

# AUTONOMY, RECIPROCITY AND COMMUNICATION IN OLDER SPOUSE RELATIONSHIPS

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*Abstract:* In previous research, older couple relationships in Japan have been largely overlooked and the emphasis has instead targeted the child-parent relationship. My paper attempts to address this imbalance by investigating power dynamics of couples that relate to the autonomy, reciprocity and communication in older Japanese spouses. The continued presence of retired salary men at home was shown to have negative consequences for women who are termed “professional housewives”. Three contributory factors were identified in conjunction with the older women’s declined autonomy. Reciprocity in the couple relationship was assessed using the housework participation of older men, where three types were identified in accordance with the men’s degree of commitment. The gendered identity and cultural factors underpinning these types are fully elucidated through the qualitative (separate) interviewing of 47 older couples who live in Japan’s Kantō region. Communication in older couple relations is under-represented from the male point of view. My paper whilst seeking a balanced representation of the couples’ views, pays attention to the pertinent issues of older Japanese men, particularly relating to *jukunen rikon* [divorce in old age] and the “new woman” movement. The concept of *ishin denshin* [understanding without verbalizing] is particularly relevant as the underlying cause behind the different gendered mental perspectives of this concept, which has generated resentment among women by acting as a barrier to a more open and accountable relationship.

*Keywords:* around the body care, breadwinner, divorce in old age, one body and soul, Retired Husband Syndrome (RHS), socio-economic groups, *single digit Shōwans*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Japan is experiencing a rapid and striking demographic evolution in its population of elderly people, which ranks proportionally high amongst the developed nations. Japan’s rapid change in demographic make-up is dramatic: The proportion of people over 65 was just 4.9 per cent in 1950, which increased to 7.9 per cent in 1975, and 21.5 per cent in 2007, and is

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professor Sara Arber, my PhD supervisor, who has been invaluable in helping to shape the content of this paper. I also wish to acknowledge Dr Stephen Bailey for his help and suggestions on the linguistic support in this paper.

expected to reach 40 per cent by 2050 (Cabinet Office 2008). This age trend is also being seen in Western Europe, with those aged above 65 are forecast to reach 27 per cent and 32 per cent in the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany respectively by 2050 (Eurostat Press Office 2006). The time taken for the UK population aged 65 and over to double from 7 to 14 per cent of the total population was 45 years (between 1930 and 1975). The same increase was achieved by the Japanese population in only 26 years (between 1970 and 1996) (Smith *et al.* 2005). This rapid demographic change has important consequences for older married couples in Japan who have to cope with a new reality, when the couple's previous delineation of home and work lives ceases upon the retirement of the husband.

According to data from the Japanese Institute of Population and Social Statistics (IPSS 2008) there has been a very notable rise in couple-only households for those aged above 65 years. Between 1975 and 2005, the proportion of households comprising couples of older people aged 65 years and above increased from 6.2 to 22.0 per cent in a near linear trend. If the cases where one partner in the couple is aged below 65 years (usually the wife) are included this figure climbs to 29.3 per cent in 2005. If, as expected, this trend continues, couple-only households comprising older Japanese people will soon constitute about one third of all older person households. This emphasizes the increasing need for close investigation of older spouse power relations from a gendered perspective.

Research (Lock 1988, 1993; Kumagai 2006) has shown that women's autonomy can be negatively affected at home, particularly where the patriarchal husband seeks to impose his will. A distinctive gender difference exists in how men and women view how they wish to spend their time following the retirement of the male breadwinner, and this leads to a further area of analysis where the "professional housewives" of retired Japanese "salary men" witness a significant decline in their autonomy at home. The emphasis is on how women have to negotiate with their retired husbands over a period of time, in order to arrive at an understanding in terms of establishing the "house rules" in post retirement.

With the increased trend whereby more older Japanese couples are living alone, Retired Husband Syndrome (*shujin zaitaku sutoresu shōkōgun*, RHS) is forecast to have a detrimental impact on the quality of spouse relations. As older couples are forced to spend more time in each other's company, according to Faiola (2005), a majority of the wives of retired Japanese men could suffer to some extent from this syndrome. RHS as a concept relates to the mental strain experienced by women due to the increased presence at home of their retired husbands, which serves to increase the female psychological burden (Johnson 1984). This paper will elucidate the social processes underlying RHS by critically examining and

interpreting the sociological and cultural factors involved. With the divorce rate among married senior citizens now the fastest growing in Japan (Alexy 2007; Kōsei Rōdōshō 2008), and a record number (approx. 7 million) of men due to retire from work between 2007 and 2009, RHS is seen as an important factor that is expected to bring further increases in the divorce rate of older couples. For those married more than 35 years, the total number of divorces has already increased from 300 in 1975 to 5,507 in 2007 (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2008).

The quality of the spouse relationship is influenced by reciprocity, while research (Lebra 1978; Borovoy 2005) indicates that a significant number of older Japanese men still retain the cultural idea of their wives as servile attendants. It is reported by Faiola (2005) and Nagai (2005) that many elderly Japanese women perceive their husbands' retirement as a bleak prospect; and in the research of Johnson (1984: 543) we find the following statement in relation to an older female respondent: "[W]hen she married her husband, she agreed it would be for better or for worse, but never realised it would be for retirement"! The strength of disenchantment is demonstrated by feminists such as Higuchi Keiko who have introduced through the mass media various derogatory phrases such as *sodai gomi* [large refuse], a phrase referring to retired men who stay at home, but are not willing to help out with tasks in the home, and are, therefore, labelled as "cumbersome to the wife, and useless". This state of being leads to issues of communication breakdown between some older couples where the husband is perceived as unwilling to engage in constructive conversation with his wife to foster harmonious relations.

