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A Natural History Model of Low Birth Rate Issues in Japan since the 1990s

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Abstract

This paper tries to combine the natural history model of social problems with Foucauldian discourse analysis. Foucault tried to outline connections between knowledge and power, and this paper applied his method to qualitative content analysis of discourse on low birth rates in Japanese news articles and discussions among the Japan's national Diet members. This paper focuses on two topics: how some policies to combat low birth rates were adopted, while other were rejected; and why the policies which were adopted tend to favor two-income families. In order to answer these two questions, this paper selects seven important events from 1990 to 2016 in order to understand what kind of power or knowledge operates, and what kind of similarities in the discourse appear repeatedly and regularly. This paper highlights four points. First, claim-makers who regarded declining birth rates as a serious social problem—population experts, politicians, bureaucrats, and feminists—influenced political decisions against low birth rates. The low birth rate issues can be considered a government-manufactured social problem. Second, the policies against low birth rates have emphasized that difficulty in balancing work and childrearing decreases the fertility rates. Therefore, gender-equality and work-life balance have been dominant within the discourses on low birth rates, and the more fundamental problem of why young people are postponing marriage have been ignored. Third, both bureaucrats in the Ministry of Finance balancing national revenue and expenditure and feminist activists emphasizing gender-equality and work-life balance often reject a child allowance which provides equal benefit to each child regardless of the parents' lifestyle. Fourth, merely welfare policies that are adaptive to the ideologies of gender-equality and work-life balance have been implemented. Bureaucrats, lawmakers, and feminist activists gained ownership of a social problem. Similarly, the gender-equality ideology has only catered to heterosexual males and females who form a family, work outside, and raise children equally. Therefore, single persons with no family or singleincome families have been neglected. This should be described as the exertion of governmental power.

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Introduction

In *Constructing Social Problems*, Spector and Kitsuse (1977) presented a natural history model for the social problems process. As the constructionist literature has grown, other analysts have elaborated on the natural history of social problems by incorporating additional theoretical concepts, and by examining how cultural and structural conditions in different countries affect how social problems emerge and evolve.[1]

This paper contributes to social problems studies by combining the natural history model of social problems with discourse analysis, as proposed by French philosopher Michael Foucault (1972).

Foucault's main research question is described as follows:

> [It is] not a question of code, but a question of events: the law of existence of statements, what made a statement possible, and what made other statements impossible; the condition of their singular emergence; their correlation with previous or simultaneous events, whether it was discursive or not. (Foucault 1994 [1968], p.681)

He tried to outline connections between knowledge and power in the fields of medicine, prison, psychology, and sexuality (Foucault 1972; Keller 2012, 2013). Kendall and Wickham summarize that in Foucauldian discourse analysis, researchers attempt "to chart the relation between the sayable and the visible; to analyze the relation between one statement and other statements; to formalize rules for the repeatability of statements (or, if you like, the use of statements, etc.)" (Kendall and Wickham 1999, p.26). Foucault's genealogical approach has the tendency to specify some events or episodes that represent some connection between power and knowledge and/or discourse.

This paper uses concepts from natural history and discourse analysis in qualitative content analysis of discourse on low birth rates in Japan, in news articles and discussions among the Japan's national Diet members.[2] It focuses on two topics: how some policies to combat low birth rates were adopted, while other were rejected; and why the

[1] Another fruitful natural history model of social problem process is proposed by Joel Best (2016). Best lists six stages: Claimsmaking, Media Coverage, Public Reaction, Policymaking, Social Problems Work, and Policy Outcomes (Best ibid.:19). The model can focus on broad and macro structures, including social contexts and settings in which claim-making activities occur. This paper especially focuses on Policymaking, Media Coverage and Public Reaction because low birth rate issues in Japan are primarily claimed by population experts, policymakers, and media workers that follow them. Most Public Reactions are declined to be influenced by other stages.

[2] This paper takes context constructionism stance proposed by Joel Best and Lawrence Nichols (Best 2016; Nichols 2015). As Nichols suggests, this paper accepts that contexts are constructed by claims-makers and social science analysts through their definitional 'context work' and, therefore, truths are complex and paradoxical (Nichols ibid., pp.82–4). In this paper, the causes of low birth rates to which claims-makers and analysts attribute are examples of contexts. Some might be correct, and others might be not from statistical and scientific point of view. The author of this paper takes the stance that analysts including the author can reasonably judge which causes are justifiable, and others are 'distorted' or not. By taking the stance, context constructionism can develop further research questions: some figures and/or statistics are distorted. And even so, how and why such 'distorted' figures or statistics can be prevalent in the social problem process.

policies which were adopted tend to favor two-income families. Examining key events in the issue's history allows us to understand the issue's evolution.

