considerable odds, while the other three fourths drop out of the workforce. Much has been written about the lives of these Japanese housewives and office ladies. I describe a population of women who transformed the social language of Japan from the 1960s through the early 2000s. In their careers, these professional women created new social identities through the mutual conditioning of structure and self.

As the profile of Fukuyama-san, and the profiles of many women in the same age cohort illustrates, the forties represent a turning point in these professional women's lives. During this period, professional women are well established and have either worked consistently at one institution or changed their workplace several times. On average, they have twenty years of work experience—sufficient time to learn the rules of the game. Although the trend is that many of the women did not marry even after turning forty, about half of my informants were married, and a few were divorced. Most of my informants in their forties were experiencing a midlife crisis in that they had begun to reflect on their lives for the first time. The sense of possibility that characterized their youth had contracted considerably.

All my informants came from solidly middle-class backgrounds. They all attended university, and some went on to pursue graduate studies at professional schools; all were successful in finding jobs. They entered the workforce during the early to late 1980s, before the economic bubble burst—that is, during Japan's economic heyday. They were sought-after university candidates, even more so if they had studied abroad. "The sky was the limit" as one of my informants explained to me enthusiastically (August 22, 2008). Once they got a job, they busily focused on building their careers, without having much time to reflect on their condition. Women in their thirties devote most of their time and energy to establishing a career, without leaving much time to reflect on their daily lives. However, the women in their forties—regardless of the sector in which they are working—have reached a certain plateau in their careers, and they can stop and reflect on their lives.

This distance such women gain from their careers and their newfound ability to look back critically on their lives trigger anxiety and a kind of emotional revolt. The women who have decided not to get married might experience a change of heart for the first time and reconsider their decision, or they may feel anxious about not having much more time to conceive a child if they have not had one yet. Finally, these transitions set in at the same time as the hormonal changes that characterize the late forties and early fifties. The soul-searching would begin with questions like the following: "What if I had married? What will become of me if I remain alone for the rest of my life? My parents will die eventually, and I am only in the middle of my life (assuming I live until I am eighty years old). How would my life have turned out if I had had children?" Women in this age range are beset by such questions, which are clearly related to their private rather than their professional lives. Getting married or even having a child once they are forty years old is hard to accomplish, especially in Japan, where women tend to marry in their late twenties.

The forties thus become a turning point in the sense that, for the first time in their lives, these women reflect on their life trajectories. When they were younger, they did not have the time to do so, and because they began working during Japan's economic heyday, their go-go mentality has become part of their consciousness. They grew up among a group of highly competitive classmates, and all the women who graduated from a university were eager to find a first-rate job. Because the times allowed for it and the demand was high, they found excellent positions.

As Fukuyama-san's case shows, several of my informants in this age group moved eagerly from one educational level to the next, and they then made the transition to work almost effortlessly. Needless to say, in many ways, they represented the pioneers for the younger generation; there are still few professional white-collar women. They followed the male career

track, enabling others, in that sense, to follow after them. Once they turned forty, the economy slowed down, and their careers became less hectic, they had more time to think about their lives.

Once their fast-paced lives settled down a bit, they became gripped by anxiety and uncertainty about their decisions. Suddenly, they no longer had so many opportunities ahead of them; they could no longer marry easily, let alone have children. When they were younger, such concerns were not even relevant to them; they did not take them seriously enough. Many informants explained that they thought pursuing a career was much more challenging; because they were highly educated, they did not want to become housewives. They also pursued financial independence and personal freedom—concepts that loomed large in their minds. They saved large portions of their incomes, between 20% and 30%, especially if they lived with their parents. As Borovoy (2010a) explained, although neoliberal reforms offer greater choice and accommodate ambition, such benefits are associated with reduced stability and security. Furthermore, because merit came to be defined as diligence and loyalty, and companies rewarded workers who were willing to sacrifice personal needs and desires for the sake of the organization, motivated career women were caught in the predicament of neoliberalism. They postponed the pursuit of fulfilling private lives for an uncertain future, because their present jobs brought lucrative incomes if they were fully committed to their careers.