Emotional closeness is explored where women are deprived of affection and care from their husbands who lack perception of their needs. This is culturally linked to the Japanese way of "understanding without verbalizing" (*ishin denshin*) in interpersonal relationships where long-married couples are presumed to possess a deep spiritual affinity. A key factor in maintaining a harmonious couple relationship is the male retiree giving willing support to his wife by engaging in housework tasks. Three types of couples were identified that cover older men fully involved in housework, partially involved, or not involved at all. The sociological factors defining these types are investigated in this paper.

Overall, this paper argues how autonomy, reciprocity, and communication are important emerging concepts for the analysis of older marital relationships in a rapidly ageing Japanese society. The key issues relate to the gendered norms and power relations within a couple's relationship, as well as to the extent to which the degree of reciprocity shown by the men can be a significant factor in determining the quality of the relationship. The emotional closeness of the couples is also explored as communication,

which is a particularly strong indicator of the quality in older couples' relationships. Where pertinent, certain views of the older men are highlighted to illuminate various perspectives of this under-reported group. For example, long-term marriages are bounded by gendered and patriarchal assumptions, which favour men, and where the majority of older women have contested these norms in favour of a more accountable and equitable partnership. However, only a minority of the men in my study have expressed a willingness to move their relationship in this direction.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

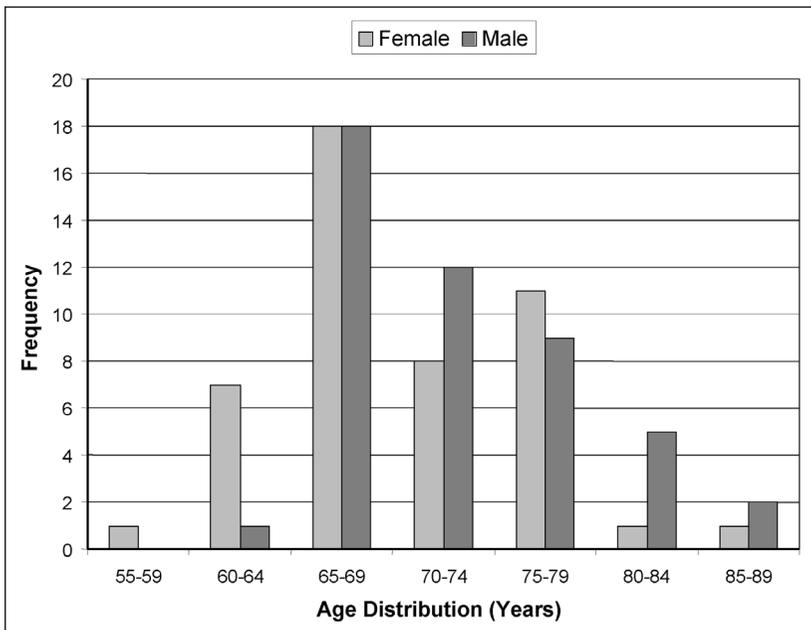
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 47 older married couples (in total, 94 people) between the ages of 58 and 89 years. One third of the sample was accessed via council officials at the local government level, while two thirds accessed using non-official networks. This included older people nominated by family and friends of the author as satisfying the required criteria for this study. In the main, the interviews were conducted separately for each couple, respectively 34 older women and 27 older men. A smaller number of interviews were also conducted with both partners present for at least part of the interview.

The interviews were held in the respondents' homes and lasted on average one and a half hours. They were tape recorded and transcribed, and field notes were made during and immediately following the visit. These notes and interview transcriptions were entered into Atlas-Ti, a qualitative software programme, and coded categories were identified from which emerged the various themes covered in this paper. Respondent names are protected with pseudonyms, and the precise research location is not specified. The respondents came from communities within the Kantō region of Eastern Honshū; thus no claim for generalization is made. However, the analysis did reveal common themes amongst the older spouses. The data gathering was conducted in compliance with ethical procedures laid out by the British Sociological Association (2004).

## 3 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

In the couples interviewed, the men ranged in age from 62 to 89 years, and the women ranged in age from 58 to 88 years (see Fig. 1). The women's mean age was 70 years and that of the men was 73 years. For both men and women, the median age was 68 years. Two thirds of those interviewed lived in Kanagawa Prefecture, with other interviews being held in the pre-

fectures of Saitama and Chiba. These are urban commuter areas of Tokyo. Apart from one couple, the period of marriage ranged from 37 years to 60 years. There was one divorce amongst the older people interviewed. The couples were characterized into three broad sub-groupings using criteria defined by Kelly (2002). This categorization was based on my assessment of socio-economic groups according to the interview respondents' self-reported education level, occupation and housing. In Japan, the class definitions are not directly comparable to social classes in the UK or the United States: social inclusiveness rather than categorical differentiation applies, as represented by the term *chūryū* [middle class] that translates as "mainstream" (Kelly 2002). By identifying with a societal mainstream, the Japanese people position themselves within the wider population in relation to class. Since the 1960s, about 90 per cent of those questioned in large scale surveys have consistently placed themselves in the upper-middle, middle, or lower-middle class. For the older couples investigated in this paper, 28 couples are defined as upper-middle class, 7 couples are defined as middle class, and 12 couples are defined as lower-middle class.



*Fig. 1: Age distribution of partners in the interviewed 47 older couples*

#### 4 RETIRED HUSBAND SYNDROME (RHS)

In the 1980s, a minority of Japanese women from the urban middle class started to report marital strain due to the continued presence of their husbands at home (Lock 1988; Higuchi 2002). RHS has been publicized in Japan since the early 1990s (Faiola 2005) through the mass media, which has reflected the previously neglected but emerging interest in the socio-psychological well-being of women (Araga 2002). More recently, Roberson (2005: 366) points out how the media create, reflect, reinforce the reproduction of dominant gender ideologies. It is important to appreciate the context in which the perception of a syndrome associated with retired husbands may be influenced to an extent by the media.

