The Conduct and Culture of Fatherhood in Japan:

How do Fathers in Tokyo Perceive Their Role?

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Abstract

Against a backdrop of economic stagnation and declining birth rate, fatherhood in Japan has drawn increasing attention over the past three decades from the state, the media, and the general public. Of particular interest is the emergence of a new kind of fathering known as *ikumen*, which centres active involvement in childcare. Using LaRossa's (1988) model of the "asynchrony" of change in the culture and conduct of fatherhood, this thesis examines perceptions of their fathering role in nine white-collar, urban fathers in the three areas of home, work, and society. Interview participants demonstrated varying levels of involvement in childcare and the strength of their fathering identity. They observed a number of changes in the conduct of fathering to match the culture through their own experiences and observing those around them, including increased corporate focus on work-life balance facilitating parenting. However, this thesis finds that culture continues to outpace conduct as the ideology of those with a strong fathering identity moves beyond the standard that others are attempting to achieve.

Keywords: Japan, Fathers, Parental leave, Masculinity, Childcare

Acknowledgements

Notes

Japanese has been romanised according to the modified Hepburn system. Macrons indicate a long vowel.

Japanese names have been written in the order last name, first name.

All translation is my own.

Interview quotes have been edited for clarity.

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List of Abbreviations

FJ	Fathering Japan
MIC	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications
MHLW	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
RENGO	Japanese Trade Union Confederation (*Nihon Rōdōkumiai Sōrengōkai*)

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1. Introduction

"Ah, men feel this kind of conflict – that even if they want to take childcare leave, they are working under the impression that it is difficult to do so..." As a concerned party, I was keenly aware of this. To be honest, I was really worried (Koizumi, 2020).

Japan's former Minister of the Environment, Koizumi Shinjirō, made headlines round the world in January 2020 when he announced his intention to take childcare leave after the birth of his first child.[1] He planned to take two weeks off over three months, but would not "skip 'important public activities'" (Siripala, 2020). Koizumi, rising star of the Suga administration (2020-21) and son of former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō, is the first serving cabinet minister to take childcare leave and he explicitly states his intention to become a role model for other men considering taking leave in a blog post discussing his thought process (Koizumi, 2020). While he was praised for providing an opportunity to "deepen national discussion" around fathers' childrearing, he also faced criticism from those who believed his position as a civil servant meant he should prioritise his responsibilities to the Japanese people (The Asahi Shimbun, 2019a).

Why is this such a contentious subject in Japan, when Boris Johnson, the former Prime Minister of the UK, took two consecutive weeks of paternity leave while in office without argument? On paper, Japan has a generous system; according to UNICEF, it has one of the longest entitlements to paid leave for fathers among OECD and EU countries (Chzhen, Gromada and Rees, 2019). Childcare leave, (*ikuji kyūgyō*, abbreviated to *ikukyū*), can be taken for 12 months by either parent. Yet only 13.97 percent of fathers took leave compared to 85.1 percent of mothers in 2021, and the vast majority took less than a week (Cabinet Office, 2019; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), 2022a). The Japanese government has continually set ambitious targets for increasing the take-up rate of fathers' childcare leave, although so far it has failed to meet them, and Prime Minister Kishida has recently indicated he wants to reach 50 percent of fathers taking childcare leave by 2025 (Otake, 2023).

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[1] This thesis uses the definitions of leave as used by the International Network on Leave Policies & Research (Koslowski et al., 2022, pp.3–4). Maternity leave is for mothers only and taken before, during, and after childbirth to protect the health of mother and child. Paternity leave is for fathers only and taken soon after childbirth to support the mother. Parental leave (or childcare leave, as in the Japanese Child Care and Family Care Leave Law) is available to both mothers and fathers and may be an individual or a family right. It is intended to "give both parents an equal opportunity to spend time caring for a young child".

For the government, fathers' use of childcare leave is a crucial tool for addressing the declining birth rate. Japan has been in the grip of a demographic crisis for over three decades now; the total fertility rate dropped to 1.57 in 1989, dubbed the "1.57 shock", bringing the problem into sharp relief.[2] Though it plateaued at around 1.4 during the 2010s (see Figure 1), the simultaneous increase in over 65s has resulted in a super-aging society with the proportion projected to reach 31.2 percent by 2030 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), 2022a). Low birth rates and an aging population are forcing the shrinking number of working age adults to shoulder an increasing tax burden to finance both pensions and elderly healthcare. Increasing fertility, therefore, has been a major policy goal since the 1990s. Initially, policies focused primarily on supporting women in the workplace, as balancing work and family responsibilities was considered a major obstacle for having children. The second Abe administration (2012-20), in particular, promoted "Womenomics" policies intended to close the gender gap at work, including tax reform and provision of childcare, as a key pillar of its growth strategy. However, fathers have become an increasingly emphasised factor in policy, with the government working under the assumption that men's participation in childcare would alleviate women's burden and thus lead to more children being born, despite inconsistent findings (Ishii-Kuntz, 2021).
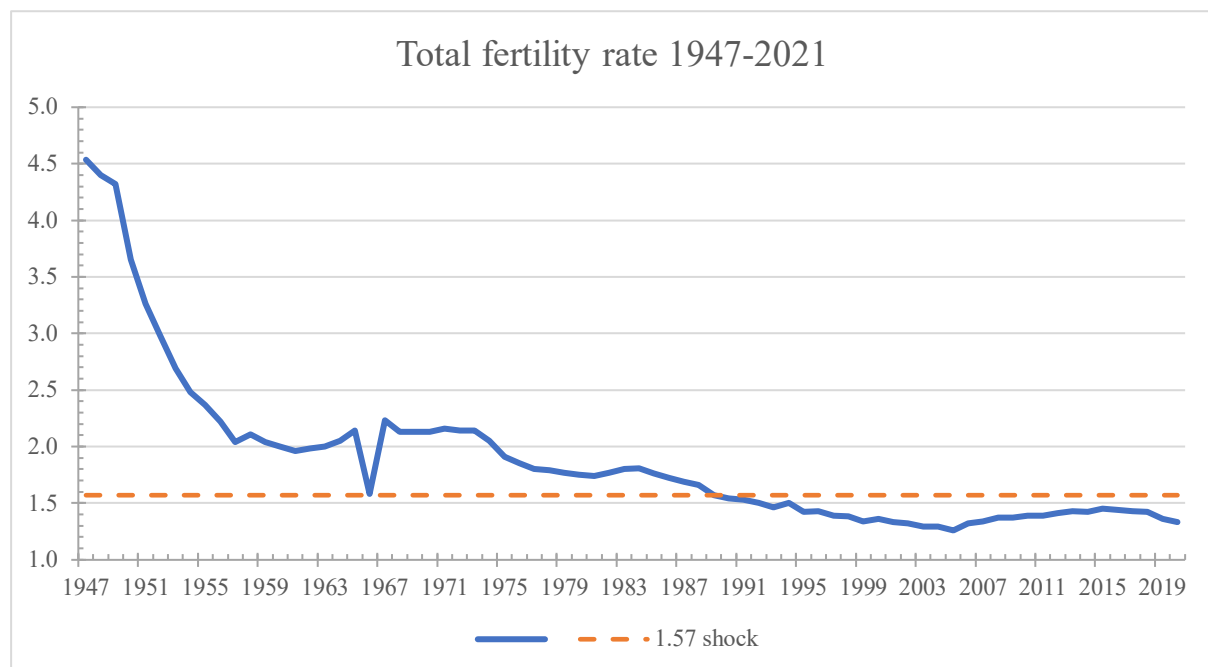

Figure 1: Total fertility rate 1947-2021. Data from *Vital Statistics*, MHLW, 2022b.

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[2] So called because the fertility rate dropped below the previous lowest rate of 1.58 in 1966, the year of the fire horse (*hinoue uma*) in the Chinese zodiac. According to superstition girls born in this year would be fiery, impulsive, and make poor wives.

At the same time, there has been increasing media discourse around nurturing and involved fatherhood and the rise of *ikumen* (a portmanteau of *ikuji* – "childcare" – and the English loanword "men" and suggestive of *ikemen* – "attractive, cool man") over the last decade. The term has become not only a major media buzzword, but an advertising strategy and a government project (Vassallo, 2017). Meanwhile, the NPO Fathering Japan (FJ), founded in 2006, has been heavily involved with lobbying for policy reform, working with MHLW on the Ikumen and IkuBoss Projects which promotes fathers taking childcare leave. It also offers various activities and events, such as cooking lessons and picture book readings, for over 500 members nationwide as part of its goal of increasing the number of "smiling fathers" (FJ, 2019a). Fathers have become a national preoccupation, with involved fathering seen not only as enjoyable, but expected.

However, there remains a gap between expectation and reality. Japanese corporate culture continues to emphasise long hours and taking any kind of paid leave is regarded as selfish (British Chamber of Commerce in Japan, 2016). Though the proportion has dropped, 45.9 percent of men in their 30s, the age group most likely to have young children, worked more than 43 hours a week and 9.6 percent worked more than 60 (MHLW, 2023). Furthermore, the role of *daikokubashira* (breadwinner, literally the central pillar of a traditional Japanese house) is axiomatic to Japanese hegemonic masculinity, limiting men's economic choices. Meanwhile, wives' increasing expectations that fathers help at home represent an additional source of pressure for Japanese men (Mathews, 2003). Despite the government's promotion of childcare leave, it has been criticised for failing to address the practical obstacles facing fathers, most prominently the underlying norms regarding the gendered division of labour (Brinton and Mun, 2016).

Against this backdrop of increased interest in fatherhood, how do Japanese men experience fatherhood? Using LaRossa's (1988; 2012) model of the culture of fatherhood (i.e. norms, values, beliefs and symbols surround fatherhood) and the conduct of fatherhood (i.e. fathers' actual behaviour), this thesis aims to understand the lived experiences of white-collar fathers in Tokyo by using a phenomenological approach to answering the following research questions:

- Has the conduct of fathering in Tokyo caught up with the culture of fathering?
  - How do salaryman fathers understand their roles as fathers?
  - How do they balance their responsibilities at work with childrearing?

- How do they perceive broader Japanese attitudes towards fatherhood?

This thesis consists of five chapters. Following the introduction, chapter two presents the historical development of fatherhood in Japan over the last century before reviewing current literature on Japanese masculinity, the evolution of *ikumen* discourse, and the utilisation of childcare leave policies. It also provides a theoretical basis for analysing fatherhood. Chapter three explains the methodological approach used to answer the research question, including limitations and ethical considerations. Chapter four analyses the interview results in three areas; participants' approach to raising children, how they balance this with their work commitments, and their perception of societal attitudes towards fathers. Finally, chapter five summarises these findings and illustrates how they answer the research question.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Scholarship on fatherhood in Japan started taking off in the 1980s as absent fathers were problematised in relation to children's maladaptive behaviour. As such, much like the in the US and Europe, it initially focused on a psychological, individualised approach. However, by the mid-2000s research had transitioned to a broader, more structural approach (Rush, 2015). At the same time, family policy was undergoing a "Nordic turn", attempting to emulate family policies of Nordic countries that had managed to maintain both a high fertility rate and high female labour force participation rate (Gupta, Smith and Verner, 2006; Toivonen, 2007). Nevertheless, the purpose of research remained the impact of fathers' involvement on mothers' well-being or childhood development until fairly recently (Shwalb and Nakazawa, 2013). Current research tends to focus on the emergence of "nurturing" fathers with regards to identity construction and masculinity (Nakatani, 2006; Vassallo, 2017; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020; Ishii-Kuntz, 2021) or the development of family policy and fathers' use of childcare leave (Brinton and Mun, 2016; Miyajima and Yamaguchi, 2017; Nakazato, 2017).