The “neoliberal trap” comfortably cushions professional women in the promise that more commitment to their jobs will bring them to the top faster. The fast-paced environment veils the inherent pitfalls, and the women who focus exclusively on their professional lives without taking their private lives into consideration ultimately have a harder time steering away from this path once they turn forty, simply because their options will have drastically declined. The environment in which they work is not conducive to self-reflection or a more contemplative mode of life. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, professional women are often wholeheartedly committed to their careers and are lured by the prospect of higher wages and promotions. This self-perpetuating process can become a major predicament, because such women find themselves with fewer options, seemingly without forewarning. In other words, if they were not careful with their options during their late twenties and thirties, they have to face a future that might seem to contradict what they had signed up for in a neoliberal environment—namely, the ability of entrepreneurial individuals to create their own destiny.

Fukuyama-san also mentions *ikigai*. As Mathews (1996) has explained, Japanese and Americans oscillate in a pendulum-like motion between self-realization and commitment to the group as the magnetic poles of their *ikigai*. During the 1950s, the Japanese focused mainly on group commitment, and their source for *ikigai* gradually shifted toward self-realization during the 1980s, whereas this dynamic is reversed in the United States. As the French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard posited, the postmodern condition shapes *ikigai* in both the United States and in Japan, which presupposes that individuals accept reality in the “real” sense as complex notions of the normative institutions of meaning and emotions, thereby understanding reality in an integrated sense. That is, overcoming religion, learning to be an individual, and being pragmatic are characteristics that are related to the common sense of late modernity (Bauman, 2007; Jameson, 1991; Mathews 1996). Meaninglessness and nothingness are the discursive structures central to the postmodern condition, forming the theoretical basis of *ikigai*. Mathews proposed that the kaleidoscopic nature of the postmodern condition and *ikigai* relate to a broader framework.

In Japan, one’s *ikigai* can be found in several ways, such as through work, family, the past, the future, creation, or religion. On another level, we can also understand *ikigai* as a commitment to either the group or self-realization (Mathews, 1996). According to Buddhist religious leader Nikkyō Niwano, “Family is the most common Japanese *ikigai*” (Mathews, 1996, p. 19), as he writes in his book *Ningen no ikigai (Reason for Living)*, but in recent times,

it has shifted from the ideal of group commitment to a more self-centered and individualistic pursuit of what makes one's life worth living (Mathews, 1996). The concept of *ikigai* is also important in terms of gender. I now briefly turn to a discussion of what Japanese women have been conventionally encouraged to pursue as their *ikigai* since the postwar period. In the immediate postwar period, women were encouraged to get married, settle down, and raise a family. Working outside the home was tolerated but not encouraged. Once women had their own families, they were forced to leave their jobs. During that period, a woman's *ikigai* was supposed to be her role as a wife and mother—in other words, her role as a “professional housewife.” In the 1970s, through government policies, women were increasingly encouraged to become “professional housewives” once they got married and were strongly discouraged from working outside the home. Again, a woman's *ikigai* was regarded as her relationship with her child or children and her husband. It was during the late 1980s that there was a veritable “*ikigai* boom,” as Mathews calls it (1996, p. 14). There was a significant shift in what should constitute one's *ikigai*, and the mass media promoted the idea of soul-searching to discover what that was. Rather than finding their *ikigai* in commitment to the group, people began to find it in self-realization. This meant that women were increasingly able to find their *ikigai* outside the home.

Needless to say, there are Japanese women who still find their *ikigai* at home and with their families, although an increasing number of women are now pursuing *ikigai* in their careers, hence representing an inclination toward self-realization rather than only fulfilling predetermined family obligations (Brooks & Devasahayam, 2011; Kimoto, 2005/2003; Nomaguchi, 2006; Ōsawa, 2006; Shinotuska, 2004). As I show in this paper, a particular group of Japanese women in the last thirty-odd years has been struggling to come to terms with their newfound freedom to determine the trajectory of their private and professional lives. Women in their forties were among the first generations to have freedom of choice in terms of pursuing a career as their sole *ikigai*, and in contrast to women in their fifties and above, the former had increasing support for their career endeavors from the state as well as company policies. For instance, although the EEOL took effect in 1986, companies and other institutions that employed women did not always know how to put it into practice, let alone gain approval from society at large. This is a normal phenomenon, however, because it takes some time for legal changes to affect social practice. In other words, it takes time for the change to penetrate the consciousness of the general public. More than three decades have passed since 1986, and although Japanese society is becoming increasingly tolerant of women finding their *ikigai* in their work, the challenge is now to combine family and work. This is because the generation of women who single-mindedly pursued professional careers has reported being unsatisfied with their one-sided lives.