Although the media is a powerful agent in Japan, the extent of its influence in being able to change people's behaviour in a certain way is open to debate. Mann (1970) argues that many research studies have shown that it is comparatively difficult for the mass media to change the public's values. It is my contention that the views of the older men and women in relation to RHS in this paper reflect their social class, with those from a highly educated urban middle class background being more able to relate to the concept of autonomy and self agency promoted by media intellectuals. However, the media generated messages relating to RHS did not produce the same impact on the other socio-economic groups in my study whose daily routines in the couple's working relationship dictate lower levels of autonomy.

##### *4.1 Women's Disempowerment and Deference to their Husbands*

Many older women in my research commented on issues that touched on matters relating to RHS. However, RHS mainly pertained to the more affluent women from an upper middle class urban background in which their spouse was formerly a salary man employed by a large corporation. This sub-group of women enjoyed a higher social standing relative to the wider interview sample having usually attained higher educational qualifications. Vogel (1978) and other scholars (Hendry 1993; Nakano 2005) describe such women as professional or full-time housewives, exemplified by being perfectionist in running their home while the husband was at work. Consequently, women from this background were more predisposed to experience RHS when their husband retired from work, having previously enjoyed a large amount of personal autonomy and space in the household, and the freedom to organize their daily affairs.

Nine of the older women went into particular detail about how RHS had affected their lives. Mrs Fukui describes the effect of her husband's retirement: "I have the feeling that he is always watching over my shoulder at home ..... When he comes back at lunchtime, I have to have the meal prepared for him around one o'clock. So my schedule has to be re-adjusted according to his lunchtime. So even if I have a late breakfast, I have to prepare for lunch then, followed by an early dinner. I am chased by cooking throughout the day." On the matter of housework sharing she says: "My husband does the housework so fast. He just rushes to the task and does it at such an alarming pace. When I am with my husband, even though I know that I do not need to do housework at a hurried pace, but, he just makes me feel that I have to do these tasks quicker". Szinovacz and Davey (2004: 440) have reported similar complaints from US retired wives as in the phenomenon of "I married you for better or for worse, but not for lunch".

Despite being highly educated, many Japanese middle class women in the early post-war period like Mrs Fukui were financially incentivized (Ogasawara 1998; Mathews 2002; Osawa 2002) to take "marriage retirement" from their employer in order to raise their children. This was a strategy widely used by Japanese companies in order to retain the lifetime commitment of the husband to the company. Over the passage of time, Mrs Fukui acquired a type of professional status as a housewife (Hendry 1993; Borovoy 2005) through developing her personal networks and home management skills. However, following the retirement of her husband, her general autonomy has been significantly undermined.

Due to limited opportunities for wider social participation through full time employment, and their busy nurturing role, older women tended to arrange the home in terms of their "self", in essence, "their castle" (Yui 2006: 33). Thus, some women were upset regarding their curtailed autonomy following their husbands' retirement. For example, Mrs Tsuji commented that her husband did not like clutter in the living room so she was required to shelve her sewing kits, and this made it impractical to continue her hobby of making Japanese dolls. Other women mentioned that they previously used their living room to perform various activities and felt they had to stop these in deference to their husbands' will. Most of the wives of salary men commented that their husbands' regular presence at home made them feel constrained. As a consequence of this, establishing an appropriate balance between separateness (personal privacy, pursuing individual hobbies, spending more time with friends) and togetherness (participating in joint activities, maintaining intimacy, and socializing as a couple) was seen as particularly important by many of the older women in my research.

In an Internet survey by Hakuhoōdō (2004), 40 per cent of Japanese women in their late fifties (n=234) communicated depression at the prospect of their husbands' retirement. RHS adversely affects the women's ability to retain their autonomy to live their lives in the same manner as before their husbands' retirement. Mrs Fukui was a qualified book reader for blind people and participated in various hobbies. While working part-time, she had been the caregiver for her frail mother at home, and had organized her house in her own way. After her mother's death, she had much greater freedom but when her husband retired from work, spending more time at home, her autonomy was again curtailed, as can be seen particularly from her description of being closely watched. Mrs Fukui's account encapsulates the essence of the other women's RHS accounts, and is typical of the majority of older women in my study who reported experiencing added burdens following their husbands' retirement.

Many of the older women were eager to talk about their hobbies, educational attainment, and employment history before marriage, and were not entirely satisfied with their lifetime identity as "just" a professional housewife. Some women questioned their housewife identity and sought to expand on this by mentioning their involvement or participation in voluntary and other activities, which required elements of teaching or other instruction. Although they were minded to perform housework to a high standard in accordance with their husbands' expectations, and to look after their husbands, they also insisted that they needed the time and space to express themselves. Merry White's paper (1987: 153) covered this theme; she reported: "[R]arely do you hear a Japanese woman say, I am *just* a housewife".

There is tension after retirement in terms of re-organizing housework. The older men were largely reluctant to discuss issues of negotiation and conflict with their wives, feeling there were no such issues to discuss. Even in cases where there was some admission of problems, the older men were reluctant to elaborate further on this matter. The women, on the other hand, talked more openly about re-negotiation by reporting clashes with their husbands that had occurred in the past or were ongoing. Mrs Bandō cares for her frail mother-in-law at home. Recently, her husband retired from work to lend some assistance; however, there were issues to be resolved. With increased life expectancy, providing care for older family members is very common in Japan, so the burden of care may extend into the later stages of life of women like Mrs Bandō, continuously denying her personal autonomy.