2.1. Historical Context

Historical studies indicate that fathers in the late Edo period (1603-1867) were heavily involved with their children's education, particularly their sons, due to the central position of the *ie* (household) as the basic economic unit of Japanese society. Codified in the Meiji Constitution (1889), the *ie* referred to both the physical household and the patriarchal family lineage in which the father served as the head of the household and was responsible for ensuring its continuity and prosperity (Vogel, 1971; Imamura, 2009). Meanwhile, fathers in

the Meiji period (1868-1912) were "aloof stern-faced disciplinarians" and fathers were depicted as a thing to fear along with natural disasters (Fuess, 1997, p.384). However, these studies rely on a few diaries written by urban elites, particularly from samurai families, and so they cannot be generalised to all fathers during this period.

The movement away from feudalism and towards a rational, scientific, and thus "modern" interpretation of the family played a vital role in the building of the Japanese nation state throughout late 19th and early 20th century. The term *daikokubashira* began to be used to refer to fathers as the state utilised it to support the emperor's institutional power by conceptualising him as the metaphorical patriarch of Japan (Yamada, 1993). Meanwhile women were re-evaluated as an economic resource, with the Confucian phrase "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) being used in government textbooks (Holloway, 2010). Urbanisation and industrialisation led to an increased distinction between work and home, while the rise in public education and the medicalisation of mothers' bodies resulted in the expansion of the maternal role at the expense of the paternal (Fuess, 1997).

Furthermore, in the aftermath of WWII the US and Japanese governments continued to shape the family in their efforts to rebuild the country, abolishing the previous *ie* system. Nevertheless, the continuation of the *koseki* (family register) defined the family within a rigid, reductionist framework that is still in effect today (Chapman and Krogness, 2014). Nuclear families became normative, rather than households with multiple generations, and the onus for welfare was placed firmly on the family, rather than the state, via corporate benefits and performed specifically by women (Esping-Andersen, 1997; Peng, 2012). Mothers' love (*bosei-ai*) was glorified during this period as "distinctive and critical" to children's development, in contrast to the pre-war tendency towards emotional restraint (Holloway and Nagase, 2014). Fathers, on the other hand, were distant, authoritative figures who represented wider society and acted as moral role models (Vogel, 1971, pp.241–3).

More generally, men were viewed as corporate warriors (*kigyō senshi*) who played a vital role in rebuilding the Japanese nation state after the devastation of WWII until it became the world's second largest economy. Enabled by a full-time housewife (*sengyō shufu*), white-collar employees were positioned as the samurai of the economic miracle, embodying loyalty and self-sacrifice, and they took "unambiguous pride" in their work (Mathews, 2003, p.110; Imamura, 2009). They worked for companies who offered lifetime employment, seniority-based wages and promotion, and company housing, and in return they committed themselves

to long hours and unpaid overtime (OECD, 2003, pp.71–4). The so-called salaryman exemplified the modern Japanese everyman, and the male breadwinner-housewife model was thoroughly embedded in society, representing a "complementary incompetence" (Sugimoto, 2010; Edwards, 1990 cited in Dales, 2018, p.289). Work was positioned as "manly childcare", the father providing financial security for his family while rarely being at home (Hidaka, 2011, p.123).

The '80s marked the "beginning of asymmetry between fathering ideology and practice" (Vassallo, 2017, p.35). Women began to delay or avoid marriage as gendered expectations regarding housework and childcare diverged and wives were less accepting of absent husbands (Jolivet, 1997). For fathers, family became another source of stress alongside work as they felt an obligation to spend time with their families, engaging in *kazoku sābisu* (literally "family service"), reminiscent of the term for unpaid overtime, *sābisu zangyō*. Like overtime, family outings and holidays were seen as strenuous and requiring fortitude, while also taking away valuable time to recuperate from work (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky, 2016). While fathers were less strict than previously, routine childcare remained the domain of mothers, with fathers "taking the good parts" (*ii toko dori*) – playing with children or taking baths together (Holloway and Nagase, 2014). Furthermore, the rise in maladaptive behaviour in adolescents, including school refusal, suicide, and *hikikomori* (social withdrawal) brought absentee fathers to media attention (Shwalb et al., 2010).

Increasing paternal engagement became a significant focus of family policy from the '90s, after the "1.57 shock" problematised the low fertility rate. The Child Care and Family Care Leave Law was enacted in 1992, allowing fathers to take childcare leave for the first time, albeit with strict eligibility requirements and at only 25 percent salary replacement.[3] Multiple ministries cooperated to develop two consecutive five-year plans in 1994 and 1999 which formulated wide-ranging "countermeasures against the declining birth rate" by lessening the burden of childcare, particularly on working mothers. However, these "Angel Plans", as they were known, were largely symbolic and resulted in little concrete change, at least partly due to modest budgets (Roberts, 2002; OECD, 2003).

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[3] Meanwhile, mothers had been entitled to childcare leave as early as the 1911 Factory Act.

Figure 2: SAM campaign poster (MHLW, 1999)   **Figure 3:** Ikujiren response poster (Ikujiren, 2000)

Additionally, in 1999 the Ministry of Health and Welfare ran the controversial "SAM campaign" encouraging fathers to become involved with childcare. A poster (see Figure 2) featuring musician Sam, the then-husband of popstar Amuro Namie, holding his infant son with the caption, "a man who doesn't raise his children can't be called a father" (*kosodate shinai otoko o chichi towa yobanai*) met with criticism from both fathers and activists. Fathers resented the state interfering in their private business and pointed out that they simply did not have the time to help at home as they were busy working hard to support their family (Jordan and Sullivan, 1999; Mathews, 2003; Hidaka, 2011). Advocates of gender equality, on the other hand, argued that the campaign failed to address the underlying causes of disengaged fathering, while the childrearing organisation Ikujiren (*Otoko mo Onna mo Ikuji Jikan o! Renrakukai*; Child Care Hours for Men and Women Network, now defunct) produced its own poster (Figure 3) stating, "a man who doesn't raise his children can't be called a father? Then allow us to care for our children unreservedly!" (*kokoro okinaku ikuji o yarasetekure!*) (Ikujiren, 2000; North, 2016).

Two types of fathering discourse emerged during this time. The first advocated for a return to nebulously "traditional" values, such as the Nakasone administration's (1982-87) "familialist reforms" that defined family as the same male breadwinner-housewife model that had dominated since WWII, rather than the actually historic *ie* system (Ochiai, 2014, pp.217–19). This continued into the '90s, with books like *Fusei no Fukken* (Reinstatement of Fatherhood)

by Hayashi Michiyoshi (1996) emphasising nostalgic stereotypes of *kaminari oyaji* (thunder father) and paternal authority. In this context, the role of the father is to dispense a moral and social education without encroaching on his wife's domestic domain, in line with existing gender roles (Nakatani, 2006). North (2009) positions this kind of "reactionary backlash" as an indicator of change. Meanwhile, the second strand of discourse focused on the emergence of involved, caring fathers, propagated by groups such as Ikujiren and FJ, and remains dominant today, further discussed below.

The culture surrounding Japanese fatherhood has changed considerably over the last 150 years, moving between involved educator, remote disciplinarian, absent breadwinner, and today's nurturing fathers. The state has been heavily involved in shaping each of these, using the family to further its own agenda. However, this does not mean the conduct of fatherhood has changed at the same rate, as will be further discussed in the following sections.

2.2. Masculinity

Parallel to the growing discourse around fatherhood has been the rise of men's studies. Connell's (2005) seminal work defines masculinity as an inherently relational social practice which is constructed in opposition to femininity. However, while masculinity ensures the subordination of women, it's also internally hierarchical, with multiple masculinities being subordinated by the culturally dominant form, known as hegemonic masculinity. While it may not be the most prevalent form of masculinity, it correlates with collective institutional power, and individual men who don't conform to the cultural ideal still benefit collectively from the oppression of women – what Connell calls "patriarchal dividends" (p.79).

In Japan, salaryman masculinity has been hegemonic since the post-war period, and its two defining characteristics are its relationships with white-collar work and heterosexual marriage. As such, it has also come to exemplify corporate Japan and is an enduring image of the Shōwa period (1926-89) and economic miracle. The typical salaryman was a:

> *...middle-class, university-educated middle-aged man, with a dependent wife and children to support, working for an organization offering such benefits as secure lifetime employment guarantee for permanent employees, and a promotions and salary scale linked to seniority (Dasgupta, 2013b, p.1).*

The *sengyō shufu* represented the corresponding "emphasised femininity", an efficient household manager and doting mother who quit her job to raise a family (Terami, 1996; Ishii and Jarkey, 2002). The union of a salaryman and *sengyō shufu* is an important stage in becoming a responsible and trustworthy *shakaijin* (fully-fledged member of society), as is having children, which is perceived as a logical result of marriage, with this ideology propagated by both the state and corporations (North, 2009; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2019). Their relationship is built on interdependence, the husband depending on his wife for his daily needs and emotional support, and the wife relying on her husband for financial security (Hidaka, 2010). Accordingly, the role of *daikokubashira* is fundamental to salaryman masculinity. Despite never being a majority, even at the height of "Japan Inc." in the '80s, the union of salaryman and *sengyō shufu* is firmly embedded in the cultural imagination, leaving blue-collar and gay masculinities, among others, marginalised (Roberson, 2003; McLelland, 2005).

Hidaka (2011) examines *daikokubashira* over three generations of salarymen and observes that women's advancement in the workplace had not challenged the importance of breadwinning as an indicator of masculinity by the mid-2000s. Among all three cohorts, participants linked *daikokubashira* to manliness (*otokorashisa*), as breadwinning "nurtured a masculine spirit in themselves that reflected the dependency of others in the family upon them" (p.120). Additionally, though younger interviewees supported gender equality, they were still comfortable relying on their wives' domestic labour, reaping the patriarchal dividends. However, it's important to note that conforming to hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily a rational choice; to take on the role of *daikokubashira* requires sacrificing one's freedom and "most men get neither rich nor powerful as a result of their submission to the salaryman doxa" (Gill, 2003; LeBlanc, 2011, p.126).

Similarly, Mathews (2003) focuses on masculinity though the lens of *ikigai* ("that which most makes life worth living") over time. While he finds a significant generational difference, with younger men being less likely to claim work as their *ikigai*, even those that assert their *ikigai* as family show a tendency to emphasise their role as the financial provider and considered routine childcare "unmanly". Mathews concludes that modern capitalist logic which devalues unpaid care work, as well as traditional gender ideology which places men in the public sphere and women in the private, are among the factors limiting the shift away from work as the *de facto* masculine *ikigai*.

Nevertheless, the last three decades of economic stagnation have increasingly challenged the hegemony of salaryman masculinity. Employment has become increasingly precarious, especially as a consequence of the deregulation of labour laws, and dual income families have been the majority since the mid '90s (Rosenbluth and Thies, 2007; Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2020). A growing emphasis on diversity and individualism has resulted in salaryman becoming pitiable "corporate slaves" lacking outside interests, rather than the admirable warriors they once were, and younger "businessmen" strive to set themselves apart from their older counterparts (Dasgupta, 2017; Tso and Nanase, 2017; Koike, 2022). However, gender norms concerning breadwinning and life course expectations remain dominant, as reflected in the experiences of male freeters (young irregular workers) who lack the financial stability to marry and start a family and thus become proper *shakaijin* (Cook, 2013).

