The Transition to Motherhood in Japan
Matsuo, H.

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Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This study was about the extent of and reasons for the postponement of first birth in Japan, an important issue that is contributing to low fertility and ageing and also one that is highly complex and not well understood. Use was made of an approach at both the macro and the micro levels, in line with Coleman’s (1990) methodological individualism, through a combination of SDT theory (van de Kaa, 1987, 1988, 1997; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988) with the process-context (de Bruijn, 1999) and life-course approaches (Giele and Elder, 1998). This approach was applied by tracing changes across different historical periods, and in a comparative manner, entailing consistent comparisons between Japan and the Netherlands. A broad range of source materials was used in this study consisting of Japanese and Dutch fertility surveys, focus group interviews with Japanese women, expert opinion interviews with Japanese experts, Japanese and Dutch indicator time series data and broad literature study.

10.2 The theoretical framework: building blocks and integration

Demographic behaviour is context-specific. That is clear from confronting the findings of Becker (1981) with those of Blossfeld (1995), Liebbröer and Corijn (1999), and a substantial number of Japanese and other demographers working on low fertility in Japan. To understand how the context impacts upon individual demographic behaviour one has to understand “the things at work inside people’s heads” (Preston, 1986, p. 189), i.e. the cognitive schemes (d’Andrade, 1992). The context determines individual behaviour via institutions and other individuals around that communicate norms and behaviour-guiding and meaning-giving rules to the individual, which are then absorbed into the individual’s cognitive schemes, as outlined by the process-context approach. As the individual ages, he/she moves through different historical contexts. That is a fundamental insight of the life-course approach with its concept of 'location in time and place'. Of fundamental importance for the rest of an individual’s life is the context during the phase of socialisation, i.e. during the individual's youth, something that can be argued on the basis of Ryder (cohorts) (1965), Easterlin (socialisation hypothesis) (1980), Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (mindscaping) (1988) and van de Kaa (mental cohorts) (1997). During socialisation, the individual shapes his/her understanding of norms and rules, and interpretation of his or her place in the world, through his or her cognitive schemes. But
decisive in forming the cognitive schemes is not only the context at that time but also the impact of the parents and the cohort members. The cognitive schemes then develop and mature after one's youth through the process of ageing, moving through different historical contexts and continuously interacting with cohort members (‘linked lives’). As the individual ages the same cohort members remain an important point of reference for the individual (‘linked lives’). The cognitive schemes include goals (d’Andrade, 1992). At the centre of our theoretical framework is the acting individual formulating goals. Individuals organise their lives around goals (and restrictions). At any point in time the individual is confronted with many competing goals and many competing careers in different domains of life. The individual deals with these by ranking them. When something changes in the context or the individual's situation, the individual will reorder his or her goals in so-called ‘transitional periods’ (Willekens, 1991) or ‘turning points’ (Abbott, 2000). The individual’s cognitive schemes, at a particular point in time, represent a reflection of the ranking of these goals and restrictions or opportunities and constraints (Willekens, 1991).

10.3 Data and method

The above process is captured through the life-history and the life-story approaches. The life-history approach is quantitative and focuses on documenting actual behaviour in objective terms. The life history represents the state transitions and sequences of states in a quantitative manner. The life-story approach is qualitative and focuses on understanding the causality underlying this behaviour. Qualitative approaches help us to identify the causality behind behaviour by identifying the mental processes of the individual, especially during so-called ‘transitional periods’. The life story focuses on the mental process of the individual’s personal development reflected in his/her goals, motivations and schemas. For a full understanding, both approaches are necessary to explain actual behaviour. This perspective was provided by de Bruijn (1999): “if quantitative data provide the skeleton of information, qualitative data add the flesh and blood” (p. 140).

To implement the life-story approach and capture the individual’s cognitive schemes, focus group discussions were conducted. In the life-history approach, use was made of fertility surveys: Netherlands Fertility Family Survey 1998 (OG98); and Japanese National Fertility Survey 1992 (JNFS92). In order to allow for single-state life table, multi-state life table and pathway (sequences of states) analyses, these data had to be prepared: raw retrospective survey data had to be converted into event history data. This required defining domains, states, and state spaces, and correctly timing events or state transitions. Such preparation of the data made possible the life-history approach using the above-mentioned methods. Each research method had its own unique added value in providing a comprehensive quantitative picture of the postponement of first birth in Japan and a comparison with the Netherlands. Single-state life-table techniques allowed us to understand changes across
cohorts in the occurrence and timing of first marriage, first birth, and the duration between first marriage and first birth independently of each other and allowed us to capture the impact of levels of educational attainment on these events. Multi-state life-table techniques enabled us to construct an average life course of cohort members (synthetic cohort), taking into account the state spaces. Finally, pathway analysis allowed us to show how the complexity of the individual's whole sequence of states before the first-child state affects the timing of first birth.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the 'context' regarding the postponement of first birth – a key part of our theoretical framework – interviews were conducted with experts, whose insights yielded explanatory factors for the postponement of first birth in Japan.