## 4.2 *Coming under Pressure from the Presence of the Husband*

The negative consequence of the older men who become wife-oriented was manifested in the way that some older women in my research reported how they felt constantly pressured by the manner of their husbands' behaviour at home following retirement. Only a few of the older women reported spending a significant amount of time outside of their home to pursue a hobby or similar activity, which was further curtailed in several cases where their husbands' health status caused concern. Mrs Satō and Mrs Gotō felt obliged to cease their outside activities due to their husbands' illness. Mr Gotō has multiple medical problems, and has recently suffered a stroke. He fits the "clingy leaves" (*nure ochiba*) description with his reliance on his wife, needing to be in her company as much as possible, thus restricting her autonomy.

According to the Japanese physician Dr Kurokawa Nobuo (cited by Faiola 2005), the effect on women of RHS is lessened when retired men choose not to spend all their time at home by seeking activities that are independent of their spouse. The older women's autonomy and authority at home was undermined by the mental pressure and physical burden imposed by their husbands' regular presence. The women typically stated that their husbands had become home-oriented and had chosen to spend most of their time at home since retirement, not wishing to engage in social intercourse.

Just under half of the women stated that their spouse did not have a hobby to compensate for the loss of work identity, and some saw their husbands' resigned attitude as problematic in terms of them becoming socially isolated (Itō 2002; Nakano 2005). Hakuohdō's (2004) report on urban Japanese men and women close to retirement age found that three quarters of housewives (n=234) preferred their husbands to be more active through employment or other activities conducted outside of the home. Mrs Kotani referred to her husband's daily routine as "following her walk from behind". The term "underfoot syndrome" (Johnson 1984; Szinovacz 1992; Price 2003) describes situations where the retired husband interferes in his wife's household routines to the point where she feels smothered. Mr Kotani is a former long distance haulage driver who lives in a farming area, but since his retirement has had no outside interests and does not wish to engage in outside activities.

In contrast to the older women who reported their lack of personal leisure time, Mr Aoi – despite having suffered a cerebral aneurism – was content for his wife to engage in various volunteer activities and hobbies, and in a similar vein, Mr Toda spent many hours in his study room as his wife was engaged in volunteer activities and often used the living room to

discuss these activities with her group members. Mrs Aoi and Mrs Toda stated that their relationship was based on an equal partnership stressing that the mutual reciprocity and understanding of each other's social activities were the key ingredients in their marital relationships.

#### 4.3 Men Becoming Home Centered

As some men get older and struggle to come to terms not only with their loss of work identity, but also the limitations brought on through age and declining health, they become more family- and home-oriented, as well as introverted, a state that is reinforced by them having smaller social networks (Sasatani 2003; Araga 2004). Some of the older men in my research initially were not socially disengaged, as immediately after retirement they reported activities such as travelling with their wives and devoting time to hobbies. This is referred to as the "honeymoon period" (Szinovacz and Davey 2004: 437), which typically lasts about two years. After this time, a sort of reality kicks in that markedly changes the older men's outlook, such that the loci of their attention becomes entirely focused on their wives. This was a common characteristic of the retired men in my research, which links to Japanese male masculinity and the *shōwa hitoketa* [the Shōwa single-digit years] mindset of *mōretsu shain* [dedicated company man] described by Plath (1975). The *shōwa hitoketa* is a broad generational trait attributed to older Japanese men, especially those born between 1926 and 1934, who have a strong work ethic and belief in the gender segregated nature of men and women.

It was observed how, in many cases, the older women's autonomy was compromised by what could be described as a state of mental attitude in their retired husbands, who lacked the purpose to seek a positive role in post-retirement, consequently becoming home-centered. The factors shaping the older men's attitudes relate to a conditioned behaviour of the Japanese salary man arising from a lifetime attachment to his (single employer) company during many years of employment. This behaviour may be referred to as a form of institutionalized mentality, not unlike that described by Goffman (1961) and further developed by Sedgewick (2007), who has expanded Goffman's argument into deeper aspects of the mind.

There were complex factors underpinning the motivations of the older men to not seek an active social life in post-retirement, and that relate to the Japanese work ethic strongly ingrained in these men who conform to the *shōwa hitoketa* mindset. The principal features of the older men's attitude towards retirement conform to Sepp Linhart's (1988: 305) assessment of Japanese leisure-related values and behaviour, in which six factors are cited: (i)

the preference for group activities; (ii) the strong differences in leisure behaviour according to gender; (iii) the tendency to regulate leisure behaviour; (iv) the clearly prescribed norms of leisure behaviour for people of certain age groups; (v) the tendency to transfer work attitudes to leisure activities, so that leisure becomes an extension of work; and (vi) the tendency to spend much of one's free time with people from the same workplace.

Mr Segawa prefers to concentrate on family related activities, only occasionally pursuing external activities by using the personal networks developed during his education years. The older men's lack of involvement in local activities made it more difficult for them to get into wider social networks after retirement. Several commented that they did not have any involvement with local networks during their employment years. Professional white collar men like Mr Segawa, a former bank manager, as well as Mr Aoi and Mr Hirai stated that they were put off by the formal nature of the rigid hours attached to their previous employment and education activities, and now wished to remain completely free of further time commitments and responsibility. Instead, a desire to spend more time conducting activities with their wives tended to dominate their outlook.

This reluctance to engage in external activities appears to have contributed to these men becoming more family- and wife-oriented, demanding more time with their wives at home, and gradually becoming more socially disengaged. Several men were reluctant to engage in outside activities due to the financial expenses, and in some cases the older men highlighted their lack of ability to compete in activities such as dancing, poetry composition, or other skill-based social activities.