Salaryman masculinity remains hegemonic, despite these challenges, with the core tenants of work and marriage remaining unchanged. However, the boundaries have shifted in response to the changing socio-economic context and whether this includes nurturing fathering is up for debate.

2.3. The Emergence of *Ikumen*

Media discourse around involved fathers in Japan has been ongoing since the '90s, if not earlier. Nakatani (2006) analyses mothers' and fathers' accounts published during this period and finds that while wives might resent their husbands for lack of support, they had internalised gendered norms regarding childcare, resulting in a "contested arena where little space is left for the fathers to assume more active roles" (p.101). Fathers' accounts, on the other hand, came from those who were actively involved and had even taken childcare leave; as such they experienced not only the same joy of parenting as mothers but also many of the same frustrations. However, they also had to contend with micro-aggressions as a result of rigid social expectations. Nakazato (2017) describes similar experiences in fathers who took childcare leave alone in the early 2010s, over a decade later, showing how slowly attitudes to fathers in public spaces are changing.

The term *ikumen* was originally created by the advertising agency Hakuhōdō in 2006 to counteract prevailing ideas of fathering being uncool, but it wasn't until MHLW launched the Ikumen Project in 2010 that it gained mainstream attention. Vassallo (2017) examines how various actors have interpreted the term to further their agendas. For example, the state uses

ikumen as an "instrument of social change" to tackle the declining birth rate, whereas magazines target an expanding consumer market that feels forced to substitute limited family time with consumption. Conversely, FJ positions *ikumen* as childcare within a broader model of "new fathers" (*atarashii papa*) which includes personal development and involvement with the local community. In this case, *ikumen* is merely a "starting point" for becoming a "smiling father" (p.61).

This is supported by Goldstein-Gidoni (2020), who further explores FJ's influence on family policy and its change in direction from "changing Japanese men" to "changing Japanese society". She notes its goal of changing mindsets, contrasting members' commitment to active fathering with their own fathers' and managers' "Shōwa [period] way of thinking" (p.368). FJ recognised the institutional barriers facing fathers at work and coined the term *ikuboss* in 2014, referring to managers who are more considerate of work-life balance and support their employees in becoming *ikumen*, and later launching the IkuBoss Award. She therefore concludes that FJ is leading the way in "slow-dripping" change.

Indeed, the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (MIC, 2022b) shows that fathers' average time spent on childcare has increased slowly, from 18 minutes a week in 1996 to 65 minutes in 2021 (see Figure 4). However, mothers' time spent has also increased from 163 minutes to 234, and they continue to spend 3.6 times as long on childcare. Furthermore, fathers continue to spend less time on housework than childcare, reflecting the influence of fathering discourse on changing ideas of masculinity, while housework remains firmly in the feminine sphere. Fathers also spend more time on childcare when their wives work, possibly because mothers who continue to work are more likely to have more gender equal ideologies (MIC, 2017; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022).

Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky (2016) contrast *ikumen* with *kazoku sābisu,* noting that not only the kinds of associated behaviours have changed, from family outings to childcare, but the sentiment has as well; childrearing is now framed as enjoyable in its own right, not merely an obligation to be endured. They further differentiate between "strong" and "weak" images of *ikumen*, with the former taking childcare leave and the latter being father's "natural" involvement in childcare and thus not requiring labelling. This suggests that *ikumen* is not an expansion in hegemonic ideals, as has been suggested, but a new, alternative masculinity (Cook, 2019). This is supported by a government survey, which found that 52.1 percent of respondents believed it was natural (*shizen*) for men to do housework and
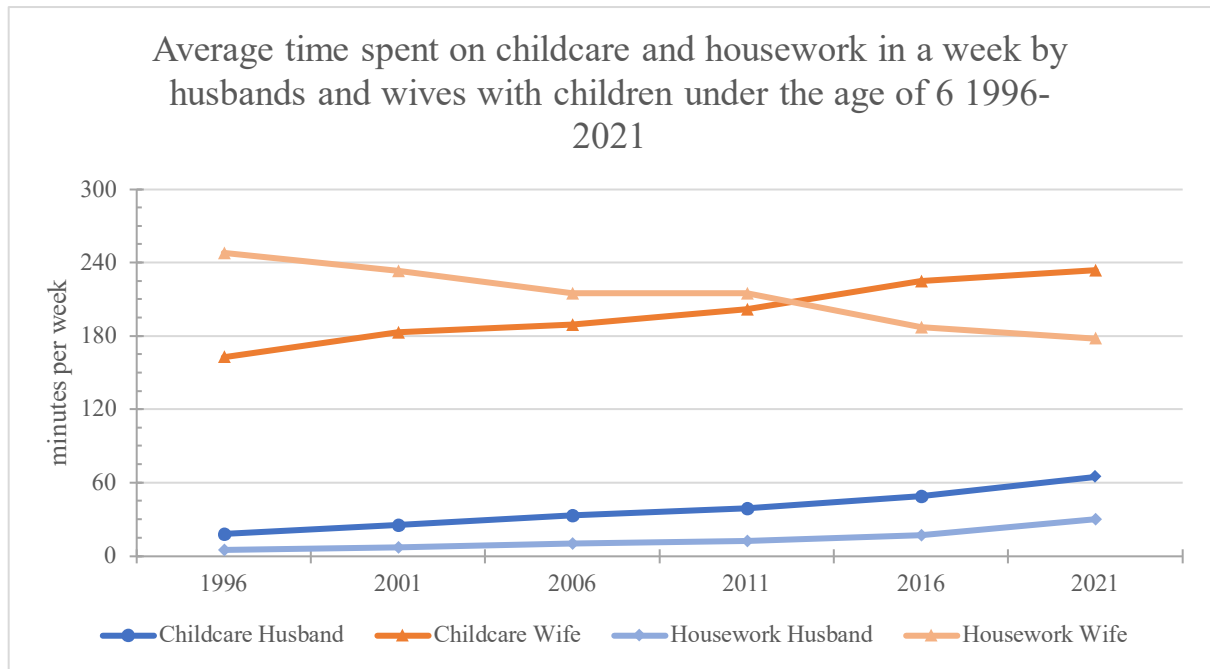
Figure 4: Average time spent on childcare and housework in a week by husbands and wives with children under the age of 6 1996-2021. Data from *Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities*, MIC, 2022b.

childcare (Cabinet Office, 2014). Even in the case of "weak" *ikumen*, however, interviewees distinguish themselves from their fathers old-fashioned behaviour, much like Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) observes in her subjects.

However, *ikumen* is not a universally praised phenomenon. While single women see *ikumen* as desirable partners, married women are more ambivalent. They resent the glorification of fathers for simply doing what is expected of women while they themselves face a lack of social validation for roles outside of "mother" and disapprobation for choosing to prioritise their careers (Vassallo, 2017; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020). Some fathers also dislike being praised for doing what is "common sense" or consider self-labelling akin to bragging and express desire for the word to fade away (Chikamochi, 2015; Koike, 2022). Likewise, members of an FJ splinter group, *Shufu no Tomo* ("The Househusband's Friend", a play on words on a now defunct monthly magazine aimed at housewives), set themselves apart from *ikumen*, disdaining them for taking only the easy part of childcare and not fully committing to their fathering responsibilities (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2022).

The state's endorsement of *ikumen* as a cornerstone of family policy, as well as FJ's media presence, means the term has been constantly visible throughout the 2010s. However, the shine has started to fade as involved fathering discourse moves beyond the narrow scope of *ikumen*.

2.4. Childcare Leave

Childcare leave is one of the most visible ways of quantifying fathers' involvement in childcare, with a core policy concern being how to encourage men to take leave at the same rate as mothers, as well as increasing the length of leave. While fathers' use of childcare leave saw a jump after the 2019 revision to the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law, which allowed leave to be taken in hourly increments (see Figure 5), leave has been "thoroughly feminised" since its introduction in the '90s (North, 2016, p.61). In fact, until the 2009 revision fathers were only able to take childcare leave if their wife was also working, reflecting the veneration of mothers as natural caregivers. Yet surveys show that men want to take childcare leave at a much greater rate than they actually do (FJ, 2019b; RENGO, 2019).

Childcare leave is often framed as a matter of social justice, particularly regarding gender equality. Women face an opportunity cost to their career as a result of taking long breaks from work to raise children, known as the maternal wall, as well as a wage penalty associated with low-paid, part-time employment that offers the necessary flexibility for childcare (Crosby, Williams and Biernat, 2004). Indeed, women who use childcare leave in Japan often never get back on track in their careers (Boling, 2015). The implication is that if men were to take childcare leave at the same rate as women so that career interruptions were equally distributed between genders, this would increase the female labour force participation rate,
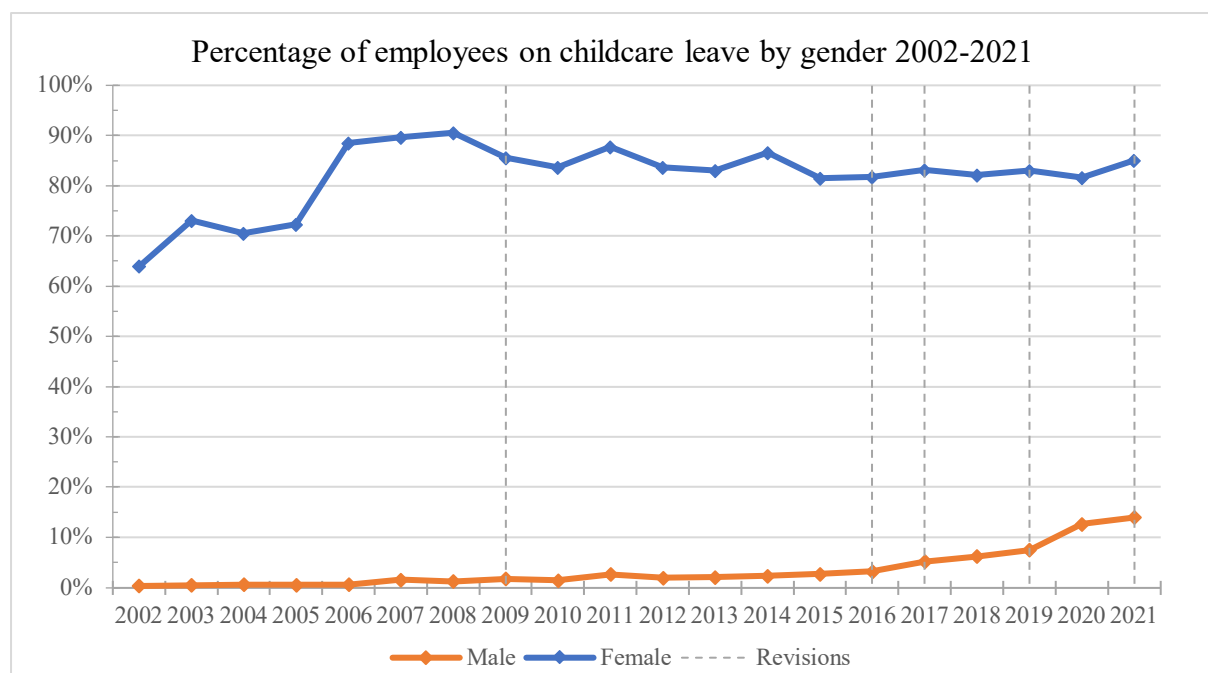

Figure 5: Percentage of employees on childcare leave by gender 2002-2021, including dates of revisions to the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law. Data from *Koyō kintō kihon chōsa*, MHLW, 2022a.

provide further career opportunities for women, and alleviate the gender pay gap.