10.4 Main findings

10.4.1 Extent of postponement of first birth in Japan and the Netherlands

Single-state life-table analysis shows that first birth is postponed and fewer women experience first birth across birth cohorts to a rather significant extent in Japan. The mean age at first birth increases from 26.6 years for women born before 1960 to 28.0 years for women born in 1960 and after. First-birth behaviour is also age-specific, centring around the mid-20s, even in the later cohort. Because women are postponing first birth but the proportion of women who are mothers decreases by age across cohorts, that is likely to lead to less catch-up behaviour at higher ages and rather high proportions of women remaining childless. A conclusive statement however cannot be formulated yet. The proportion of women remaining childless at age 50 is 14.1 percent in the earlier cohort, while in the later cohort, it is 33.9 percent at age 33.

Also in the Netherlands first birth is postponed across birth cohorts and fewer women experience giving birth across birth cohorts to a significant extent. The mean age at first birth increases from 26.3 years for women born before 1960 to 27.7 years for women born in 1960 and after. The cumulative proportion of women in first birth at ages 25, 30 and 35 in the later cohort is also lower than that in the earlier cohort, although at the higher ages this is the case to a much smaller extent than in Japan. First-birth behaviour is not concentrated around certain ages, and this allows for catch-up behaviour at higher ages and lower proportions of women remaining childless. The proportion of women remaining childless in the earlier cohort at age 50 is 14.3 percent, while in the later cohort it is 13.8 percent at age 39.

10.4.2 Reasons for the postponement of first birth in Japan and the Netherlands

In Japan, postponement of first birth is due to changes in marriage behaviour. The pattern of Japanese first-marriage behaviour is almost identical to that of first-birth behaviour, indicating
the close relation between first marriage and first birth, and the fact that any change in marriage behaviour affects first-birth behaviour. Single-state life-table analysis shows that first marriage is postponed and fewer women experience marriage across cohorts. The mean age at first marriage increases from 24.9 years for women born before 1960 to 26.6 years for women born in 1960 and after. The cumulative proportion of women in first marriage at ages 25, 30 and 35 in the later cohort is lower than in the earlier cohort. And first-marriage behaviour is concentrated around certain ages in the later cohort. This is again likely to lead to less scope for catch-up behaviour at higher ages and rather high proportions of women remaining unmarried. Because of the close link between marriage and motherhood this engenders high proportions of women remaining childless.

In the Netherlands, postponement of first birth is due to a combination of changes in marriage behaviour and the increasing prevalence of cohabitation. There is no close correspondence in the Netherlands between first-marriage and first-birth behaviour. As in the case of first birth, first marriage is postponed and experienced less across birth cohorts. And the mean age at first marriage increases from 23.4 years for women born before 1960 to 31.7 years for women born in 1960 and after. But the cumulative proportion of women in first marriage at various ages is much lower in the later cohort than that in the earlier cohort, and this to a much larger extent than was the case with first birth, due to the increasing incidence of cohabitation.

To a certain extent marriage (and therefore first-birth) behaviour is driven by educational attainment in Japan, at least in the later cohort. There is no variation by level of educational attainment in terms of first-marriage and first-birth behaviour in the earlier cohort, and more but still limited variation in the later cohort. Single-state life-table analysis shows that high-educated women are likely to get married 3.7 years later and give birth 2.4 years later than low-educated women. In the Netherlands, variation across levels of educational attainment is already much higher in the earlier cohort and becomes even more pronounced in the later cohort. The analysis shows that in the later cohort high-educated women are likely to get married 3.8 years later and give birth 5.7 years later than low-educated women.

The close connection between marriage and motherhood in Japan, the concentration of behaviour around certain ages, and the limited impact of levels of educational attainment on marriage and motherhood point to the continued importance of standard biographies in Japan. On the other hand, the weakening link between marriage and motherhood in the Netherlands, the absence of concentration of behaviour around certain ages, and the large impact of levels of educational attainment on marriage and motherhood point to choice biographies in the Netherlands. These concepts of standard and choice biographies are discussed elsewhere (du Bois-Reymond, et al., 2003; Liefbroer and de Jong-Gierveld, 1994).