A further important factor that precluded the older men's participation in outdoor activities relates to the masculine considerations of not wishing to exhibit any frailty or visible signs of illness: the need to present a "healthy body" image was a recurring theme. This was manifested in one example where one of the men avoided contact with his associates at the time of his hospital visits for dialysis treatment, in order to conceal his medical condition. In another example, Mr Kubota expressed frustration about no longer being able to move his body freely due to his age and disability. He mentioned irritation of not being able to chase after his young grandchild any longer, and this frustration had developed to the point where he now rarely ventures outside.

#### *4.4 Men's Autonomy in Retirement*

When asked about retirement, some older men emphasized that they were "re-born" (Oda 1998, 1999; Alexy 2007) and keen to discard the sym-

bols of work status such as job titles and business cards, and some even cut ties with former work colleagues. This post-employment autonomy for retired men can often have the opposite effect on women whose autonomy becomes more restricted. Several men described their retirement years as their *asobi no jikan* [play time]. Mr Bandō has had a long working life but has now fully retired from employment through work-related mental fatigue. He did not consider himself to be an “older man” as he was very active running 10 km each morning and enjoys the freedom to do things in his own time. Mr Hirai also refers to retirement as *asonderu* [playing], as a liberating experience. His job involved difficult issues that caused significant stress. Since retirement, he expressed the desire to live a life free from politics and people in general. These former white-collar salary men value their retirement as free, unrestricted time where they are able to pursue activities at their own discretion close to home. However, the wives regarded their husbands’ free time as challenging their own authority at home, restricting their autonomy and forcing them to re-organize their activities at home, which were previously tailored to the women’s particular requirements.

As mentioned in the introduction, there is growing public awareness in Japan of retired men colloquially referred to as *sodai gomi* (Nakano 2005; Kumagai 2006; Alexy 2007; Iwao 2008). Respected male activists such as the physician Dr Hinohara Shigeaki (Hinohara *et al.* 2006) and Mr Hotta Tsutomu (2005), Co-chairman of the Japan Council on Aging, regularly advocate that such men should become more active through pursuing hobbies and education. They instruct retired men on active ageing and how to become more independent by learning how to perform housework and cooking, and also on recognizing and appreciating their wives’ efforts. However, as these activists belong to a higher social class, their message has difficulty in reaching out to the majority of retired Japanese men.

In overall summary, RHS was largely manifested through the professional housewives’ experience of declined autonomy, and the difficulties associated with having to defer to the will of their retired husbands. This mainly affected the women from a privileged background, where the presence of the husband at home was reported to have brought increased mental pressure and physical burden. The burden was compounded in the case of the men becoming centered on the home, which was attributed to a mindset in which some older men were unable, or unwilling, to seek a new positive role or purpose in post retirement. Whereas this section on RHS has largely pertained to middle- and high-ranking former salary men and their wives, the rest of this paper will discuss issues that pertain to the full interview sample.

## 5 RECIPROCITY AND THE DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT OF HUSBANDS IN DOMESTIC WORK

In my research, a typology with three categories emerged from the interview data, which are distinguished by the relative contributions of the older men towards housework involvement. Category I focuses on the older couples who deviate from the *daikoku bashira* [breadwinner, literally: the central pillar of a Japanese house] model and support networks based on the Japanese stem-family system. The “new” man “generally characterised as sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook” (Gill 2003: 37) actively participates in “women’s work”, i. e. housework. These older men typically had upper middle-class backgrounds and were keen to broaden or enlighten their lives. Category II relates to the older men who have some commitment to housework, but this was limited by various factors including illness in the men and attitudes in some older women who regard housework to be their gendered responsibility. Category III highlights the men who have no involvement in housework whatsoever, where the division of gender segregated domestic labour is upheld.

### *5.1 Category I: Older Men Fully Engaged in Housework and Reciprocity*

In my research, only four men (out of 47) reported regular involvement in cooking, laundry, and cleaning. These older couples were strongly minded to support each other rather than seeking outside assistance, and lived alone in neo-local residences (i. e. a married couple separate from the parental family) having less contact with their extended families. These older men were well-educated former salary men from urban backgrounds, and viewed doing housework as a practical survival skill and act of reciprocity. Mr Kashima, for instance, had a positive attitude towards housework that he claimed was an act of reciprocity for his wife who had a hernia. Since moving two years ago, he and his wife have shared the housework as a daily routine. The older couples without children often had couple-oriented mindsets. They tended to concentrate on how to remain viable to take care of each other’s needs in their later years, and this added motivation to the establishment of a solid routine for housework sharing.

Mr Hama is a former English language high school teacher. He has learned to perform a wide range of household tasks, taking over from his wife who suffers from manic depression and has more recently developed dementia. He undertook the housework responsibilities that included

regular cooking, which was very unusual for the men in this study, because he felt obliged to reciprocate the care of his wife who had raised their children. Rose and Bruce (1995: 126–127) have recognized a situation where men are generally praised for performing care for their spouse, coining the term “Mr Wonderful”. The Mr Wonderful description suitably applies to Mr Hama, who was described by an interview intermediary as a “selfless and dedicated man”. In my research, most of the men could not envisage inheriting the housework from their ill wives because in their own words “they would not know what to do”.

Housework sharing was a long-established routine in the Aoi household. However, Mrs Aoi’s emphasis on “separateness” was unusual as it differed from the majority of older couples who regarded themselves more as a united entity, in accordance with cultural norms (Harris and Long 1999; Borovoy 2005). The older men in particular displayed discomfort or reluctance to talk about issues such as conflicts with their wives in retirement or other aspects of the relationship that symbolized “separateness” (Price 2003). “We do our things on our own” was the key quotation, which exemplified how both partners had established a rule to be self-sufficient and in charge of their own affairs. Without children, the Aoi’s had a rule to do housework when either of them had spare time at home. This arrangement may reflect the more unusual situation where both partners have had continuous full-time employment throughout their working lives.