In order to answer these two research questions, this paper selects seven important episodes or events from 1990 to 2016 in order to understand how and why a particular policy—social welfare for working couples—became central to Japan's governmental policies against low birth rates.

These seven episodes are selected not by random sampling, but by a purposive one. In these events, some claims or statements appear repeatedly and regularly. This paper focuses on the repeatability and regularity of the claims or statements as the main concerns of Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Low birth rate issue or, more generally, population problems can be analyzed using a Foucauldian concept, "governmentality." Foucault mentioned the term, in its broadest sense, as a heading for a project that exercises power in terms of the "conduct of conducts" (Foucault 2000, p.34, Walters 2012, p.11). In a more specific sense, Foucault defined the concept as 'the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its main form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument' (Foucault 2007, p.108). He argued that a modern governmental power consists of law, disciplinary, and security system.

As Foucault argued, population used to be a main target of the governmental power, which was exercised through knowledge on population growth or decline, and produced by experts, bureaucrats and policymakers who are concerned with the issues. Through population discourses, people acquire knowledge on their own sexuality and reproduction, regulate their own behaviors, and generate concerns about other's behaviors in accordance with the discursive knowledge.

Through analyzing these seven events, this paper tries to find out what kind of power or knowledge operates, and what kind of similarities in the discourse appear repeatedly and regularly.

Episode 1: The Origin of Low Birth Rate Issues (1990)

Japan's low birth rate issues have a specific date on which they were realized: On June 9, 1990, the Welfare Ministry announced that the total fertility rate (the average number of children borne by a woman throughout her lifetime) in 1989 was 1.57. This was the lowest figure since the Ministry began estimating Japan's birthrates. Since what is referred to as the "1.57 shock," low birth rate has been one of Japan's biggest social problems.

On June 12, the then Finance Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto stated in a meeting that declining birth rates are caused by women's higher education; a Japan-based American female journalist present at the meeting grilled the then Chief Cabinet Secretary Misoji Sakamoto on whether Hasimoto's remarks represented the official views of the Japanese government, and whether they adopted the "Be fruitful, and multiply" slogan. Sakamoto replied, "women's higher education might be one of many causes, but I guess Japanese women would not give birth to babies so easily even if the government requested them to have more babies" (Shimbun 1990b).

This event is interesting from our perspective because the assumption that women's higher education causes declining birth rates used to be a common assumption among population experts at that time.[3] However, once the Finance Minister articulated this argument, he was severely criticized by a female journalist. Thus, at the starting point of low birth rate issues in Japan, such traditional assumptions were seriously checked by the media.

The female journalist also referred to "Be fruitful, and multiply," which was the main rhetoric slogan of the wartime pro-natalist policy called the Population Policy Establishment Guideline (Jinko Seisaku Kakuritsu Yoko) in 1941. The journalist was asking whether the wartime pro-natalist policy would be revived as a current population policy.

However, the then government was rather prudent in reviving the policy. The Chief Cabinet Secretary, who was considered the main assistant to the Prime Minister, recognized that the wartime slogan, "Be fruitful, and multiply," alone would not effectively lead to women giving birth to more babies in modern Japan. Thus, the slogan was rejected by nearly all parties even at the beginning of the issue just because the women's movement had presumably become more important, and the politicians understood that the old slogan would have been attacked as old-style sexism.

Episode 2: Emphasis on Gender Equality (1992)

At an inhouse meeting in Posts and Telecommunications Research Institute (Yusei Kenkyusho), which was a think tank sponsored by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, around 1992, economists Yasushi Harada and Seiji Takada presented evidence that a rise in female wages decreases birth rates, based on Japanese prefectural cross-sectional analysis. However, Yukiko Okuma, a female journalist at Asahi Shimbun commented:

> Now, the hypothesis that women's higher education and higher career aspirations cause lower birthrates is not applicable in advanced countries. (…) Experts in demography, such as the President of Health Ministry's National Institute of Population Research, [have] accepted the notion that birth rates are declining in conservative countries which have bossy husband-based traditions and in which conservative male consciousness has not changed in spite of women's higher education (Takayama and Harada 1993, pp.15-16).