The results of the multi-state life-table analysis also demonstrated how in Japan postponement is due to changes in marriage behaviour, namely a continuation but increasing
rejection of a standard biography, while in the Netherlands it is due to the emergence of choice biographies, reflected in postponement of marriage and increased cohabitation.

This becomes clear from looking at the destination states to which transitions are mostly made; the states from which women enter marriage and motherhood; transition occurrence exposure rates; and the length and number of episodes. In the earlier cohort, marriage and motherhood have primacy over living alone and cohabitation, and living alone has primacy over cohabitation. Marriage and motherhood are important and closely connected. Transitions into marriage and motherhood occur directly from living at the parental home. Behaviour is relatively standardised. In the later Dutch cohort, living alone and cohabitation gain at the expense of marriage and motherhood. Marriage and motherhood are still rather closely connected (although the link between cohabitation and motherhood is strengthening) but the pathway to marriage is increasingly complex. This increasing complexity is closely linked to postponement. Behaviour is less standardised and more diversified, reflected by shorter episodes and the increasing number of episodes. Our analysis shows that a Dutch woman of the later cohort spends more time living alone and cohabiting, while the time spent in marriage and being a mother (first child state) is less. A Dutch woman born in 1960 and after and between ages 20 and 38 is likely to spend 1.0 years more in the 'living alone' state, 2.1 years more in the 'cohabiting' state, 0.7 years less in the 'married' state, and 2.5 years less in the 'first child' state than her counterpart born before 1960.

The multi-state life-table results for the earlier Japanese cohort indicate the simple pathways followed by all women, thus displaying standardised behaviour. Results for the later cohort reflect the continuation of simple pathways. But women get increasingly 'stuck' at the beginning of the sequence. Women born in 1960 and after are spending more time with their partner resulting in less time being a mother. A woman born in 1960 or after and between ages 20 and 32 spends 0.2 years more in the 'never met partner' state, 1.4 years more in the 'met partner' state, 0.1 years less in the 'married' state, and 1.4 years less in the 'first child state'.

Pathway analysis shows how, especially in the Netherlands, the emergence of choice biographies causes postponement, leading to higher ages at first birth. Distinctive differences in terms of partnership and living arrangement pathways to first birth are found among Dutch women of the earlier and the later birth cohorts. Fifty-six percent of the women from the earlier birth cohort follow a standard pathway to their first child. They leave the parental home, get married, and have their first child. The proportion of this type of partnership and living arrangement pathway decreases by half to 28.7 percent in the later birth cohort of women. In general, we see in the Netherlands a decreasing importance of marriage across cohorts, an increasing importance of cohabitation and more diversity, and more complexity in behaviour. In Japan, the standard biography is more prevalent. The results of our analysis show that over 90 percent of women in both birth cohorts follow the traditional pathway to the first child, that is meeting the partner, getting engaged, getting married, and having a child.
In general, Dutch women increasingly exhibit choice biographies while Japanese women continue to exhibit standard biographies.

Different partnership pathways result in different ages at first birth. In the Dutch earlier cohort, living alone before marriage delays first birth by 1.9 years compared to the traditional pathway of leaving the parental home to get married and have children, cohabitation before marriage delays it by 3.1 years, and living alone and cohabiting before marriage by 4.8 years. Similar differences are also found in the Dutch later cohort. Cohabitation before marriage delays first birth by 1.6 years, and living alone and cohabitation before marriage delay it by 3.2 years, while only cohabiting brings first birth forward by 2.4 years. The above results clearly show that the postponement of first birth is at least partially due to the emergence of new, alternative pathways, which deviate and differ from the ‘traditional’ pathway of leaving the parental home to get married and give birth. In both the Japanese earlier and the later cohorts, if first birth occurs within the context of a non-marital union, then the mean age at first birth is lower than if it occurs within the context of a marital union.