However, Gupta, Smith and Verner (2006) point out that where few men take childcare leave, fathers face a negative "signal effect". In other words, there is a larger wage penalty than in environments where the take-up of childcare leave is more gender equal. Accordingly, economic considerations play a major factor in whether fathers take leave. Zhelyazkova (2013) observes that while women's behaviour tends to be analysed on an individual level, men's behaviour is analysed within a family context, based on spouse's relative resources. In Japan, the salary replacement rate is less than 100 percent which incentivises the lower earner to take leave. In the vast majority of cases this is the wife, particularly due to spousal income tax provisions that encourage the second earner to remain below a certain income threshold (OECD, 2003, pp.184–86). It therefore makes financial sense for mothers to take childcare leave.

Nevertheless, economic concerns are not the only reason fathers decide not to take leave according to surveys carried out by the Cabinet Office (2017; 2019) and the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (*Nihon Rōdōkumiai Sōrengōkai*, hereafter RENGO) (2014; 2019). Fathers are reluctant to be an inconvenience (*meiwaku*) to their co-workers, and the atmosphere at many workplaces remains inimical to taking any kind of leave, with RENGO (2019) reporting that the majority of respondents use less than half of their annual leave. North (2016) finds that the "pioneers" of childcare leave dealt with this by using consensus building strategies or arranging leave to coincide with quiet periods in order to minimise disruption. "Paternity harassment" (*patahara*) is also an issue, with a third of respondents who wanted to take leave but weren't able to experiencing negative reactions from managers and colleagues (RENGO, 2019). In actuality, mothers face the same obstacles, but have the option (sometimes considered a privilege) to simply leave the workforce to raise children, temporarily or otherwise, while fathers cannot as long as they are expected to be the *daikokubashira* (Nemoto, 2013; Boling, 2015).

Additionally, the take-up rate obscures the fact that many men take "hidden" childcare leave (*kakure ikukyū*). Surveys show that fathers using the childcare leave system are a tiny, albeit increasing, minority; the Cabinet Office (2017) reports 6.2 percent of respondents using childcare leave (*ikuji kyūgyō*), compared to 92.9 percent using annual leave or non-statutory

paternity leave (*haigūsha shussan kyūka*), while FJ (2019) reports 34.9 and 65.1 percent respectively.[4] One account from an employee of Asahi Shimbun suggests that the amount of paperwork involved in requesting childcare leave is an additional deterrent, along with the low level of salary replacement (Takafume, 2020). North (2016) further explains that using annual leave avoids the "flexibility stigma" associated with men's childcare leave and demonstrates the maturity expected of a *shakaijin* by subordinating one's own desires to maintain social harmony.

Nakazato (2017), on the other hand, explores reasons why men choose to take childcare leave, with supporting their wives' return to work being cited by half of his interviewees. The common denominator was "a flexible attitude to gender roles and respect for the career of their partner" (p.253). This emphasis on supporting wives' careers contrasts with older studies which found that marital relationships changed with the birth of a child, transforming from husband-wife to mother-father (Shwalb and Nakazawa, 2013). Nakazato (2017) further examines interviewees' experiences as fathers who took leave while their wives worked and finds that they frequently felt bored, isolated, or anxious, similar to Nakatani's (2016) findings discussed above. In particular, they struggled with meeting other fathers and feeling judged by mothers. He found this allowed them to empathise with stay-at-home mothers and changed not only their perceptions of housework and childcare, but their working style as they learned how to manage their time more efficiently, which indicates there are benefits to companies that support fathers' use of childcare leave.

Research suggests that formal rights by themselves are not enough to change practices, however, with attitudinal changes also being necessary (North, 2016; Ishii-Kuntz, 2019). This is partly because Japanese policy is developed through consensus building between employers and unions (OECD, 2003, pp.69–70). While companies have an "obligation to make effort", there are no enforcement mechanisms or penalty clauses, with the state instead relying on moral persuasion, leading to accusations of "position-taking" (Boling, 1998). There is debate over how best to instigate change, with Morrone and Matsuyama (2013) placing the burden of change on individual employees asserting their rights, while FJ stresses changing managers' awareness as the more effective approach over a "silent revolution" of leave takers (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2019, p.369).

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[4] The Cabinet Office question allows multiple answers, while the FJ question is single answer, so these figures are not directly comparable.

Similarly, Brinton and Mun's (2016) interviews with Japanese HR managers show that the influence of peer companies has a greater effect on implementation of workplace policies than the law. However, they also argue that such policies are seen as an implicitly female benefit; managers use them as a strategy to attract and retain female labour, while still expecting employees to embody the "ideal worker" who prioritises company needs over family responsibilities. Though fathers who take leave may be useful symbolically, managers do not question the assumption that mothers bear primary responsibility for childrearing and thus reinforce the gendered division of labour.

Childcare leave continues to be a significant priority of the Japanese state, with four revisions to the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law in the last decade. Yet major institutional barriers remain for fathers who want to take leave, especially regarding workplace atmosphere and managers' understanding of policy. However, the take-up rate has been gradually increasing, reflecting the efforts of multiple actors and the influence of culture on conduct.

2.5. Theorising Fatherhood

Having presented the state of current literature on aspects of Japanese fathers, this section questions how we understand "involved fathering". Fatherhood is both a biological status and a social one, and it both impacts on and is impacted by masculinity. Pleck (2010) discusses the idea that fathers make an "essential and unique contribution" to child development by virtue of their maleness but concludes that while there are gendered differences in parenting, they are not significant. Instead, he proposes an "important father" hypothesis, in which involved fathering is just one of many influences on child outcomes. At the same time, longitudinal studies in the Japanese context have linked paternal involvement to children's sociability, adaptability, and independence (Shwalb et al., 2010; Ishii-Kuntz, 2015).

The question then becomes how we conceptualise and measure "involvement". Palkovitz (2012) points out in his review of child development research that structural and demographic variables (e.g. employment or marital status) have often obscured ideological variables (e.g. parenting style) so that qualitative measures are often lacking. Generally speaking, involvement is understood as meaning more time with children or higher frequencies of certain behaviours, while neglecting the content of such behaviour in a relational context. In other words, all involvement is assumed to be inherently positive. Palkovitz also observes

that "involved father" is often used as a synonym for "good father" in popular discourse, which is laden with implicit value judgements.

Yet behaviour is only one aspect of fathering. LaRossa's (1988) framework of culture and conduct distinguishes between normative values of fatherhood and what fathers actually do. He describes the "asynchrony" of culture and conduct during the emergence of "new fathers" in '80s USA, as shifting ideas of what fathering should be were not accompanied by a proportionate change in behaviour. Typically, while culture follows conduct, LaRossa argues that the culture of fatherhood was influenced by the "modernising" conduct of motherhood, with the conduct of fatherhood acting as a "stabiliser".

In using this model of culture versus conduct to compare Japan and Germany, countries with similar historical approaches to state welfare and family policy, Olbrich (2018) concludes that while normative values do not differ significantly, conduct in Japan continues to be more "traditional" than Germany. She argues that while conduct has caught up to culture in Germany, in Japan it continues to lag behind partly due to differing cultural values regarding what "good fathers" look like. Takaoka and Sun (2018) also compare German and Japanese parenting values from the point of view of both mothers and fathers. They find that despite the fact Japanese men work longer hours than German men, the proportion of Japanese men who believe good fathers should focus on work and leave childcare to the mother was much lower than German men: 12.8 percent and 45.6 percent respectively (p.114). RENGO (2014; 2019) surveys also show that culture continues to change faster than conduct (see Figure 6). Respondents would like to balance work and childcare at twice the rate at which they are able to do so, and while the number of men who would like to prioritise childcare has grown from 10.9 percent in 2014 to 14.1 percent in 2019, the proportion who are actually prioritising childcare has decreased. This demonstrates that the realities of Japanese fathers' lives prevent them from achieving their preferred work-life balance, meaning that the conduct of fatherhood continues to lag behind the culture.

Ishii-Kuntz (2013) describes a model of Japanese father's participation in childcare based on individual, family, and work factors. Predictors of active involvement include having a strong fathering identity, a more progressive gender ideology, younger children, shorter work hours, working for family-friendly companies, and experiencing less job stress. The most significant factors are relative resources and time availability; fathers with higher incomes and less availability at home tend to be less involved in childcare, which is a result of Japanese
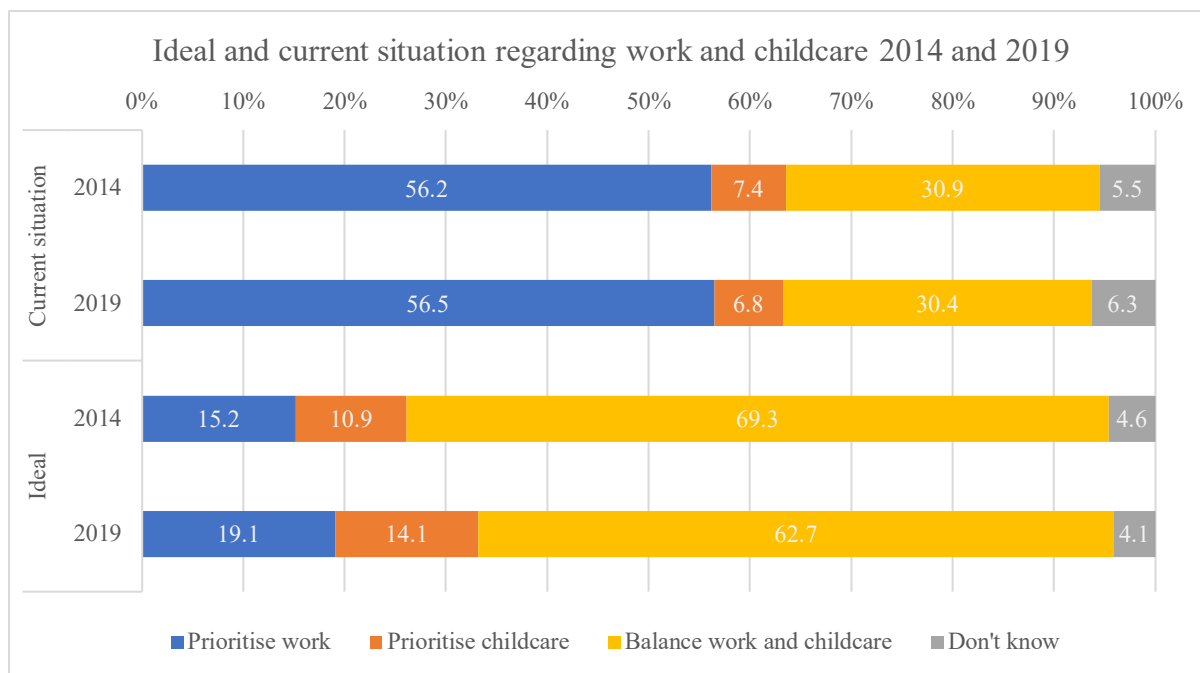
Figure 6: Ideal and current situation regarding work and childcare 2014 and 2019. Data from *Pataniti-harasumento (patahara) ni kansuru chōsa*, RENGO, 2014 and *Dansei no kaji ikuji sanka ni kansuru jittai chōsa 2019*, RENGO, 2019.

corporate culture constraining men's behaviour. She further presents two theories for how fathers' relationship with their own fathers might influence involvement with childcare. In the role modelling theory, fathers seek to emulate their fathers' commitment to childcare, while they compensate for their fathers' lack of it in the compensation theory, with the former having a stronger influence.