The then National Institute of Population Research (currently, the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research) was Japan's largest research institute for birth rate and population estimation. The discourse produced by the Institution has largely influenced both academic research and the comprehensive population policy in Japan. Yukiko Okuma, who belonged to the mass media industry at the time, quoted the remarks of the Institute's President, in which she attributed the causes of low birth rates not to women's higher education, but to male sex-role consciousness, such as husband's bossiness and male chauvinism. Further, she claimed that advanced countries that discard

[3] For instance, a Japanese economic demographer Yamaguchi Mitoshi argued that female labour participation along with their higher education decreased birth rates using longitudinal data between 1900 and 1970 (Yamaguchi 2001).

traditional sex roles increase birthrates by realizing a work-life balance and making it easier to raise children. Thus, gender-equality discourses, which are currently widespread, had been dominant at that time as an accepted opinion among population experts.

On December 1994, Japan's first policy against low birth rate, known as the "Angel Plan," was agreed upon by the Ministries of Education, Welfare, Labour, and Construction. The policy declared that child-rearing is not just a problem for parents, and sought to promote child-rearing support from the whole society, including private enterprises and local communities. It proposed a five-year plan for urgent child-care support, attempting to expand public child-care support for 0–2-year-old infants, and establish community child-care centers. The policy seemed to reject both the "Be fruitful, and multiply" notion and the assumption that women's higher education and higher career aspirations lead to fewer children. Furthermore, it highlighted women's difficulties in maintaining work-childcare balance and proposed social welfare and child-care support for working couples.

Episode 3: Contested Statistics (2005)

Around 2000, the assumption that gender equality causes higher birth rates in advanced countries became prevalent among some experts, bureaucrats, and politicians.[4] They often used a cross-national scatter diagram of female labor participation rates (FLPR) and total fertility rates (TFR) of some OECD countries, and claimed that the higher the FLPR, the higher the TFR is in "advanced" countries such as Sweden, France, and the United States (see Fig. 1).

However, Akagawa (2004, 2011, 2012, 2014) demonstrated that the diagram was ***distorted*** because the countries were selected purposefully and the opposite tendency could be found if the relationship was reanalyzed using all OECD countries, or all countries with per capita GDP of over $10,000[5] (see Fig.2).

In October 2005, a female academic-turned-politician Kuniko Inoguchi was appointed the first Minister of State for Measures for Declining Birthrate and Gender Equality. She elucidated to the public that gender equality increases birth rates, using the contested statistics. In 2004, a book titled "What's wrong with low birthrates on earth!" adopted the quantitative social survey and claimed that gender-equality is not related to low birthrates (Akagawa 2004). Although the book became popular, its argument was ignored by policy makers.

On October 26, 2005, a female lawmaker from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Eriko Yamatani, made an exception and delivered a statement to a committee of the Upper house:

> There is a hypothesis that balancing work and child-rearing increases birthrates and its advocates often cite the data which seems to show the positive correlation

[4] Akagawa (2004, p. 94) picks up ten well-known Japanese feminists, economists and bureaucrats between 2000 and 2004, who argued that gender equality causes higher birth rates among advanced countries.

[5] In this section, the author of this paper has appeared as a claimsmaker on low birthrate issues in Japan. As a claimsmaker, the author challenged the diagram above and the discourse that gender-equality is related to low birthrates. However, in this paper, the author tries to analyze himself as an object of the research, in other words, as one of the claimsmakers in this issue. This reflexive analysis has been recommended by Kitsuse and Spector (1977, p.127).