In other studies (Szinovacz 1992, 2000), the husband’s housework participation, such as in cooking, declines when the wife retires from paid employment. Mr Miyamoto had been in charge of the housework while his wife worked full-time to support the family. However, due to his cardiac arrest and his wife’s subsequent retirement, he no longer does the housework. Mrs Miyamoto expressed her strong gratitude for her husband’s previous housework commitment, but is now determined to perform the housework alone.

## *5.2 Category II: Older Men Struggling to Perform Housework*

Recent studies (Hakuhōdō 2003, 2007) of older couple relationships have explored the limited involvement of Japanese men in housework participation. Mrs Kotani and Mrs Zama have modified their attitudes in regards to the involvement of their husbands in housework. They taught their husbands to do the basics of housework should they pre-decease them due to their particular adverse medical histories. Their husbands were keen to learn the housework in order to become self-sufficient. However,

as they were not familiar with household tasks, this tested the patience of their wives. Like most of the men in my study, Mr Kotani mentioned that housework, especially cooking, did not come naturally as his family had discouraged him from doing this activity in the past. In Japan, the domestic kitchen is defined as the woman's space, and off-limits to men. Similar to category I, the couples discussed here (16 in total) lived in couple-only households in the main with limited extended family assistance.

Despite his willingness to learn, Mr Kotani was often discouraged by his wife's criticism of the quality of his housework performance. Although previously content with the segregated division of labour – his wife did all the housework –, Mr Kotani now sees the need to do more housework himself to ease his wife's burden as she is disabled with liver cirrhosis. He mentioned frustration with his wife's impatience about his slow learning, and complained about the difficulty in coping with his wife's constant criticism of his inability to carry out domestic tasks correctly. When asked to describe his wife, he referred to her as "scary", a description that presumably relates to her constant negative judgement of him. Mrs Kotani in turn found it difficult to cope with her husband's slow progress in helping out with the housework tasks. The important dynamic specified by Mr Kotani was for his wife to show more patience, but unfortunately he has difficulty remembering basic housework instructions.

Mr Shimoda's wife was a perfectionist in matters of cleanliness and housework, which caused him stress. He regarded his wife's high standard of housework as secondary to his job of running the family business, stating that her standard in housework was exceptionally high and that he was therefore discouraged from participating in the housework. Mrs Shimoda typified the Japanese housewife who is proud to portray a high standard of housework, passed down by her mother, and was reluctant for her husband to participate in housework due to his "lower" standard.

Even though some men attempt to contribute to the housework, they are often cited by their wives, as well as by scholars (Satō 1998; Yamato 2006; Alexy 2007), as not doing enough. This has been raised as a factor for generating marital dissatisfaction (Nagai 2005; Ono and Raymo 2005) and could lead to consequences such as the situation reported by Hisada (2007) where a Japanese woman ceased doing the housework entirely after the retirement of her husband. Nonetheless, Japanese men approaching retirement are increasingly expressing a willingness to learn housework skills (Hakuhōdō 2007).

However, some older women in my study were reluctant to accept their husbands' help in performing gendered housework, because this undermined their gendered role in the home as well as their identity as a "good" housewife. Mrs Tsuji felt pressured by her husband's high standard of

food presentation and cooking that came across in her account, implying that her housewife identity was being undermined. In this sense, some women were reluctant for their husbands to encroach into territory that they considered to be the woman's domain.

In a similar vein, the women of greater age were particularly ambivalent about the "new man/new woman" dichotomy. For example, Mrs Tanaka frequently mentioned that housework was a 'woman's job', and was unwilling to let her husband participate in the housework. The other older couples displayed a negative attitude towards what they perceived as an idealistic, upper-class youth-oriented idea that challenges the segregated gendered identity of men and women under Japan's work ethic.

### 5.3 Category III: Older Men Not Engaged in Performing Housework

Whereas previously the older men were at least willing to contribute to housework in order to ease their wives' burden, a majority (namely 27) of the older men in my research fall into category III: they had a very limited role, or no involvement whatsoever in the performance of housework or contributing in other ways to ease their wives' burden. Some of these men were described by their wives as having a mindset that makes them content to leave the housework to the wife. This reticence is explained by Edwards (1987) and Mathews (2002: 109) who describe the Japanese marital gender role, in which the spouse relationship is based on the "breadwinner" model. Here, the husband earns money to support his household, while his wife takes on the management role at home to support the wage earner.

Other literature (Borovoy 2005) refers to the Japanese white-collar man as internalizing the *daikoku bashira* model by taking for granted the division of gender segregated labour between husband and wife. In the Segawa patrilineal household, the division of gender segregated labour is strongly upheld. Men like Mr Segawa are particularly criticized by feminist scholars (Ochiai 1999; Inoue 2000; Ueno 2002) for refusing to participate in housework due to hegemonic masculine-related factors. Komashaku (1978), Higuchi (2002), and Ueno (1994, 2003) argue that marriages such as the Segawa's are a symbol of patriarchy and, ultimately, a barrier to greater female autonomy. Following her husband's retirement and their decision to relocate near to their working daughter (effectively creating a pseudo-three-generational household), Mrs Segawa, alongside doing all the housework, was also responsible for the well-being of two granddaughters as well as her husband. She betrayed obvious frustration in what she described as the limited commitment

and lack of appreciation from her husband concerning her busy working schedule, commenting that her husband leads a “good relaxing life”. The division of gender segregated labour in the Segawa household is long established, and, from my interviews with the couple, is unlikely to change. In this situation, the men expect to receive *mi no mawari no sewa* [around the body care] (Lebra 1978, 1984), where the husband totally depends on his wife to “dress” him and to provide him with food and a clean environment. This female marital norm is still a powerful force in Japan today (Nakano 2005; Iwao 2008).