These theoretical frameworks form a basis for analysing fathers' behaviour in Japan, with LaRossa's (1988) model being particularly useful due to its distinction between culture and conduct.

3. Methodology

This chapter discusses the research design used to collect data through fieldwork conducted in Tokyo, justifying the methodological approach chosen, with a discussion of the limitations and issues of reflexivity.

3.1. Data Collection

This thesis aims to interpret fathers' lived experiences which are inherently imbued with subjective meaning as a result of interactions with historical and social norms (Creswell, 2013). Using a phenomenological, social constructivist approach, therefore, data was collected through semi-structured interviews.

The primary benefit of semi-structured interviews in qualitative research is that they allow participants to "speak in their own voices", which is necessary when dealing with questions of attitude and self-perception (Seale, 2012, p.209). Additionally, semi-structured interviews are flexible and responsive to what participants perceive as important, encouraging tangents and prioritising participants' accounts rather than the researcher's preconceptions (Bryman, 2012). While there are benefits to interviewing couples either together or separately, particularly regarding potentially conflicting accounts of involvement with routine childcare, this thesis focuses on fathers' self-perception rather than satisfaction within the marital relationship so individual interviews were chosen (Beitin, 2012). While interviews are not the most reliable way to quantify fathers' involvement in childrearing due to self-report bias, this is not the primary focus of the thesis (LaRossa, 2012).

An interview guide was designed with questions covering a range of topics, including childcare responsibilities, work-life balance, parenting values, hopes for their children's future, and contemporaneous fathering-related news stories, such as Koizumi taking childcare leave. This guide was given in advance to those participants who requested it, with questions in both English and Japanese. Translation of the questions into Japanese not only allowed participants to fully understand what they would be asked, it also reassured them as to my comprehension of Japanese and Japanese society and hence that there would not be serious difficulties with communication. While the interview guide was not strictly adhered to, in cases where the participant had prepared beforehand or where their English ability was limited it allowed for a sense of structure.

3.1.1. Participant Selection

Originally, I intended to recruit ten participants from FJ via their website contact form, with the only requirement being that they lived in Tokyo so that there would be a large sample from which to draw. Not only was this a matter of logistics, since FJ members are easily accessible and I lacked any existing connections in Tokyo, but as members of an organisation that centred involved fathering, potential participants could be expected to have childrearing as a core component of their identity. However, as the interviews would be carried out primarily in English, initial contact resulted in only two participants. Further recruitment was carried out with the aid of staff from Waseda University, amounting to five university staff members and a journalist. A final participant was found through snowball sampling, a method which has been criticised for potentially distorting the sample due to seeds referring

participants who may all be of the same gender or ethnic group, for example (Parker and Scott, 2020). While the final participant matched the original recruitment criteria as a member of FJ, university faculty members are overrepresented in my sample, further discussed below.

In total, nine face-to-face interviews were carried out in Tokyo in January and February of 2020, ranging from 30 minutes long to an hour and a half. In some cases, time was limited as the interview was conducted during their working hours which resulted in shorter, more superficial answers as I aimed to cover the majority of the interview guide, rather than focus on a few questions in depth. Participants were offered a choice of location, and while the majority chose to be interviewed at work or at a nearby café, Takuya invited me to his home to meet his family. The interview occurred with his wife and children present and while his wife contributed to the conversation, for ethical reasons no observation of the children was carried out. In the case of the two interviews with Waseda University administrative staff, Shōta and Minato, a professor was present and able to interpret when necessary. All participants were offered a small gift of food after the interview, similar to *omiyage*, as a token of gratitude. All participants gave their consent to the interview being recorded, so interviews were then transcribed and translated where applicable.

Table 1: Summary of interview participants

Alias	Age	Occupation	Wife's employment status	Children (sex & age)	FJ member
Takuya	32	company employee	maternity leave	M (2), F (>1)	Yes
Yūta	34	university faculty	housewife	M (4), M (2)	No
Haruto	47	university faculty	full time	M (1)	No
Osamu	55	university faculty	part time	F (16), M (13)	No
Shōta	33	university admin	part time	F (1)	No
Minato	37	university admin	maternity leave	M (>1)	No
Daisuke	38	company employee	housewife	M (7), M (4), F (2)	Yes
Naoki	58	company employee	housewife	F (25)	No
Kenta	37	company employee	full time	F (2)	Yes

The participants can be grouped in several ways: their age, where they work, their wife's emplyment status, the age of their children, and whether they are a member of FJ. Table 1 lays out how each participant fits into these key variables. Most of the fathers were in their 30s with their youngest child being two or under. However, Naoki was the oldest participant at 58 and he also had the oldest child, an adult daughter. Similarly, Osamu, also in his 50s, had children in junior and senior high school. Children have different caregiving needs at different stages in their lives, and once they have reached a certain age (usually by the time they enter elementary school), parental involvement becomes less intense (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013). Naoki and Osamu were able to reflect on how they had raised their children in the past and what they could have done differently, as well as providing a counterpoint to the other fathers who currently had small children. Additionally, the two of them, as well as Haruto, grew up during Japan's economic miracle and are old enough to remember the bubble bursting, which has influenced their attitudes towards fathering. Finally, of the four company employees, each worked for a large company (over 300 employees) in various industries, including pharmaceuticals and finance.

3.1.2. Limitations

There are multiples factors that mean the participants are not representative of the average Japanese father and thus the results cannot be generalised. Firstly, all participants were resident in Tokyo and had white-collar jobs, placing them firmly in the urban middle class. Blue-collar and rural fathers develop different perspectives of fatherhood based on their environment, and while they have been overlooked in literature, I was unable to recruit any. Faculty members at Waseda University are also overrepresented in my sample compared to the general population. While they are white-collar workers, academia is quite different to typical Japanese corporate culture, allowing them more autonomy and flexibility. At the same time, recent research has tended to focus on members of FJ, so by exploring other fathers' experiences this thesis makes a valuable contribution to the field (Vassallo, 2017; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020; Koike, 2022).

The fact that participants were confident in expressing themselves in English also places them apart. Additionally, multiple participants had experience working abroad for several years, including in Europe, the US, and Africa, exposing them to other ways of thinking in multiple areas, including fathering. For example, Yūta noted that his wife often told him that his way of thinking is different from "normal" Japanese people. The three members of FJ are

also outliers as they are actively performing fatherhood as part of their identity and have potentially considered what fathering means to them beyond "common sense" understandings. However, the point of phenomenological research is to explore the lived experiences of a subset of the population in depth rather than being representative (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

As the interviews were carried out in English, this also represents a limiting factor on the results. Not only was participant selection influenced by this, as discussed above, but participants occasionally struggled to articulate more complicated thoughts in their second language. When this happened, we switched to Japanese. While I received assistance with translation after the fact, in this case the interviews were limited by my own Japanese ability as I was not always able to follow up on their responses in the moment. Additionally, any translation between languages is subject to interpretation and nuance may be lost.

3.2. Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

While fatherhood is not necessarily a sensitive topic, it is still important to respect participants' dignity. Therefore, standards for transparency, consent, and confidentiality were followed (Swedish Research Council, 2017). However, given the flexibility of the research design, it's important to note that the concept of informed consent and consent forms may be insufficient in and of itself (Marzano, 2012). The concept of interviews as "inter views" means that they are subject to the same ambiguity as any other social interaction; thus, ethical research must be considered before, during, and after fieldwork is carried out (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

The concept of fatherhood is inherently gendered; there are people who say a woman can never understand what it means to be a father. However, even as a woman, I still have a relationship with my own father that influences my interpretation of the interview results. Additionally, the UK and Japan have different attitudes regarding fatherhood; for example, the male breadwinner is virtually extinct in the UK as most families are now dual income. However, in Japan over 40 percent of women quit their jobs to raise children, returning to part-time work once their children reach school age (Boling, 2019). I am aware that as a white British researcher I have the epistemic power to define what is "better" regarding father's involvement in childrearing (Dotson, 2014). However, I want my research to be participant-driven, so that conceptual power is in the hands of those who live it. In particular, I do not want to problematise Japanese fathering, regardless of how I personally feel.

Additionally, my position as an outsider in a country with a strong in-group culture may be both a positive and a negative (Dasgupta, 2013a). The former in that participants may feel freer to express opinions that are counter to the prevailing culture of Japan; the latter in that increased social distance may result in only surface-level opinions being expressed in order to avoid conflict.

4. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents and analyses the results in three main areas: participant's experiences at home, at work, and their view of Japanese society as regards fathers. While there is considerable overlap between these categories, they mark the boundaries where parenting attitudes conflict.

4.1. At Home

4.1.1. Childcare Responsibilities

Haruto and Kenta's wives both worked full-time, so they took on a large part of childcare and housework themselves. Kenta was actually the primary caregiver as he worked reduced hours, but if he had to go on a business trip or had a big project at work, then his wife understood that she would have to take care of their daughter for a week or two. The summer before, Kenta's daughter was ill for ten days. While he and his wife each took time off work to care for her, Kenta was the one who took the first few days off. What Haruto did, on the other hand, depended on his wife's schedule, as she was the one who might have a business trip at which point he was entirely responsible for childcare. Typically, he took his son to daycare in the morning before work while his wife picked him up on the way home.

Daisuke also helped out a lot at home, although in his case his wife did not work, and he also lived with his mother- and grandmother-in-law who could help out as well. As well as being the only multi-generational household in the sample, he had three children between seven and two with a fourth on the way, and so his responsibilities ranged from helping with homework to changing nappies. Minato believed he did a lot already, particularly household chores like laundry, but he wanted to do more as his wife wanted more time for herself. He hoped that if he did more at the weekend especially, then she would be able to go out and meet friends. She was on maternity leave at the time, which can be a difficult, isolating period for new

parents as they learn to take care of an infant by themselves, so this is especially important (Nakazato, 2017; Ishii-Kuntz, 2019).

For Takuya and Yūta, however, their main focus was their job, reflective of a more traditional division of labour. Their wives were at home all day, the former on maternity leave and the latter as a full-time housewife (although she was considering a return to part-time work), so they were able to work long hours, usually returning home after 10pm. Moreover, they both slept in a separate bedroom to the rest of their family so their children did not wake them up during the night and they could concentrate during the day. Yūta believed his wife was happy with the situation, saying:

> *Well, she often says to me "it's okay, it's okay". She also told me it's kinda normal, husband and father work a lot, and only [home at] weekends. So, I think she wants me to be home on weekends, but not weekdays.*

Osamu's children were teenagers, but he helped with childcare when they were small. Still, he found it much easier once they entered school. He supported them with their homework, and although he tried to do housework, he thought his wife was much better at it so she did more. Likewise, Shōta thought he could do more around the house as he had the time, but at the same time he said fathers "shouldn't do what they can't do". He gave the example of cooking, as even though he enjoyed it, his wife was better at preparing food for their daughter so he left it to her. However, a lack of competence in housework and childcare is often used to justify maintaining the traditional gendered division of labour, allowing fathers to reap patriarchal dividends (Connell, 2005; van Hooff, 2011).

All participants expressed the belief that there was no substantial difference between mothers and fathers, beyond the fact that only mothers can breastfeed. When asked whether mothers might feel resentment or anxiety at a father "interfering" with childcare, all were sceptical, showing the change in attitudes since Nakatani's (2006) interviews in the '90s. Additionally, none of them had heard of the three-year myth except for Takuya's wife; when she explained it to him, he dismissed it as too old-fashioned even for his parents' generation. Despite this, there was a general feeling that mothers were more suited to taking care of young children, even when they were bottle-fed, and participants would become more involved once their children were older. In this respect, there is a contradiction between participants' stated beliefs and what they are actually doing.