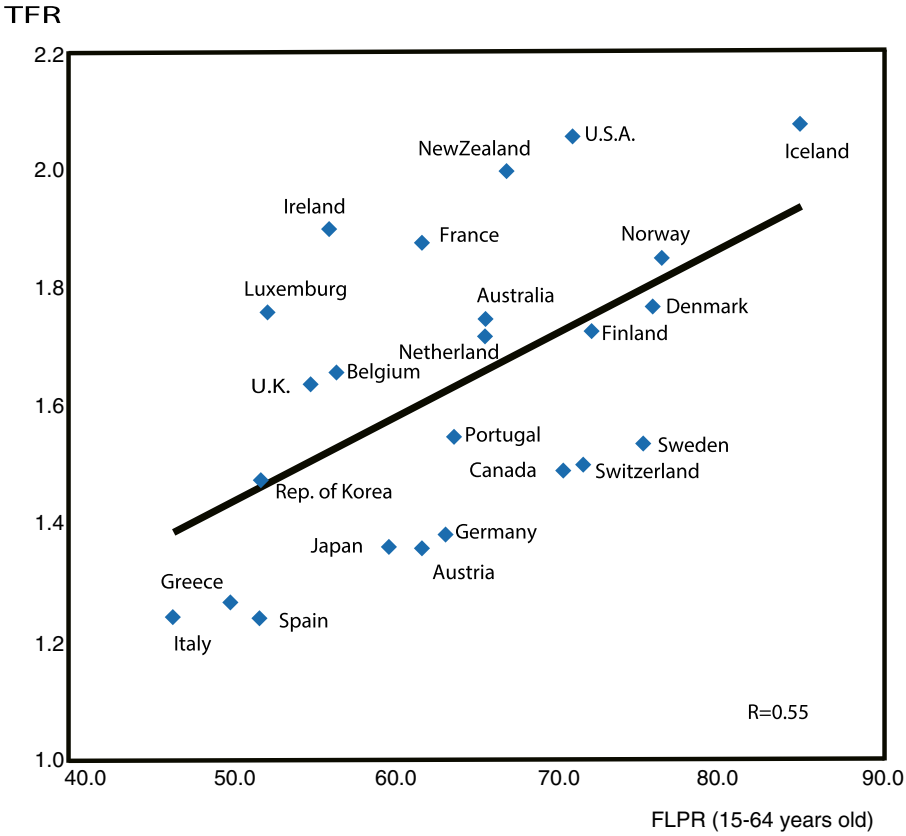

Fig. 1 Special committee on a low birth rate and gender equality (2005)

> between FLPR and TFR among OECD countries. However, there is a debate among academics on whether that is a spurious correlation because some inconvenient countries, such as Turkey and Mexico, are excluded from the diagram. I feel it is a natural argument that early marriage leads to higher birthrates, but that kind of message and education is hard to deliver in our society (Yamatani 2005).

Although Yamatani did not refer to the book, she recognized that higher birthrates were a result of early marriages; however, she acknowledged the difficulties in accepting this idea in the Japanese society. Yamatani was a conservative lawmaker; she could have delivered a message such as "Marry as early as possible and have as many children as possible," but she hesitated. Even in 2005, conservative lawmakers carefully avoided delivering public messages that encouraged women to have more babies.

Episode 4: Child Allowance Rejection (2005)

In Japan's population policies, supporting work-childrearing balance is a rather common principle. It is often accompanied by gender-equality and work-life balance ideologies, which assume that a man and woman form a family, and then work outside