My informants voiced two major concerns: marriage and pregnancy. During their forties, single women may have chosen to remain unmarried or to continue looking for a partner in the hope of having a child. Some say they are content with their decision to remain single; others explain that they still hope to get married and, if possible, have a child. If they are still single, they might ask a relative, friend, or colleague to introduce them to a potential partner. Others have tried online dating, which is not as widespread in Japan as it is in the United States; for two of my informants, this resulted in marriage. Some married women told me that they regretted turning down many suitors in their twenties and thirties, hoping that better ones would come along. Several of the married women who wanted children were contemplating in vitro fertilization (IVF) or other types of artificial insemination, like oocyte cryopreservation (egg freezing).

A woman who becomes pregnant in her forties is at increased risk for health problems associated with pregnancy, and my informants voiced this anxiety in different ways. Many informants repeated the same phrase: their “biological clock was ticking.” Several women had

consulted doctors in Japan and in the United States, especially in California, because of its well-known fertility clinics. Women who resorted to fertility treatments referred to them as “being treated with Western and Eastern medicine,” an undertaking that was often quite costly (August 22, 2008). Women who were not able to conceive seemed to blame God: “If we do not have any children, it must be God’s will.” One woman said that she would never try artificial insemination because it was unnatural. She said, “We went to the shrine to pray for a child, but if we remain unsuccessful, then it’s because God must not have wanted to give us a child.” Their pragmatic approach reflects the Confucian reluctance to interfere with nature when it comes to reproduction.

In the Confucian tradition, IVF and other reproductive procedures are seen as dishonoring a person’s parents, which leaves few options other than praying at a shrine (Tsuge, 2010, 2012a; 2012b; Tsuge & Katō, 2007). Fertility treatments are seen as overly invasive and in violation of Confucian principles. Moreover, as Naoki Ikegami has pointed out, “The low rates of hysterectomies, cesarean sections, and other invasive procedures in Japan stem from the Buddhist philosophy of noninterference, a resignation to events beyond human control” (qtd. in Miller, 2006, p. 86). Apart from its high costs, IVF and other fertility treatments are “invasive procedures” and therefore uncommon in Japan.

The women who decided to undergo fertility treatments were rarely successful. The success rates are lower for couples with male-factor infertility as well as for women with only one ovary or those over forty years old (Jayaprakasan & Kean, 2017; Kovacs, Brinsden, & DeCherney, 2018). Some women underwent treatments while working full-time. The painful hormone treatments, the long waits at the clinic—even for private clients—and the emotional strain all contributed to the enormous stress associated with the procedure. Out of six informants who tried IVF, only two became pregnant—and only after considerable investments of time and money. Two women quit their jobs to focus on their fertility treatments. Luckily, they had saved enough of their income to do so, and their husbands were making enough money to allow them to give up their jobs. Kuroda Harumi (42) said, “It was my mission to have a child. I was only focused on this one thing. Day in, day out, I had only one thought in my mind” (August 22, 2008). The IVF treatments for the other four women did not result in conception. The women reported to me that their male physicians blamed them for having worked like a man. It is surprising that four different physicians would blame women for the failure of artificial insemination. The argument is outrageously misogynistic, and it is dismaying that medical doctors would resort to it. Perhaps a female doctor would have been more sensitive and professional.

Women in their forties are thus at a turning point in terms of work, marriage, and childbearing. Although they might be under slightly less stress at work, they have more time to reflect on their personal lives. Those who are married and without children might consider having an IVF treatment. In any case, these women represent an eclectic group of accomplished professionals who are trying to make sense of their life choices, to negotiate their decisions, and to reevaluate their prospects.

Implications

Japanese professional women find their own ways to evade the many career traps along the way, and more often than not, they have to swim against the stream to do so. Professional Japanese women in their forties were my largest group of informants, and they all struggled with similar issues, whether their work field was finance, industry, government, academia, or entrepreneurship. Many women explained to me that their forties represented their first opportunity to reflect on their life course. During their twenties, they were focused solely on studying and accumulating degrees, and during their thirties, they were establishing careers

and did not have much time to reflect on their lives. During their forties, however, these women had reached a comfortable level of achievement, and they had more time to think about their life choices. In terms of both their professional and private life stage, they reassessed their achievements, and many concluded that they had established a career to the detriment of raising a family (Holloway, 2010; Jackson & Tomioka, 2004; Nemoto, 2016; Rowley, 2008).

