

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ Social Science Study Group



Wednesday, 30 June 2010, 18.30 h

Allison ALEXY, Lafayette College

What Makes it OK to Leave: Explaining Divorce in Contemporary Japan

At first glance, the rising divorce rate might seem to be the largest indicator of change in contemporary Japanese family lives. Having risen for much of the postwar period, the divorce rate now predicts that well over thirty percent of marriages will end in divorce. While these numbers are significant, a more meaningful shift is visible in the explanations people give for divorce. In these narratives of explanation, we see a changing sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable in marital relationships paralleled with socially intelligible explanations for ending a marriage. In this presentation, I describe how people explain divorces in the current moment and highlight their stories of how such explanations have changed. Specifically, I trace a shift from explaining divorce through male promiscuity or domestic violence to insufficient romance and a search for self. I situate these changes between demographic shifts and the turn to neoliberal ethics that privileges particular understandings of individualism.

The presentation is based on ethnographic research I have been conducting since 2005, with divorced men and women, married couples, lawyers, counsellors, and children of divorced parents. It is part of my larger project about the structures and forms of intimacy in contemporary Japan.

Allison ALEXY is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Lafayette College. Her research considers romance, intimacy, and family lives in contemporary Japan. With Richard Ronald, she is co-editor of a forthcoming volume entitled, "Home and Family in Contemporary Japan: Continuity and Transformation."

The DIJ Social Science Study Group is a forum for young scholars and Ph.D. candidates in the field of Social Sciences organized by Maren Godzik, Barbara Holthus and Ralph Lützel. All are welcome to attend, but registration (holthus@dijtokyo.org) is appreciated.

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