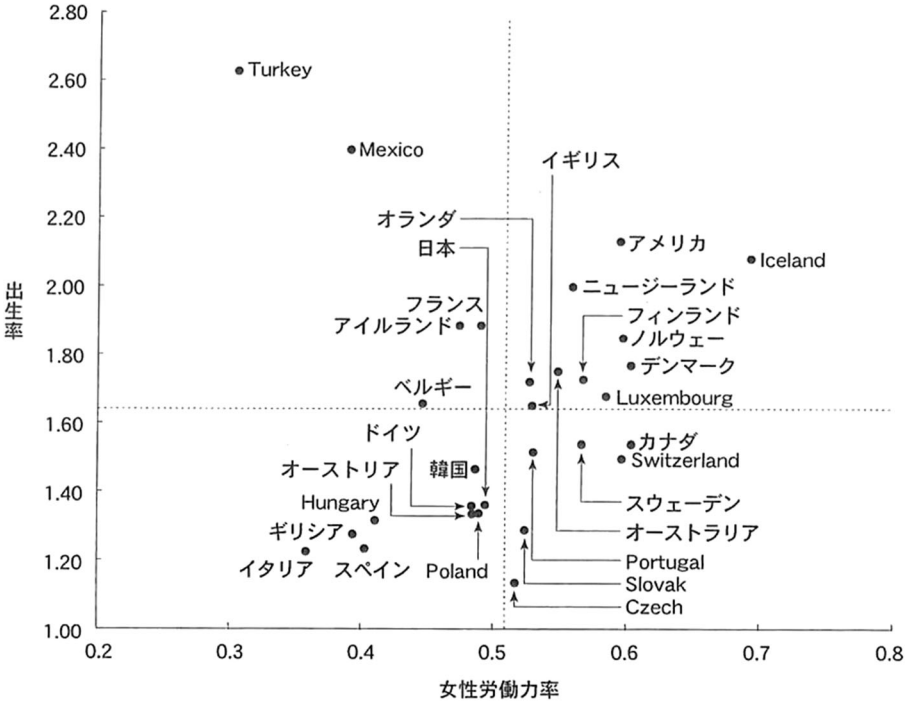

Fig. 2 Akagawa (2005, p.125)

and raise children equally as husband and wife. According to these ideologies, a family type in which a husband works as the breadwinner and the wife becomes a housewife (male-breadwinner families) is criticized and rejected. Moreover, family types in which the wife works as breadwinner and the husband becomes a househusband (female-breadwinner families) as well as same-sex couples are ignored.

Therefore, population policies, except for those that support work- childrearing balance, are often ignored or strongly opposed. A typical example is the child allowance policy, which proposes providing equal allowance to both double- and single-income families; however, child allowance has been severely opposed by population experts, bureaucrats, and feminist activists.

For instance, in November 1990, former Welfare Minister Juro Saito proposed a substantial increase in child allowance as a solution against low birth rates before a committee of the ruling LDP. The then Welfare Minister Yuji Tsushima responded, “Declining birthrates have a magnitude of problems, and therefore increasing child allowance is just only one solution. However, it should be central to comprehensive policies against low birth rates.” (Shimbun 1990a).

Against these claims, a Ministry of Finance bureaucrat, in charge of the welfare budget, commented, “I do not believe that child allowance leads to increasing birth-rates. We should not assign any budget for that presumably inefficient policy.” Moreover, the chairperson of the Japan Federation of Employers’ Association and the Federation of Economic Organizations, two of the major corporate associations in

Japan, reportedly commented that "We cannot afford that burden because we employers have to share half the burden of the child allowance. Employees should not ask for more allowance" (Shimbun 1990a).

Child allowance was first introduced in 1972; in 1990, the second child aged less than 7 years was given 2500 yen or about $25 a month, and the third child was given 5000 yen or about $50 a month. Even though the amount of the allowance was rather measly considering the standard of living at the time, many actors were against even a little increase.

However, many people believed that the decline in birth rates was due to the financial cost of raising children. The 8th National Fertility Survey (NFS 1990) conducted by National Institution of Population asked respondents why the ideal number of children for couples is below three. The responses were ranked as follows: first, "It costs too much to raise children" (36.9%); second, "School expenses for children are too high" (29.3%); third "Mental and physical burden of childrearing" (25.2%); fourth "People dislike late child-bearing" (16.3%); and fifth "Houses are too small to raise children" (15.7%) (Shimbun 1990c). The outcome of the opinion polls indicates that Japanese citizens emphasized economic factors, such as financial burden and poor housing for childrearing, as the causes for declining birthrates. However, bureaucrats and business managers tried to ignore such public opinion.

Moreover, commentators and activists who support child-care support as a policy against low birth rates tend to emphasize public benefit in kind, such as expanding nursery schools or resolving the issue of children on waiting lists at nursery centers; however, they tend to reject financial support for children and the couples who raise them.

In June 2006, Inoguchi planned to propose a new plan for the declining birth rate, which reportedly included financial child-care support, such as expanding the infant allowance and providing free childbirth services. However, some experts, whom Inoguchi had appointed as members of her advisory committee, announced their opposition at a press conference. They believed that mere financial support could not secure child-rearing and the first priority should be a review of the ways of working and a diverse child-care support at home and in the local community, which implied balancing work and child-rearing for couples (Shimbun 2006).

Although their discourse was biased and the provision of financial support for couples and their children seemed fair, they were right that financial support alone does not guarantee security. However, they regarded financial support and work-life balance as contradictory, and believed that implementing financial support would obstruct the work-life balancing policy.

Episode 5: Child Allowance Rejection (2009)

The negative attitude toward financial support exploded when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) took office in September 2009. During the campaign, the DPJ announced a new child allowance policy that would provide 26,000 yen per month to each child under 15-years of age, irrespective of their household income. In 2010, they proposed raising the allowance to 13,000 yen per month. However, the Great East Japan

Earthquake (March 11, 2011) and the budget deficit prevented them from increasing the child allowance and the policy was abolished in 2012.