Why then is the standard biography in Japan at the same time continued and increasingly rejected? Japan's post-war economic development has been very rapid, entailing high growth rates and structural change, namely a shift from a largely agriculture-based economy, characterised by low labour mobility and family-based production, to industrial and service economies characterised by high labour mobility and paid employment. This has caused a shift in so-called ultimate goals from lower-order ('survival' – Inglehart, 1990) to higher-order ('esteem', 'belonging', 'self-realisation' – Inglehart, 1990). At the same time, economic development has afforded women ever expanding educational and labour market opportunities, and increasing aspirations. All of the above has had important consequences for family, marriage and motherhood in Japan. In the agriculture-based economy, women ensured 'survival' (lower-order goal) through marriage and fertility within the context of the agricultural household. In the industrial society, women achieved 'survival' (lower-order goal) and 'belonging', 'esteem' and 'self-realisation' (higher-order goals) mainly through marriage and fertility, to a lesser extent through work and education, in the context of the industrial household. This industrial household was supported by numerous institutions, norms, rules, and sanctions. And connected to this industrial household was a rigid sequence of marriage and motherhood with the concomitant fixed ages and durations (See also Chapter 4). In the post-industrial or service economy, women effect 'belonging', 'esteem' and 'self-realisation' (higher-order goals) in the first place through education and work. But these are not combinable with marriage and motherhood because of remaining 'industrial' norms and institutions. Furthermore, work has become increasingly attractive, while marriage becomes increasingly less attractive, and norms on having to get married weaken.
How does this work at the micro level? Postponement is not planned ahead of time. It is of a cumulative nature. In real life, rather than looking and planning far ahead, women make decisions in the short to medium term. These decisions usually concern the transition ‘into the next stage’. What is key then is how exactly these decisions on transitions are made. The first and decisive step in the cumulative postponement process consists of the child rearing choices made by the parents (mothers). This implies the inter-generational nature of postponement. In particular the educational career choices made by the parents, especially mothers, are critical. The mere fact of being encouraged to reach higher levels of educational attainment already entails postponement. But being encouraged (or even pushed) into reaching higher levels of educational attainment also means being put on a particular path, a particular life course. This life course is partially of a self-sustaining, path-dependent and predictable nature, but paradoxically it is also of an unstable and unpredictable nature. Notions such as continuity and shift explain the inherent dualities. The balance of continuity and shift depends on the reinforcing or weakening impact of ‘mediated’ childhood and later experiences and contextual change. The context sends out internally conflicting signals, however, and can also give signals that are different from the ‘mediated’ childhood or later experiences.

Having completed one’s education one has to decide about the ‘next stage’ to enter. Transitioning from education into work constitutes an ‘expected’ or ‘self-evident’ tradition. This ‘self-evidence’ is embedded in the cognitive schemes. Initial input into the cognitive schemes consists of the ‘mediated’ memory of childhood experiences: ‘My mother worked and that was a good thing’ or ‘My mother did not work and that was a bad thing’. Second, the context changes over time and makes it more acceptable to go on working after education. So the mere transition from education to work leads to additional postponement.

Once this transition has been made, the individual reassesses the situation, finds work interesting and wants to specialise, if she is able to do so. The individual flexibly reorders priorities. Work becomes an instrumental goal to reach higher-level goals. At the same time the individual is confronted with the fact that work is not combinable with marriage and motherhood, that marriage becomes less attractive in absolute and relative terms. At the same time, women are challenged by strong meaning-giving rules on what it means to be a woman. They still want to have children. Since work and family are not combinable this leads to dilemmas between conflicting instrumental goals. The context gives conflicting signals forcing a woman to choose between different meanings on motherhood. Based upon her mediated childhood and later experiences she will formulate a choice. This leads to traditionalism, rejection or postponement/failed postponement.
10.4.3 Has Japan experienced an SDT?

In spite of the fact that Japan has experienced a SDT, van de Kaa's SDT sequence and features are not entirely applicable. Some critical SDT components, such as cohabitation, extra-marital birth, are missing, and the timing of the SDT sequence is not consistent with van de Kaa's model. In addition, absolute rates for the same indicator differ substantially between the two countries, and no stabilisation and correction of the TFR has taken place in Japan. But the core definitional components of an SDT, namely low fertility and increases in the mean ages at first marriage and first birth, are present. However, the nature of the Japanese SDT differs fundamentally from the Dutch one. While in the Netherlands change across time takes the form of moving from a standard to a choice biography (the bond between marriage and fertility is increasingly loosened), that in Japan is one of a continuation but also increasing rejection of a standard biography (the bond between marriage and fertility is still strong) without the emergence of a choice biography.

The Japanese SDT differs from the standard one not only in terms of demographic indicators, but also in terms of causal factors. The importance of the structural dimension is clear and evidently in line with the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2. However, it is less so for the cultural dimension. Secularisation does not seem to be relevant as far as Japan is concerned but on the other hand, values relating to partnership are changing as women increasingly aspire to a growing degree of equality in relationships, although not to the same extent as in the Netherlands. Values pertaining to the raising of children seem to have changed much less. Lastly, as far as the technological dimension is concerned, the absence of the pill for most of the post-war period shows that the availability of reliable contraception has not played the same role in Japan that it has played in the Netherlands.