4.1.2. Raising Children

For most participants, the transition to fatherhood was relatively straightforward. While Shōta, for example, was initially "30 percent" nervous about how to take care of a baby because of his lack of experience, since his daughter had turned one, he felt more confident in his abilities. Having a child wasn't always something they expected or wanted, but they found that being a father was more fun than they had anticipated. Daisuke, in particular, said his first son "taught [him it's] fun to share time with baby. *Kazoku naru to iu koto* [how to become a family]". At the time we spoke, he had three children and his wife was pregnant with their fourth. Naoki, whose daughter was in her 20s, also believed that being a father was fun and expressed regret that not everyone would be able to experience parenthood as more young people remain unmarried.

For Haruto, on the other hand, having his own child was not what changed his mind. Instead, he framed it as a matter of maturity:

> *Before 30 years old, I hate screaming kids in the train or shopping mall. Don't scream in the crowd[ed] area. I don't know why, but after 30 years old, I can take it. [chuckles] If I see the crying baby in the train, I can handle this. I'm growing up.*

Nevertheless, he was looking forward to his son, then 16 months old, growing up so he could take him to museums. He considered providing opportunities a key part of his role as a father, especially because of his background as a professor and researcher. At the same time, he was aware that part of that requires him to bear the financial burden of his children's choices, such as studying abroad.

Takuya also felt that his main responsibility as a father was to earn enough money so that he could give his children a variety of experiences and introduce them to society:

> *[…] like what society is like, what world is like, company is like, economic is like… things more I should give him a chance to know. Can take him to other place or can give him many opportunities.*

He wanted his children to grow up with broad horizons (*shiya o hiroku*) without thinking things should be a certain way, which is why he invited me to his home to interview him. He was particularly worried that his son, who was two, was already closing himself off:

> *Sometimes people speaking in English, I think he's now starting [to think], "that is not my language, so I don't want to hear that, I don't want to listen [to] that".*

Similarly, Kenta thought it was important for children to experience other countries' cultures, in contrast to his parents who had stayed in the same city their whole lives. While they had a comfortable life, he implied that change would be more beneficial for children given the state of the Japanese economy, although it wasn't clear whether this was because they could bring other perspectives back to Japan or simply leave altogether.

When it comes to how they wanted their children to grow up and what kind of values they wanted to instil, there were two other main groups among the participants. The first group wanted their children to be friendly and considerate, while the second wanted them to be independent. The former is related to the concept of *shitsuke* (teaching correct behaviour), which is generally considered the purview of mothers and tends to emphasise the value of human relationships. Yūta, Haruto and Shōta are among this group, which aligns with Holloway's (2010) findings that kindness (*yasashisa*) was the most desired quality in children, regardless of gender.

Minato, Osamu, and Naoki comprised the second group. Notably, Osamu and Naoki both had older children, which may indicate the difference in aspirations once children reach a certain age. Osamu, in particular, wanted his teenage children to "realise their potential" and "to study various things and find what they really like and study that thing further". Naoki, meanwhile, framed it as respecting his daughter's ability to make her own choices. When we spoke, she had recently completed her master's degree in music and was hoping to study further in Paris, so he concluded that he had been fairly successful.

When asked what the most important thing was for bringing up happy children, participants struggled to articulate themselves, not because of their English ability, but because it was not something they had needed to explicitly define for themselves before. For example, Shōta said that love, rather than time or money, was most important. But when he tried to explain how he expressed that love, he reverted to spending time together:

> *That's really difficult. Actually, I'm now thinking the way [to show love] [laughs]. For me now, I try to be with her as much as possible. So, I try to finish my work as early as I can, go home as early as possible, I try to stay with my family on the weekend... I can't, but I try to communicate [laughs].*

The implication is that once Shōta's daughter is old enough to properly understand Japanese, the way he expresses love will change and the quantity of time spent together may become less important than the quality.

Yūta observed that there was a contradiction between what he thought was important and what he was choosing to do, with his behaviour not reflecting his beliefs. Although he worked long hours, as discussed above, he believed that children need the presence of a parent. However, he emphasised that it was about listening to them so that they don't feel alone or anxious rather than simply spending time together. He wondered if there was a difference between mothers and fathers in this regard, as he had felt more comfortable confiding in his father when he was younger; as he had two sons, he wasn't sure whether his wife's presence alone was enough. However, his focus remained work since he enjoyed conducting research and wanted to publish more.

Participants generally enjoyed childcare and were looking forward to their children growing older so they could share more experiences. In this respect, conduct has not greatly changed from previous depictions of fathers where they represented wider society.

4.1.3. Relationship With Their Own Father

All of the participants considered their father a good parent, even when they criticised some of his behaviour. While they were aware that their fathers worked long hours, they tended to remember spending time together at the weekend, in contrast to older studies that portrayed fathers as strict disciplinarians who never played with their children. (Holloway and Nagase, 2014) They also expressed an understanding of generational differences, as their mothers were *sengyō shufu* who enabled their fathers to focus on work. Nevertheless, Kenta believed that his father could be considered a kind of *ikumen* as he made sure to return home by 7pm to have dinner with his family and continued working at home in the evenings.

For the most part, participants regarded their fathers as a role model rather than wanting to compensate for their uninvolved parenting, similar to Ishii-Kuntz's (2013) findings. Takuya, whose father would return home from work just before he went to bed, said that growing up he never considered whether his father was good or bad, only that "he is what he is". In retrospect, he believed that he was a good father as he supported Takuya in other ways, "not taking care like mother do, but instead he did what he could" and he wanted to do the same.

Naoki, the oldest participant, was the most openly critical, saying that he felt his father could be quite tough on him as he was the type who believed things must be done his way. At the same time, Naoki admired his father's work ethic, saying that it taught him the importance of working hard. This influenced his own approach as a father, as he tried to balance his father's example with respecting his daughter's autonomy.

Mostly, participants remembered their fathers playing with them at the weekend. Common activities included swimming and hiking. Osamu said his father encouraged him to enjoy sports:

> *For example, he took me to the swimming pool and the sea in the summer so that I can enjoy the hot weather. He took me skiing in the winter. He tried to make me experience various things.*

Their fathers were also involved in their education, usually by supporting them with homework or creating study plans. Yūta, in particular, recalled confiding in his father as a high school student regarding his plans for the future and wanted to do the same for his sons.

Overall, while participants' fathers did not participate in childcare, mostly due to their long working hours, they were still involved in their sons' lives, especially once they reached elementary school age. They provided a moral and social education, typical of fathers in the late '80s and '90s when the majority of participants were growing up (Nakatani, 2006). However, these accounts show that childcare is not necessarily what children value, and that the quality of involvement needs to be assessed as well as the quantity (Palkovitz, 2012).

4.2. At Work

Of the nine participants, three were university faculty members, two were university support staff, and the remaining four worked for large companies in various industries. The three faculty members, Yūta, Haruto, and Osamu, mentioned that working for a university meant that they had a lot more flexibility than a regular salaryman. Due to the nature of their work, they were able to arrange their teaching schedules to suit themselves while research could be done at any time. For example, Osamu only worked four days onsite; as he said, "you're not bound to the office or to the desk from 9 to 5, so we are flexible". As such, they did not feel it was an issue for them if they needed to take time off to take care of their children.

However, this does not mean that they returned home early enough to have dinner with their families. Osamu had teenage children who attended cram school (*juku*) in the evenings, so they often returned home later than he did, even though he arrived home around 7.30pm. While Haruto dropped his son off at kindergarten in the morning, he would often not return home till late in the evening as he went to a café or had dinner outside while reviewing journals.

Yūta was the most explicit about how he separated the two. He felt that because he was still early in his career and he wanted to focus on publishing research, he needed to focus only on work during the week and then at the weekend he could concentrate on home. This is reminiscent of the need to give 100 percent commitment to the company characteristic of salaryman masculinity (Mathews, 2003; Morrone and Matsuyama, 2010). He did not return home until 9 or 10 in the evening and sometimes worked until after midnight, at which point his family was already asleep.

Takuya, on the other hand, worked for a large investment company and so had a typical salaryman schedule. He noted that he had the right to leave work early if he needed to, but in practice, it was not so easy. However, his company had recently joined the IkuBoss Project, a joint initiative by FJ and MHLW that aims to promote work-life balance by "transforming" managers (IkuBoss.com, 2019). As Takuya said:

> *Working and life should [be] more mixed and boss must consider everything for his people, what he is now caring, considering, and the people have to be most comfortable to work and after work. That is something* ikuboss *must consider.*

Takuya also noted the growing awareness of work-style reform (*hatarakikata kaikaku*) in Japan as cause for optimism. At his previous company, he worked "from morning to morning" and didn't think that was "wrong or weird", but after eight years of employment, he saw the current situation as completely different which made it much easier for parenting. He hoped that in the next five or ten years it would become even easier. Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) notes that pessimism regarding the rate of progress has obscured the incremental change that is actually occurring; Takuya's account shows that though obstacles remain in corporate Japan, it is in the process of adjusting its expectations, allowing fathers' conduct to change.

4.2.1. Support Systems

Shōta and Minato worked in the same office at Waseda University, and they agreed that their office environment made it easy for parents to take care of children. Shōta had taken a day off work to take care of his daughter when she was sick. However, they had differing levels of awareness of what support systems the university offered; Shōta wasn't sure what was available, while Minato knew there was an in-house daycare. Conversely, Shōta asked his colleagues with older children for advice, while Minato did not. Even though Shōta and Minato worked together, they still had remarkably different experiences of the same environment.

While Shōta praised the university for offering a "good deal" for parents, he mentioned that it, like many Japanese companies, had a system of rotating support staff throughout different offices every six or seven years, known as *haichi tenkan*. He said that if such a move meant he could not spend time with his family, he would think of looking for another job. This points to the importance of managers and colleagues in enabling involved fathering.

Naoki, who worked for a national newspaper, thought his company was quite flexible. While his daughter was now an adult, he was able to take time off to take care of her when she was younger, although it depended on what kind of work he was assigned at the time. He was also aware of some of the support systems that were available for parents. For example, there was a daycare in the same building as well as an option for working reduced hours. However, he believed it was still easier for mothers than fathers as he was only aware of female employees taking advantage of these systems. This indicates that the flexibility stigma resulting from the feminisation of childcare policies is still evident even in "flexible" companies (Brinton and Mun, 2016; North, 2016).

Similarly, Kenta spoke to his union and HR department to request an in-house daycare after he returned from childcare leave. Daycare remains a significant issue for parents as demand continues to outstrip supply, yet Kenta's company refused as it would have been unfair to older employees or employees without children. However, research into the maternal wall suggests that it's actually mothers who are most discriminated against, something that is especially important for Kenta as he chose to work reduced hours to support his wife's career development (Crosby, Williams and Biernat, 2004; Nemoto, 2013). Kenta ascribed this to an "older person thinking", similar to the "Shōwa way of thinking" that Goldstein-Gidoni's (2020) interviewees report.

4.2.2. Childcare Leave

Four of the participants took childcare leave: Minato, Takuya, Daisuke, and Kenta, the latter three being FJ members. Not only does this put them in the minority of fathers, but they took extended periods of leave, with Takuya's being the shortest at one month, when the majority take less than six days (Cabinet Office, 2019). Kenta noted that 53 percent of fathers took leave at his company, although annual leave was included in these statistics so that it appeared better to the public. Additionally, the average period of leave was 2.5 days, despite Kenta taking 6.5 months. This is consistent with North's (2016) concept of "hidden" childcare leave.