Many experts and politicians criticized the DPJ, arguing that increasing child allowance would never lead to increased birth rates. For instance, an article in the *Asahi Shimbun* argued:

> What is necessary for policies against low birthrates is not just financial support, because a major cause of the declining birthrates is that women are forced to choose between working or childrearing when they have a baby. In order to enable women to balance work and childrearing, expansion of secure nursery school services and realization of work-life balance are two of the most fundamental factors, much like the wheels of a vehicle (Shimbun 2009a).

However, this article excluded financial support for children from "the wheels of a vehicle" policies against low birth rates.

In November 2009, the then OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría pointed out that Japan's FLPR for women aged between 25 and 54 years was lower compared to other OECD countries, and delivered the following statement:

> Japan's birth rates are declining and it is important for women to be utilized in a bid to secure workforce. Women's empowerment and policies against low birth-rates go well together. Japan should put a greater premium on resolving the issue of children on waiting lists at nursery centers than on child allowance (Shimbun 2009b).

These claims advocate the expansion of nursery schools and maintaining work-life balance, which are privileges that exclusively benefit two-income families, as more effective policies against low birth rates than child allowances, which benefit every child equally, irrespective of the parents' lifestyle. The failure of child allowance suggests that the basis of policies against low birth rates finally moved to welfare policies that merely supported double-income families.

Episode 6: A Discourse in February 2016

On February 15, 2016, an anonymous woman posted a blog titled "My child wasn't accepted for nursery school. Die, Japan!!! (Hoikuen Ochita Nihon Shine!!!)" on her blog named Hatena Anonymous Diary (An Anonymous Woman 2016). She asked, "What about a 'society in which all citizens are dynamically engaged'?[6] My kid was rejected by a nursery school. I'll have to quit my job. I gave birth, have raised the kid, and worked my ass off to pay taxes. And Japan, are you still not satisfied?" She ended the post with "Oh, give me a break. Damn you, Japan!!! "(translated by Japan Times 2016).

[6] A "society in which all citizens are dynamically engaged" is one of the key slogans of the Shinzo Abe administration.

The next day, a TV program called "Newsweb" of NHK, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, singled out the statement and some commentators and activists retweeted the blog. A few days later, several internet news sites, such as BIGLOBE, excite, infoseek, and yahoo, cited the statement; moreover, Japan's five largest TV stations and its four major newspapers, including *Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi,* and *Nikkei Shimbun*, editorialized about the blog.

The blog seemed to deliver two messages: One, that "the shortage of day care facilities remains a serious hurdle for mothers returning to the workforce, especially in overcrowded areas such as Tokyo." The other is that she "shed light on what she called the hypocrisy of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's drive to promote the 'dynamic engagement' of all citizens" (summarized by Japan Times 2016).

On February 29, Shiori Yamao, a female lower house member who belonged to the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), cited the blog at the budget committee and criticized Abe's stance toward the problem of "children on waiting lists." Abe's initial reply was, "I cannot assure if the message is real or not. I do not know who the author is. Therefore, we cannot argue this anymore" (Abe 2016a). However, a week later, he changed his stance slightly, saying, "We are enhancing child-care services and eliminating the waiting list for children. We are speeding up that project more quickly than the DPJ government" (Abe 2016b).

Conservative lower Diet members might regard the message, "Die, Japan!!!," as excessively harsh. For instance, a popular Japanese conservative commentator Masaru Sato regarded the remarks as unprecedented bad language in the Japan's Diet (Sato and Miyake 2016). However, they accepted the opposition party's criticism and agreed with the policy of eliminating the waiting list for children.

At the end of 2016, the message, "My child wasn't accepted for nursery school. Die, Japan!!!" was selected as one of the top ten buzzwords by a corporation, and Yamao participated in the award ceremony.

Episode 7: Another Discourse in February 2016

On the other hand, on February 29, 2016, the same day that Yamao criticized Abe at the Diet, a junior high school principal in Osaka delivered the following message to the students at the school meeting.