Japanese career women are competing with the deeply entrenched values of motherhood and caretaking, which are still present in contemporary Japan. Under the aegis of the good wife and the wise mother, the Japanese government instituted this concept to facilitate Japan's transition to a modern society. Women could contribute to the new nation by taking a more active role in child-rearing, as well as by engaging in patriotic activities and contributing to the family's income. Rohlen (1974) noted that many women see work as training for becoming good wives and mothers (Imamura, 1996; Iwao, 1993; Lebra, 1984; Ogasawara, 1998).

When this group of women in their forties began work in the early to late 1980s, the labor market was favorable, and their advanced university degrees gave them the best chances for establishing a career. But since the bubble burst in the early 1990s, the Japanese economy has reached an all-time low, and the career prospects of these women are not as promising as they were when they started working; if they are still unmarried, the likelihood of finding a partner is now even lower. Thus, the many opportunities these women once had are suddenly drastically reduced, and what they describe as *ikigai ga naku narimashita* (losing my purpose in life) is—rather than a symptom of a midlife crisis, which would hint at a conflict—a sign of depression. As Mathews (1996) has argued, through *ikigai*, these women seek a sense of social significance, and through that, a broader transcendent significance. It is precisely this sense of social significance that my informants believe they have lost; they seem to confuse signs of depression with a loss of their *ikigai*. Certainly, depression might also be correlated with a loss of *ikigai*, but depression is a much more concrete personal state than the diffuse notion of *ikigai*.

As the ethnographic vignette shows, these women had to carve out their own paths, and they often had to compete with men to establish their careers. Despite the gender equity espoused by many employers, careers progress less smoothly for women than for men, especially if the woman wants to have children. Because of this disruption, women who stay on their career tracks without taking maternity leave will be more competitive. They are in direct competition with other women and, needless to say, with their male coworkers as well. Because there is not yet a predetermined successful career path for women, unless women choose to follow the path that has been defined by men and followed by women for lack of a better choice, women have to find out for themselves how to establish a career. As I suggested in the introduction, workplaces must find new ways to allow women to establish their own career paths without having to follow the male model. A paradigm shift needs to happen for women to lead more balanced and fulfilling lives.

Not all is doom and gloom if Japan can make better use of its most underutilized resource: its women. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Matsui et al. (2005) were already writing about “womenomics,” and their conclusions hold true in the present. That is, either out of economic necessity or as a result of lifestyle choices, an increasing proportion of Japanese women are entering the workforce and becoming an important income earners and consumers. Although much more progress needs to be made at both the public- and private-sector levels to foster greater female labor participation, Japan is moving in the right direction. Although increased female participation is by no means the entire solution to Japan's demographic woes, it can offset the negative impact of a shrinking pool of labor on income and demand growth over the longer term. Indeed, Matsui et al.'s economic simulation suggests that if Japanese female participation rates rose to levels currently seen in the United States, Japan would add

2.6 million people to the workforce, raising its trend GDP growth rate from 1.2% to 1.5% over the next two decades (2005).

As the “womenomics” report suggested, increasing female participation is imperative. Of the three ways that Japan can improve its demographic profile, increasing its labor participation rate—especially that of its females—is likely to prove most effective. Progress is finally being made in eliminating some of the obstacles to higher female participation in the workforce. Contrary to some opinions, the female participation rate tends to be positively correlated with the fertility rate in most countries. Although demographics pose a challenge to every developed economy, none is expected to be as hard hit as Japan. Over the next two decades, Japan’s population is expected to shrink by 6%, to 127.4 million, but its workforce (ages 15–64) is already shrinking and is predicted to fall by nearly 10% within the next twenty years. As a result, Japan will have only two workers for every retiree within the next thirty years, and two retirees for every three workers by 2050. In conclusion, the new archetype of *kyaria ūman* (career woman) is slowly emerging and will shape the socioeconomic environment of Japan for years to come.

It will take years for this new trend to diffuse into other parts of society, but the data in this article indicates a clear trend toward an increased number of career women. Generations of Japanese women to come will embrace this new trend, and given an improved work–life balance, better maternity leave policies, and better childcare facilities, the percentage of women in the professional labor force will significantly increase. Women in Japan have many opportunities, but no one is telling them exactly what to do to succeed. They have to figure it out themselves, and in the near future, a clearer trend will emerge, perhaps akin to the salaryman archetype. To achieve this goal and for Japan to remain competitive in the globalized economy, Japanese corporations and the government should focus on the career development of young women. Given the increased competition from other countries, Japan must rethink the position of its women within society. The country is losing valuable human capital in an increasingly competitive and globalized world.

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