The older couples from a farming background or who were self-employed, typically occupied the multi-generational household where the gendered segregated division of labour was usually strongly maintained. The older couples from this background were usually able to call upon a daughter or daughter-in-law who would undertake the majority of housework. In their absence, the women tended to do the housework to support the entire extended family.

Autonomy and reciprocity play a key role in the quality of older spouse relations. Recently, other research has begun to focus more on communication skills, such as Fukino and Kataoka (2005), as well as the process of communication between older retired couples, which is considered to be crucial in married spouse relationships.

## 6 COMMUNICATION BETWEEN OLDER SPOUSES

Mrs Toda and her husband were childhood friends and have known each other for more than fifty years. She mentioned that withholding her opinions was important in the maintenance of a successful marriage. Mrs Kashima expressed a similar point. She had lived with her husband’s parents for nine years, during this time suffering daily mental stress with the constant feeling of falling short of the expectation of her husband’s family. In order to sustain a harmonious relationship with her husband and her in-laws, she had to keep her opinions to herself, and this sentiment was voiced by many of the women. Lock (1993) and other feminists (e.g. Lebra 1978) have reported that Japanese wives have stated that it was necessary for women to not confront their husband as the basis for a successful couple relationship; concealing their own opinions and not challenging the husband was important. This finding was also recently observed by Borovoy (2005: 94–96). Underpinning this dynamic, Fuse (1993: 95) mentions that the political purpose of the “good wife and wise mother” ideology in Japan is that children learn the fundamental respect for authority through observing their mother deferring to their father, which bolsters the family institution. Mrs Doi, a

former school teacher, stated that challenging or criticizing those in authority (her husband) would set a bad example to the younger generation.

Mrs Satō gave the counter argument to withholding one's opinion. While acknowledging that respect for the husband is important, she believes that the traditional "keep it to oneself" approach is ultimately damaging to the relationship in terms of losing one's identity, which undermines both communication and the freedom to express a particular viewpoint that will ultimately serve only to erode the woman's autonomy. The older women were more willing to make their thoughts known when considered tactically appropriate. Mrs Aoi in her youth was forthright in her views but is now more measured and less confrontational with her husband, who has become increasingly short-tempered and stubborn. With greater openness, the couple relationship can prosper as both partners learn more of each other's needs and aspirations, and in some cases, further their mutual discovery within the relationship.

Discovery of the "other side" of the spouse can benefit relationships in post-retirement situations where previously unseen positive attributes of one or both spouses become more apparent as they spend more time in each other's company. Mrs Fukui's husband was rather quiet and a man of few words. She was surprised to discover how he became more outgoing and engaged in playing sports and other volunteering activities following his retirement.

### 6.1 Communication and Emotional Closeness

When asked about the amount of couple communication after retirement, most of the older men in my research claimed that there was no change in the communication, apparently not wishing to dwell on this matter. There may be a gender difference in reporting on couple communications. Befu (1977: 230) has commented that the ideal Japanese man is a "man of few words who gets on with a task when asked rather than promising to do it, and does not complain but endures hardship in silence". Ueno (2003: 81) commented on a stigma amongst Japanese men who regarded talking about one's wife in public as shameful. Thus, men are more reticent to talk about their wives.

Emotional closeness in older Japanese couples largely relies on emotional support (Koyano *et al.* 1998; Asakawa *et al.* 1999) and *ishin denshin* [understanding without verbalizing] is argued to be a particularly strong indicator in Japanese couple relationships. When discussing Japanese communication patterns, various scholars (Iwao 1993; Borovoy 2005) have argued that *ishin denshin* is important in interpersonal relationships,

where long-married couples are presumed to possess a deep understanding. In my study, most of the older men made direct reference to, or implied how, they and their wives shared “one body and soul” termed *isshin dōtai* (Harris, Long and Fujii 1998), which is in effect, a shared identity. These older men typically believed that non-verbal communication between intimate partners symbolized “unspoken sensitivity” and intimacy (also see Borovoy 2005: 96). When asked to describe their wives, many of the older men gave a response that indicated how their wives were *kūki no yō* [like the air] to them, implying how crucial they were for providing both instrumental support (e. g. around the body care) and emotional support.

Mr Hirai was not the only older man who specifically used the “like air” terminology when describing his wife. He prefers a discrete type of expressive relationship where his comments reflected a common sentiment amongst the older men who preferred their wives to be quiet, non-fussy and deferential. Iguchi (1999) and Borovoy (2005) have highlighted that the *ishin denshin* relationship requires considerable emotional and instrumental effort by women, citing a lack of appreciation and feedback by men; in a similar sense, in my research, several of the older women stated a desire to receive verbal acknowledgement or a more explicit gesture of appreciation from their husbands for their efforts. Kawano and Ueno (2001) as well as Ida (2003) argue in favour of the importance of verbal based communication skills for a couple relationship. Ueno and Miyadai (1998) claimed that a general lack of communication skills in Japanese men was deeply problematic in terms of sustaining a relationship.

## *6.2 Older Men's Apprehension of Changing Couple Dynamics and Old Age Divorce*

When asked about changes that had occurred in their relationships after retirement, most of the men commented that their wives were not affected by their regular presence at home. This, however, was not reflected in the significant response of their wives. A possible explanation for this could be a mindset where the men are reluctant to acknowledge differences that do not conform to the *isshin dōtai* ideal (Harris and Long 1999). Mr Kashima and Mr Bandō were defensive in the manner of their responses on the issue of spouse burden, and in a further observation, when asked to describe their wives, most men appeared surprised and paused before typically replying: “I do not know how to answer” or “I have never thought about it”. This appears to support the notion that relationship matters are considered to be the woman’s domain, and not a natural topic for male

discussion (Seale and Charteris-Black 2008). Mr Bandō displayed mild embarrassment when asked to describe his wife, stating that she was a traditional full-time housewife, a stereotypical description voiced by most of the older men.