> The most important thing for women is to give birth to two or more children. It is more valuable than building your career because low birthrate would ruin Japan. Only women can give birth to babies. Men can't. I agree with the idea that if a woman gives birth and raises two or more children, she should be entitled to enroll in and graduate from a national university for free. She had better study in the university and be a professional such as a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, and a nurse after raising children. Raising children is such important work. If you can't marry and give birth to babies for physical reasons, you will be able to adopt orphans. Next, boys, listen to me carefully. You had better raise children cooperating with your future wife. It is not just your wife's duty. (Huffington Post 2016)

As soon as the message was reported in the press, the principal came under fire and the education board, which had the jurisdiction to control the school, reportedly considered punishing him because they regarded his remarks as an anti-gender-equality discourse.

What does the simultaneous occurrence of the two episodes signify?

First, the relatively harsh message, "Die, Japan!!!," was not criticized by either the ruling or the opposition parties, although might be regarded as hate speech, advocating obliterating the Japanese nation and state. However, both opposition and ruling parties shared the view that a welfare policy, such as enhancing public child-care services, eliminating the waiting list for children, focusing on working couples, was effective against low birth rates.

On the other hand, a direct message such as "women should give birth to two or more children" is somehow severely charged as sexual harassment or anti-gender-equality discourse. However, giving birth to two or more children has been taken for granted as a pro-natalist policy to prevent low birth rates and declining population. In fact, the Abe administration set a goal to raise Japan's total fertility rate to 1.8 by 2025, which means that, except for same-sex or infertile couples, must have two children on average.

In summary, nowadays only social welfare policies that support working mothers are accepted as policies against low birth rates in Japan. Other policies are rejected and other possible policies to increase birth rates are severely criticized as being politically incorrect.

Discussion

This paper examined seven episodes in the social problem process that illustrate the evolution of the discourse on low birth rate issues in Japan since the 1990s. Focusing on discourse complements the natural history model of social problems, and highlights four points.

First, claim-makers who regard declining birth rates as a serious social problem to be solved consist of (a) experts in demography, economics, and sociology; (b) politicians, bureaucrats, and social problem workers, who suggest and implement measures against low birth rates, including budget revisions, and (c) feminists or child-care support activists, who belong to advisory committees or councils, influencing political decisions against low birth rates. In particular, experts from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, which announces the annual estimations of population and TFR, influence the policy-making process as insider claim-makers. The mainstream media, including the five major newspapers (*Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei*, and *Sankei Shimbuns*) and the six giant TV stations (NHK, Nihon TV, TBS TV, Asahi, Fuji TV, and Tokyo TV) tend to report the statistics produced by these insider claim-makers nationwide. Thus, the low birth rate issues in Japan can be considered a government-manufactured social problem.

These claim-makers tend to emphasize that low economic growth and the instability of the current public pension system result from low birth rates. In other words, few claims discuss the merit of low birth rates, such as the possibilities they might solve the traffic congestion problem in urban cities, amelioration of resources, and environmental problems, allowing people to live in larger and less expensive houses.

Their claims also neglect the possibility that low birth rates or depopulation does not necessarily lead to lower economic growth or breakdown of the public pension system.

In fact, according to Abenomics,[7] sustainable economic growth is possible in a low birth rate condition through monetary easing and fiscal stimulus. If this is the case, the current public pension system will be sustainable, and the per capita GDP will increase. However, such possibilities have not been discussed by lawmakers and the mass media.

On the other hand, theories on the causes of low birth rates in Japan distort the evidence. The policies against low birth rates until now have emphasized that difficulty in balancing work and childrearing decreases the number of children that a couple has. However, a demographer Iwasawa (2015) proved that the influence of the declining number of children that a couple has on declining birth rates is just 10%; while 90% is attributed to an increase in the number of unmarried people. Gender-equality and work-life balance in the context of policies against low birth rates are supposed to contribute to the increase in the number of children that a couple has, and therefore, they do not significantly impact the increase in birth rates. However, gender-equality and work-life balance have been dominant within the "universe of discourses" (Mead 1934) on low birth rate issues in Japan; these discourses have ignored the more fundamental problem of why young people are postponing marriage.

Moreover, national opinion polls highlighted the concerns of financial burden in childrearing (the parents ranked "It costs too much to raise children" as the top concern). However, not only bureaucrats in the Ministry of Finance, who are capable of balancing national revenue and expenditure, but also feminists and activists who emphasize gender-equality and work-life balance, often reject a child allowance, which provides equal benefit to each child, regardless of the parents' lifestyle, because of the financial burden on the national government and ineffective policy outcomes. Instead, they emphasize expanding public nursery services and resolving the issue of children on waiting lists at nursery centers, guaranteeing privilege to two-income families.