Takuya was the first in his company to take leave, although he was inspired by a colleague at his former company who took 3 months. He felt that, while colleagues under 40 reacted positively, there were still some negative feelings around him taking leave, though due to recent social opinion the "company cannot clearly say negative things". His manager, in particular, was not very understanding at first, as he was a "Shōwa man". However, Takuya's wife wrote him a letter thanking him for granting childcare leave, saying that she had praised the company to her friends, which began to change his mind. As a result of being the first manager in the company to grant childcare leave, he became the leader of the IkuBoss Project within the company and he was beginning to understand why childcare leave is important. This shows the importance of fathers who take leave, not only as role models for other employees but also for their managers.

Kenta took two periods of leave for his daughter, an initial two weeks when she was born and then a further six months towards the end of his wife's year of leave so that they overlapped for three months. Part of the reason for Kenta's decision was that he and his wife were unsure whether they would be able to find a daycare place. The more crucial factor, however, was his awareness that mothers are still discriminated against. Kenta chose to take primary responsibility for their daughter so that his wife continued to be offered career opportunities, particularly as they were considering a second child and she would need to take maternity leave again. For Kenta and his wife, these kinds of life shifts were considered a seesaw, and while her career took precedence for the moment, the balance might change in the future.

Minato's motivation, on the other hand, was his wife's health. As his wife was over 35 when she was pregnant and thus more at risk for complications, he took three months of leave so that he could support her after she had given birth. He spent the six months before taking

leave preparing his colleagues to cover his role as he was worried about the impact it would have on the office, similar to the strategies that North (2016) describes. He found that "the more I take care of [my baby], the more I'm happy", feeling that it helped him develop a strong bond with his son.

Daisuke was a major outlier, as not only did he take five months of leave for his second child, he also took a year and nine months for his third.[5] When he returned to work after the latter, he was transferred to a different department within his company. He maintains that it was part of the usual job rotation that he was expecting and not *patahara*, but he didn't care regardless. For Daisuke, it was more important to be a pioneer who broke barriers, explaining:

> *We have to choose. We have to choose the way we want to do. Many people think hard-working is good things. Partly, that is right. We have to choose working like parents.*

He was inspired by a book he read in his 20s whose author had been a stay-at-home dad for four years, saying he wanted to experience that "important, precious time" with his children. Additionally, he hadn't been involved with his first child since he wasn't sure of how to take care of him and wanted to rectify that with his subsequent children. At the time of the interview, Daisuke's wife was pregnant with their fourth child, and although he would have liked to take childcare leave again, he was looking for a new job and was unsure whether he would be eligible as workers must be employed for one year prior to taking leave.

Of the remaining participants who did not take leave, Osamu and Naoki, who both have older children, didn't remember whether leave was available to them when their children were born. Given the stricter eligibility criteria prior to the 2009 revision, it is likely that they would have been unable to take leave, regardless of desire. Naoki nevertheless took two weeks of annual leave to take care of his daughter, which he greatly enjoyed. Yūta, Haruto, and Shōta, on the other hand, considered taking childcare leave and decided against it for various reasons. Haruto's son was born at the end of the summer break, so due to his position as a university employee he found he did not need to take leave, whereas in Shōta's case, his wife's parents were available to help with childcare. For these fathers, deciding whether to

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[5] Childcare leave is only able to be used for 12 months for each parent, so it's unclear how Daisuke was able to take such a long period of leave.

take childcare leave or not was a matter of necessity rather than "precious" time to spend with their children.

Meanwhile, Yūta was concerned about the impact his absence would have on colleagues. As discussed in chapter two, this is one of the primary reasons why fathers choose not to take leave. However, it was also the reason Yūta's wife chose to quit her job at a state-run nursery rather than extending her childcare leave after their second child was born.[6] While he praised her sensitivity toward her colleagues, he was not able to comprehend why she didn't fully utilise her entitlement, despite not exercising his own rights to the same.

The participants who chose to take childcare leave showed a strong desire to be involved in childrearing, either for their own sake or to support their wives, which aligns with Nakazato's (2017) conclusions. Meanwhile, leave was perceived as merely a practical matter for those who chose not to take it.

4.3. In Society

4.3.1. Images of Fatherhood and Masculinity

Ikumen has been a popular image of fatherhood for over a decade; however, none of the participants used it to describe themselves. They fell into two groups, with the first group feeling that they didn't do enough to justify being called *ikumen*. Yūta, in particular, compared himself to one of his friends whom he felt did a lot more than himself:

> *For example, he finishes [his] job before 6, and then he often arrives home around 6 so that they can have dinner together and take baths together. […] Sometimes people say "oh, you're really* ikumen*" but I don't think so for myself because, as I said, what I'm doing is just playing with kids [at] weekends. Because I know someone who is really, really doing a lot of housework – that guy is really* ikumen *I think, not myself.*

Similarly, although Shōta would like to be called an *ikumen*, he thought he would have to do something like get up in the night to feed the baby before he could call himself one. Haruto agreed, saying that while he did "basic things", he relied on his wife too much. For these

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[6] Civil servants are entitled to three years of childcare leave.

fathers, *ikumen* carries a much higher standard of involved parenting than they currently perform.

The second group objected to the term *ikumen* itself. Notably, this group includes all three FJ members. For these fathers, *ikumen* is a redundant concept as childcare becomes the norm rather than something exceptional that requires praise (Chikamochi, 2015; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2022). Daisuke was particularly vehement in his dislike of the word, hoping that it would disappear in the next decade. He noted that other countries don't have a similar word and that he considered childcare "natural" (*atarimae*), saying, "for a father, it's common sense to take care of children. *Fazā suru koto ne, chichioya ga…dakara* [because a father does fathering]". Kenta agreed, saying:

> *I don't like being called* ikumen*, because when we hear this word* ikumen *everybody says, "ah, you are a very good dad, and you really love your daughter". But in my case, of course I love her.*

Still, Kenta used *ikumen* to describe himself to others as it simplified his situation, rather than explaining that his "basic concept" was supporting his wife's career development.

Similarly, Takuya felt that the image of *ikumen* was changing, becoming less cool and more "self-satisfactory", similar to Vassallo's (2017) boastful *ikumen*. He made a distinction between helping mothers and doing childcare:

> *Father should work, but he is more supporting mother, that is* ikumen*. But that is a bit [of an] old concept. But now father is not so much different from mother. Just what mother does, father should also take care of children. So that is not* ikumen*. If I call myself* ikumen*, that is very much just self-satisfactory. Or irony.*

This is comparable to FJ's stance, which discourages fathers from using words like "co-operate" (*kyōryoku*) as it leads them to view themselves as mother's helpers rather than committed co-parents (Vassallo, 2017, p.59).

When it comes to describing themselves as *daikokubashira*, participants were even more reluctant, even though they were functionally the breadwinner of their families. Kenta was the lone exception to this, saying his wife makes a "very solid" pillar. Likewise, Minato said it was an out-of-date idea and that if his wife made more money, then she would naturally

become the *daikokubashira*. For these younger fathers, being the higher earner has no impact on their masculinity, especially given the financial realities of raising children in Tokyo.

However, they remain the minority and gendered expectations remain strong. Shōta, despite being one of the youngest participants at 33, felt it was particularly important for him to be the *daikokubashira*. While he recognised that societal norms were changing, he still believed in the idea of "husbands should work outside the home and wives should take care of the household", at least for his own family. Still, he was keen to clarify that any kind of family is okay, as long as the husband and wife can agree between themselves.

Osamu agreed that it was up to individual couples to decide who is the breadwinner. Nevertheless, he was the only participant who considered *daikokubashira* to have both an economic and spiritual aspect and that fathers should encompass both of them. The perception of fathers as a moral authority was not mentioned by any other participant, and even Osamu conceded that in his family, his wife was very influential, having come from a tradition of *kakaodenka* (dominant wife, in contrast to *teishukanpaku,* dominant husband).

None of the participants explicitly related *daikokubashira* to masculinity, in contrast to Hidaka's (2011) findings. Instead, the term is developing an element of gender neutrality as the opportunities for women's career development improve. Even where participants believed that the *daikokubashira* ideology remained important, they maintained that it was an individual choice rather than a societal expectation.

Similarly, when asked about old stereotypes like *kaminari oyaji* that characterise fathers as obstinate, thundering, and in some cases even unpredictably violent, Haruto was grateful that things had changed, saying:

> *In our case I don't have to be such kind of character. Sometimes, my wife should be* kaminari oyaji *[laughs]. For me, she's tough to my kid.*

His response also shows the weakening of such depictions, as calling his wife *kaminari oyaji* was simply a joke and nothing more. On the other hand, Naoki, whose daughter was an adult, consciously tried to avoid becoming that kind of father. He explains, "when she did some stupid, funny things I try to laugh, smile instead of yelling". Given that Osamu, Haruto, and Naoki are the three oldest participants, all being over 40, this indicates how expectations have

changed regarding fathers' strictness over the past few decades, as reported by Holloway and Nagase (2014).

4.3.2. Reactions to Koizumi Taking Childcare Leave

At the time the interviews were conducted, Koizumi Shinjirō, then Minister of the Environment, was making headlines as the first serving cabinet minister to take childcare leave. He had discussed the possibility of taking leave as early as August 2019, then confirmed his decision in a blog post on 15 January 2020, stating that he intended to take "two weeks' worth" of leave over three months in order to support his wife while "giving top priority" to public affairs (Koizumi, 2020). While members of the Diet are not entitled to childcare leave under the current law, he planned to make up the two weeks by working shorter hours or by teleworking, in addition to full days off. In this way, he hoped to lead by example and reform working styles across the entire Ministry of the Environment, saying that it's not enough to change the system, but also the "atmosphere" (*kūki*) to make it easier for fathers to take childcare leave.

Koizumi is the latest in a long line of Diet members, prefectural governors, and mayors to take childcare leave in the hope that a high-profile role model would encourage increased leave-taking in fathers, such as Narisawa Hironobu, mayor of a Tokyo ward, in 2010 and Miyazaki Kensuke, former Diet member, in 2016. However, Koizumi's decision was met with the same mixed reactions as Miyazaki's was six years earlier. While the majority approved, criticism revolved around Koizumi's responsibilities to taxpayers as a cabinet member as well as the idea that this was a PR stunt (The Asahi Shimbun, 2019b; Craft, 2020).

Similarly, most participants agreed that Koizumi taking childcare leave was a positive step, although Yūta noted the fact that it was newsworthy meant that fathers taking leave was still not normalised. Kenta believed that it could mark a "turning point" for Japan and Takuya emphasised the importance of this kind of "top to bottom" approach for changing attitudes.

On the other hand, some participants were disappointed that Koizumi was taking so little time off. Minato wished that he had taken a year of leave as he could have made an even bigger impact on Japanese society. He noted that prime ministers in other countries have taken childcare leave so "how could [Koizumi] be busier than a prime minister?" Haruto agreed, saying that two weeks was "almost nothing" and nobody would miss him.

Only Naoki and Osamu, both over 50, felt that Koizumi's civic duties meant that he was not in a position to take leave. They both also agreed that a female politician should not take leave. Even so, Naoki was more ambivalent, saying that as a father, Koizumi made the "right choice" even if, as a minister serving the nation, he should not have taken leave. Naoki also wondered whether he needed to "change his mindset" to keep up with changing attitudes.