10.5 Suggestions for future research

At the end of this study, a number of issues still remain unanswered and should be addressed in future research:

1. The theoretical framework could be employed to address different demographic issues and issues in different country settings. We consider our integrated theoretical framework, which combines SDT theory with the process-context and life-course approaches and focuses on ‘cognitive schemes’ (d’Andrade, 1992) and ‘human agency’, useful in understanding behaviour. Applying this theoretical framework more widely will help to further develop it.

2. The SDT theory needs to be better conceptualised and applied more widely. A clearer conceptualisation of the SDT and its nature is necessary to enable a better assessment of its applicability to different country settings.
3. The combined *life-history/life-story method* could be applied more widely. This combination method will allow for a better specification of the relationship between goals (cognitive schemes) and actual behaviour, as well as the relative importance of each of the concepts used in this study for understanding behaviour: “linked lives”, “location in time and place” or “human agency”.

4. Multi-state life-table techniques could be employed in different state spaces either by increasing the order of events (first, second and third order) or by increasing the number of domains (living arrangement, work, partnership and education or even contraceptive use).

5. The pathway approach, which we applied, could be used from descriptive to sequence analysis. It can be extended into sequence analysis and can include pathways by age (30, 40 or 50 years) allowing for the projection of future pathways based on information from the past.

6. Wider use could be made of in-depth interviews. More in-depth interviews should be held, not only with respondents themselves, but also with the individuals around them (partner, parents, such as mothers, etc.). Interviews with such individuals are likely to greatly add to the understanding of individual behaviour. As far as this particular study is concerned, it could benefit from in-depth interviews in Japan in addition to the focus group discussions/interviews as well as Dutch in-depth interviews. A further suggestion is to include respondents who also became mothers recently, which is likely to capture the ‘adaptive’ nature of goals discussed earlier in this study.

10.6 Policy recommendations

The research documented in this book – in particular the voices of women – shows that Japanese women have great difficulty combining work with marriage and motherhood. The pressure of the job and inadequate support from their surrounding environment are given as reasons for postponement. Therefore, the most basic policy recommendation addressed to the Japanese government is to develop policies that enable women to combine work with marriage and motherhood, to provide women with real options.

This first policy recommendation entails a number of practical initiatives that could be taken. The government is first of all advised to work towards creating more flexible working conditions. Working hours should be shortened and/or made more flexible. Different forms and durations of part-time work (0.5, 0.75) and work-sharing should be instituted. Home or tele-working should be made possible and encouraged. It is important to grant working mothers and fathers flexible maternal and paternal leave, time credit (leave of absence), and leave in case of illness of the child. Of absolutely critical importance is the increased availability of day care. The successful combination of work and motherhood is a significant
policy issue in many industrialised counties. “De kunst van het combineren” (The art of combining) (Keuzenkamp, et al., 2000) a publication by the Social and Cultural Planning Office, is illustrative of this kind of discussion in the Netherlands. The authors address the important issue of the allocation of time by partners in dual-career families.

The cost of raising children in Japan is high. Raising a child to the age of 6, for instance, is currently estimated to cost around ¥4.4 million ($36,000) on average (Look Japan, June 2003). The financial cost that parents incur in raising their children should be lowered by reducing the cost of education and increasing child allowances. Another major task lying ahead for the government is to examine gender roles and encourage men to become more involved in the household and child rearing activities. The voices of Japanese women have clearly demonstrated this need. All of these areas of intervention require the adjustment not only of formal (legal) rules but also of informal rules, such as social norms.

The second policy recommendation entails that women are provided with the means to exercise full control over their fertility. Pill use, though legal now, can be promoted further by lowering its price. Men could also be taught to take their responsibility when it comes to contraception, as also indicated by the experts. The example of the Netherlands shows that enabling women to control their own reproductive career allows for the timing of motherhood to be decided by the individual. The age at which to have a child is a concern to many women not only because of the problem of combining work and motherhood but also because of the possible negative health consequences of late motherhood. Women should therefore have full access to information on the advantages and disadvantages of having children after a particular age. Some Dutch studies, such as “Een slimme meid regelt haar zwangerschap op tijd” (A smart woman gets pregnant at the right time) (Beets and Verloove-Vanhorick, 1992), document the possible negative consequence of late motherhood.

This study has shown that demographic behaviour differs across countries and historical periods in many ways. In recent years, however, a universal phenomenon has emerged: women everywhere want to decide their own destinies and be active in many domains of life. It is up to society as a whole then, including women, men and the government, to provide women with the real option of freely and rationally choosing the life path they really want. But implementing the necessary measures has to be done in a gradual and thoughtful way. This is in accordance with an old saying in Japan: “Isogaba maware”. It refers to the fact that change cannot be forced through in a rush but has to be promoted building block by building block in a sustained manner.