The natural history model of social problems is one of the most effective ways to describe how a problem is constructed and what type of claim-making activities have become dominant. It usually focuses on "a social problem process" and "how and why particular conditions come to be constructed as social problems" (Best 2016, p.14). This paper stressed that not only "what" and "how" questions but also "why" questions—"why particular constructions have become dominant and other constructions are rejected and neglected"—are important to move "beyond case studies" (Best 2015).

For instance, in trying to understand why Japanese discourse has concentrated on policies aimed at helping two-income families, we might assume that nobody opposes social welfare policies that they believe will increase birth rates, even if that is not the case. Another possible solution might be cooperation among feminism-oriented experts, politicians, and bureaucrats who began favoring austere budget after the burst of the bubble economy. Since "gender equality" in Japan's political context usually assumes that only married heterosexual couples who work outside the home raise children, the policies for single people, male-breadwinner couples, and even female-breadwinner couples have often been neglected.

[7] According to Financial Times Lexicon, Abenomics is "the name given to a suite of measures introduced by Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe after his December 2012 re-election to the post he last held in 2007. His aim was to revive the sluggish economy with "three arrows": a massive fiscal stimulus, more aggressive monetary easing from the Bank of Japan, and structural reforms to boost Japan's competitiveness" (http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=abenomics).

As a result, merely welfare policies that are adaptive to the ideologies of gender-equality and work-life balance have been accepted and implemented by experts, bureaucrats, lawmakers, and activists, whereas other policies have been excluded. From the perspective of the natural history model of social problems, they gain "ownership of a social problem" (Gusfield 1981; Best 2016). Ownership implies "having one's construction of a troubling condition become widely accepted" (Best 2016, p. 344) and the owners have the right to define the troubling situation:

> The owners' frames become influential in shaping how others approach the problem and its solution; the owners' perspective may not be the only possible way of thinking about the troubling condition, but it becomes familiar, almost taken for granted by the press, the public, and policymakers. Precisely because they are well known, owners find it much easier to mobilize resources (Best 2016, p. 88).

These findings correspond with the Foucauldian discourse analysis. Foucault (1980) described the connection between power and knowledge; his basic research question was why a type of discourse and its rhetoric becomes prevalent at a certain time and space, while other discourses are excluded. This can be connected with the basic constructionist perspective that proposed by Spector and Kitsuse (1977): "The central problem for a theory of social problems is to account for the emergence, nature and maintenance of claims-making and responding activities" (p.76).

In this case study, government-oriented population experts, bureaucrats, policymakers, and feminists have gained and shared the ownership of master narratives on low birthrate issues—the hypothesis that only double income families increase birthrates and they should be supported by the government—and other types of discourse which have challenged the hypothesis and proposed more universal child-care support for people have been excluded. This might be described as the consequence of exertion of governmental power, which Foucault argued to be 'the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this specific (…) power that has the population as its target, political economy as its main form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument' (Foucault 2007, p.108).

This paper conciliated the constructionist perspective with Foucauldian discourse analysis to understand why discourse on low birth rates became so narrowly focused. Thus, the pro-natalist slogan of "Be fruitful, and multiply," which directly encouraged having more children, was severely censured as the resurgence of wartime militarism. In a sense, the slogan can be an example of the strawman argument (Gula 2002). Liberal journalists and feminists have endeavored to label the government policies against low birth rate with the slogan, so that even the government seeks to avoid such labeling. The slogan was constructed as an imaginary enemy, and became a tabooed option.

Similarly, under the Japanese political context, the gender-equality ideology, in many cases, has only catered to heterosexual males and females who form a family, work outside, and raise children equally. Therefore, single persons with no family or single-income families, whether male- or female-breadwinner types, have been neglected. Japan's policies against low birthrates have excluded these people, which

means they ignore the increasing number of single persons, which directly affects declining birthrates.

Conclusion

This paper reflected on the ongoing low birth rate issues in Japan since the 1990s, and examined them by combining the natural history model of social problems recommended by Spector and Kitsuse with Foucauldian discourse analysis. It illustrates ways constructionist thinking can continue to evolve, both by incorporating additional theoretical perspectives and by studying social problems processes in other nations.

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