It has been noted in research findings (Hakuhōdō 2003; Tomita 2006) that Japanese husbands are likely to value their wives as “traditional” women. Recently, however, through the media, the feminist ideology of the “new” middle-aged woman (as opposed to the traditional female nurturer model) has been more widely disseminated (Inoue 2000; Thang 2007), and older Japanese men are increasingly aware of a power shift in the dynamics of their marital relationships. Ruth Linhart (1990) and others (such as Smith 1987; Alexy 2007) claim that Japanese men today are more apprehensive about their spouse who at some stage may refuse to accept the model of being a nurturer to the *daikoku bashira*. More older men are increasingly aware of the possibility of their wives seeking greater autonomy by leaving their husband. This is due to three changes in the divorce situation in Japan. First, the divorce rate has risen among long-term married couples (i. e. couples married over twenty years), divorces that are thought more likely to be initiated by women (Kumagai 2006; Alexy 2007). Second, divorce settlements for women have recently been enhanced. And finally, the social stigma towards divorcees has decreased.

Many of the older women in my research commented on *jukunen rikon* [divorce in old age], although the universal opinion did not entertain the possibility of legal marriage termination. The key factors were the lack of personal finances among the older women and the reluctance to pursue the legal pathway to divorce that has implications of social stigma (Ono 2006). Earlier in this paper, the point was raised about the need to be aware of the media context relating to social issues; that is, RHS. Kumagai (2006) and Ono (2006) have generally criticized the media in Japan for its selective reporting on extreme cases of marital breakdown where the social consequences of divorce in long-term marital relationships have tended to be exaggerated and sensationalized.

Alexy (2007: 183) notes a Japanese popular presumption that “women will gladly leave their husbands as soon as they can afford it, once they have enough money”. Iwao (1993) has also commented on “retirement divorce”, meaning that the wife separates from her husband on the day of his retirement. However, in my study, the majority of women who had previously held full-time employment had a sympathetic view towards retired men. Mrs Okada, a computer programmer strongly criticized “retirement divorce” by commenting that the wife who seeks divorce soon after her husband’s retirement is selfish and inconsiderate because the husband had worked under demanding labour conditions for many years

in order to support his family. This sympathy towards salary men was also reported in the research of Ogasawara (1998) and Mathews (2002). Having worked with male colleagues for 38 years, Mrs Okada was perhaps more predisposed to express her sympathetic view towards retired salary men. In the main, the older women in general expected "separation" to only occur through the death of one of the partners of the couple.

In the above section, I have addressed several important issues relating to communication in the older person relationship, as well as the delicate gendered balance in spouse relationships, as for example the pressure on some older women to withhold their opinion so as not to upset their husband. Furthermore, I have emphasized how subtle unspoken communication between older couples imposes emotional pressure particularly on the women, when the husband fails to reciprocate any gesture of appreciation.

## 7 DISCUSSION

With a record number of older Japanese men entering retirement, as well as predictions of increased older couple separation, this paper has highlighted various issues affecting the quality of older spouse relationships. A strong feature was the use of separate interviewing, which has allowed the gendered context in the older men's and women's viewpoints to be considered in the fuller picture. In assessing the extent of older women's Retired Husband Syndrome (RHS), I have highlighted the thought processes where older women from a higher social background were more able to identify with the RHS message generated by the mass media. These "professional housewives" stressed their need for more personal space, which I believe reflects Andō's argument (1999: 56) who describes a significant shift in Japanese social consciousness towards individualization in older couple relationships. This argument, however, may not apply universally, since in my study such aspirations were reported far less by older women who come from a self-employed background or lived in multi-generational households where patrilineal family norms dominated.

On the other side of the RHS coin, the lack of new purposes in post-retirement acts against the autonomy of professional housewives; that is, in cases where the salary man is content to remain at home. Across socio-economic classes, the older men in my study strongly identified themselves with the *shōwa hitoketa* work ethic and being a *daikoku bashira* and were uncomfortable in how their post-employment world had lost its association with their previous identity. Nonetheless, some of the men readily accepted the need to explore new directions and identities in retire-

ment. However, this was found to be generally difficult due to the work-related time framework and social networks of the men being dismantled upon retirement.

Sepp Linhart (1988) predicted, twenty years ago, a convergence between Japan and the West in leisure behaviour of men in full-time employment, which has essentially been realized. However, in retirement, I observed a distinction based on class and health status where the men from a more affluent background were more able to engage in leisure-type activities. Elsewhere, a lack of resources and declining health precluded the majority of men from engaging in leisure activities.

The politics of housework sharing among older couples has illuminated the gendered meanings and identity attached to housework. The negotiation process reveals that both men and women need to compromise to effectively share the burden and to make the relationship stronger where men take part in the life of the home. The reciprocity and respect for the wife in the home was demonstrated by a minority of the older men in my study. This dynamic will change as the “new” man entering retirement is expected to play a fuller part in the home. As these “new” men learn housework skills at an earlier stage, the situation observed in my study of older men struggling to come to terms with housework and, with it, the associated mutual frustration that this generates in the couple relationship, will be less prevalent in the future.

Giddens (1992) proposed the transformation of intimacy in advanced societies in which female emancipation brings radical democratization to personal relationships. On matters of communication, the older women expressed a preference towards a more open and frank communication with their husbands. This was problematic where the older men were uncomfortable and reluctant to reciprocate, as exemplified by their difficulty in “describing” their wives by stating: “I have never thought about that” or “I don’t know how to answer”. In terms of Giddens, I have observed a wide gender gap in the communication between older men and women that impedes the realization of a more egalitarian relationship.

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