4.3.3. FJ Membership

Three participants were members of FJ. Takuya had joined only recently so he had not yet had any opportunity to take part in the activities and events that the organisation offers. Daisuke and Kenta, however, had been members for two years, since the birth of their youngest children. While Daisuke sometimes took part in events, Kenta thought initiatives like IkuBoss were more valuable. The two of them had met because of FJ and became friends, often taking their children to the park together.

FJ's charismatic founder and director, Andō Tetsuya, was instrumental in inspiring Takuya and Kenta to join. In Takuya's case, he and his manager took part in a panel discussion at an IkuBoss seminar due to his position as the first in his company to take childcare leave. Andō interviewed them both and later gave a presentation that Takuya found very moving. He also directly recommended that Takuya join. Likewise, Kenta was at a parents' class (*ryōshin gakkyū*) organised by his ward where Andō gave a presentation. He was so impressed with it that he introduced himself there and then.

For both Kenta and Daisuke, FJ functioned as a place where they could meet like-minded fathers and build a community. While mothers have their own social circle of *mamatomo* (literally mother-friend), fathers often find themselves more socially isolated from other parents, especially mothers (Nakazato, 2017; Ishii-Kuntz, 2019). While non-members, like Yūta and Minato, had friends who had become fathers, they had not made new fathering friends, although they attributed this to their children being too young for school. As Kenta said:

> *For me personally, FJ is a place where I can get to know [and] make the community with* ikumen. *They have the same problem as me. Exactly the same problem as me. We can share our problems and our feelings. That makes me more comfortable, doing my* ikukyū *[for] six months.*

The two of them sometimes felt uncomfortable or embarrassed when they took their children to the park on weekdays, as if they were being judged. Daisuke particularly felt as if people were looking at him as a *fushinsha* (suspicious person) while he was on childcare leave. Although fathers and their children are a regular sight at the weekend, especially in Tokyo, the belief that any man who is not at work on a weekday is unemployed and therefore worthless persists, with insults like *gokutsubushi* (parasite) and *himo* (financially dependent on a woman) being commonplace (Vassallo, 2017; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2022). The community Kenta and Daisuke have made for themselves within FJ thus enables them to persevere in their commitment to childrearing, despite perceived criticism.

4.3.4. Is Japan Changing?

Looking at the past, Haruto could see how different things were from his parent's generation when gender was "always so vivid". He also compared himself to the people around him; he had his first child late in life, in his mid-40s, while he had friends who got married and had children 20 years ago, immediately after graduating university. Their wives quit their jobs, whereas Haruto's wife enjoyed working and remained at her job on a full-time basis. For Haruto, the aging population was the most pressing impetus for change, saying, "the problem is systematic, the structure in the society. It is very hard to fix it in the short period but in the long run, we need [to] remodel our society".

Multiple participants also noted that women nowadays have to work, as a single income can no longer sustain a family, which has also contributed to changing expectations. 16 years ago, when their daughter was born, Osamu's wife felt forced to leave her job as a research dentist, which he called a particularly "chauvinistic" profession, as she was not able to dedicate enough time to childrearing and they had difficulty finding a daycare place. He thought things were much better than they were, but that Japan was still not friendly towards parents of young children. Naoki agreed, wondering if the concept of "barrier-free", which centres accessibility for people with disabilities, should also apply to parents. Still, he was happy that Japan was "realising that childrearing is not a job by [only] parents but all society should be involved".

However, Yūta noted that there was still a big divide between rural and urban Japan. He grew up in Gunma Prefecture where the gendered division of labour continued to dominate, while in Tokyo men and women were more equal. That could sometimes be difficult for him to understand, and he explained that because he grew up with his father working and his mother

at home that the gendered division of labour felt "right" to him. Accordingly, he believed he needed to "catch up" with shifting expectations. Nonetheless, he thought that both individual feelings and systems needed to change, and that institutional change was the most effective way to influence attitudes.

For Takuya, change was most obvious at work. While *hatarakikata kaikaku* and IkuBoss had made inroads on reducing working hours in the time he's been working, as discussed above, he said he still hesitated to leave work on time:

> *Still leaving early is giving some negative [reaction]. Working is from 9 till 5.30, but no one left 5.30. If I try to leave, "what happened?" people will ask me. "Any problem or emergency?"*

Takuya wanted Japanese people to value their time more, and for companies to prioritise productivity over presenteeism. But he considered his opinion a minority one, at least among the older generation. According to him, it was people over 40, like his manager, who needed to change their minds while younger people had more familiarity with fathering and so were driving societal change.

Likewise, Kenta observed that young employees at his company didn't think twice about using their annual leave. Though he joked that maybe Japan will change in 100 years, he said that he could "feel our society changing" as systems like childcare leave had been introduced and expanded. In Kenta's opinion, it was just that the Japanese mindset was simply too traditional to keep up. Daisuke, conversely, thought that changing minds was simple, it was only that people didn't try to change. Pioneers were therefore necessary: "Some[one] will have to challenge. Some[one] will have to break that wall, that thick high wall. *Sō suru to, chenji suru* [once that happens, it will change]".

It was evident to participants that Japanese society has changed its attitudes towards fathering, and gender equality in general, over the last few decades. They showed awareness of the institutional motives for change, like the aging population and women's labour force participation. However, they noted that the pace of change in Tokyo was much more rapid than in other parts of the county, though it still had a long way to go. Yet they remained optimistic as they believed that the younger generation who had grown up with involved fathering and work-style reform discourses were more willing to challenge the status quo.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Fatherhood has been the subject of national debate in Japan for several decades as the government has implemented various policies to encourage fathers' use of childcare leave. Additionally, FJ and other organisations have successfully raised awareness of the challenges facing involved fathers. This thesis examines the experiences of white-collar fathers in Tokyo as they negotiate their dual roles as parents and workers in the context of a society that emphasises men's commitment to their employer.

Participants represented a range of involvement in childcare, from being the primary caregiver to only contributing at the weekend. Other than the biological functions of childbirth and breastfeeding, they saw no difference between mothers and fathers, although there was still a perception that their wives were better suited to infant care than they were. At the same time, they enjoyed spending time with their children, and were keen to introduce them to wider society once they were old enough. Participants fell into three groups in terms of how they wanted their children to grow up: sociability, independence, and diversity of experience. Previous research has shown that teaching children to develop harmonious relationships has been a crucial element of Japanese parenting (Holloway and Nagase, 2014; Takaoka and Sun, 2018). However, participants also wanted to pass on their own values; there was a tendency towards valuing education, autonomy, and intercultural interaction due to the high proportion of participants who had worked abroad or were faculty members. Notably the three participants who prioritised cultural diversity were the three FJ members.

For the most part, they felt their own fathers were good parents, often considering them a role model, in line with Ishii-Kuntz's (2013) model of fathering rather than more recent research rejecting Shōwa fathers (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020). Participants fondly remembered spending time together at the weekend, even when their fathers worked long hours during the week, suggesting that, with the benefit of hindsight, quality rather than quantity of involvement was more important to them.

There was a difference between the three Waseda University faculty members and other participants regarding flexibility at work, although this did not necessarily mean they were more involved fathers. Rather, they were more likely to work late as they enjoyed their work. The regular employees, meanwhile, noted that although companies might offer support systems like in-house daycare, in practice they were used primarily by mothers, indicating the

feminisation of family policies (Brinton and Mun, 2016). Though the two fathers who prioritised their jobs over childcare were supported by wives who weren't currently working, there was no correlation between wives' employment status and how involved participants felt they were.

A significant factor in fathers' decision to take childcare leave was their relationship with their wife, whether it was supporting her career and her health, or being supported by her. Participants also expressed a strong desire to take leave for their own sake which allowed them to endure criticism and develop strategies for minimising tension at work. This supports Nakazato's (2017) findings where a strong fathering identity and respect for their wives' career were significant factors in taking leave. On the other hand, fathers who chose not to take leave felt it was unnecessary as they had alternative childcare options. The impact on colleagues was the biggest obstacle discussed, while economic concerns were not mentioned at all, contrary to scholarly focus on relative resources.

The term *ikumen* elicited conflicting reactions. Though none of the participants identified themselves as such, their reasoning can be divided into two categories. Firstly, there were the participants who believed they did not help enough at home to justify being labelled *ikumen*. Secondly, there were the participants, including all three FJ members, who disliked the term itself, considering it unnecessary as fathering was natural behaviour for fathers. The two groups align with Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky's (2016) "strong" and "weak" images of *ikumen* respectively. However, compared with their interviewees' belief that the expectations of strong *ikumen* were unrealistic, participants either knew someone or had personal experience of a standard of childrearing that had seemed impossible a decade ago, demonstrating that change in father's conduct is slowly but undeniably happening, bringing it more in line with the culture of fatherhood. Ironically, it is the members of FJ, who had each taken an extended period of leave, who had the most in common with Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky's interviewees, who never considered taking leave, as both groups resisted labelling "common sense" fathering behaviour.

Similarly, participants generally resisted labelling themselves *daikokubashira* even when they were functionally the breadwinner, considering it old-fashioned. While Hidaka (2010) identified it as a core component of hegemonic masculinity, participants did not link it to gender, instead agreeing that women could be *daikokubashira* if they earned more than their

husbands. For these men, breadwinning was a matter of negotiation between couples rather than conforming to social expectations, indicating a transformation in salaryman masculinity.

Overall, participants could see that Japanese attitudes towards parenting had changed in their lifetime, primarily in the realm of work-life balance, as a result of economic anxieties that required mothers continue working. They observed both a generational and an urban-rural divide in beliefs, with those over 40 being identified as needing to change their mindsets and those under 30 as resisting traditional corporate norms. However, they disagreed on whether top-down or bottom-up transformation was more effective. Nonetheless, when it came to shifting attitudes towards fathers' involved childcare, participants were less positive; they reported feeling judged and uncomfortable taking their children out during the week when men are expected to be at work. This is why organisations like FJ are vital for community building, as participants lacked opportunities to develop friendships with other fathers with similar experiences. Despite this, research tends to focus on FJ's structural initiatives, with little attention paid to the influence of peer networks on fathering.

Reactions to Koizumi's use of childcare leave were mixed. The majority were optimistic that it signified a turning point in the discussion around fathers taking childcare leave, hoping that such a high-profile example would lead to increasing normalisation, although some were disappointed that he didn't go further. Criticism came from the oldest participants and centred on his status as a minister funded by taxpayers, in line with media reporting (The Asahi Shimbun, 2019b; Craft, 2020; Siripala, 2020). It is difficult to tell whether Koizumi has had much impact on rates of leave taking, however, as there has been limited follow-up reporting, though a recent article regarding local elections indicates that politicians continue to face difficulties balancing their public duties with childrearing (Ito, 2023). Additionally, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic almost immediately afterwards may have had an impact, with early research suggesting that mothers' workstyles were most affected (Yamamura and Tsustsui, 2021).

Applying LaRossa's (1988) model of the asynchrony of culture and conduct of fatherhood to the results, it is clear that while the conduct of fatherhood has changed, it continues to be outpaced by continuing development in culture. This is most evident in the difference between FJ members and non-members, as the former's ideology has moved beyond the standard that the latter are attempting to achieve. Despite the state's emphasis on childcare leave, structural barriers remain the biggest factor in limiting fathers' capacity to participate

in childcare. However, this thesis is limited to white-collar workers in Tokyo, and there remains a gap in the literature regarding both blue-collar and rural fathers. Further research tracing the development of fathering ideology over time in fathers of school age children may also be valuable as there is a tendency to focus on fathers of infants, again due to the dominance of childcare leave in fathering discourse. The multiplicity of fathering cultures remains an under-studied element in Japanese society.

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