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THE CHANGES IN DEVELOPMENTAL NICHE: NURTURANCE FORMATION IN YOUNG PEOPLE OF JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that one of the factors underlying the so-called '*Shoshika*' or 'problem of decreasing number of children' in present day Japan is the malformation of nurturance in young people before they start parenting. University students from North America were interviewed in order to find out about the baby sitter system in America. It was suggested that the baby sitter system, consisting of the young people (the baby sitters), their parents (who encourage them), and the caregivers of young children, serves as a nurturance formation device. On the contrary, due to drastic changes in family structure and the disappearance of community life, younger generations of Japanese grew up with little or no experience with young children. They are suffering from serious failure in nurturance formation. *Shoshika* is one of the results. The paper suggests that nurturance formation should add a new dimension to the concept of developmental niche.

Key Words: *shoshika*, nurturance, *yoikusei*, baby-sitting, developmental niche, nuclear family

INTRODUCTION

Like many post-industrial societies in the West, Japan's birth rate has been dropping since 1990s. This trend is often referred to as '*Shoshika*' in the language of journalism/mass-media. *Shoshika*, which literally means decreasing of the number of children, has been considered one of the major social issues in Japan during the last two decades. Technically speaking, the term '*shoshika shakai*'(*shosika* society) was first used to denote a situation in the society when the number of children population is below that of people over 65. This issue of '*Shosika*' has been the topic of many discussions as well as the target of a variety of attempts made by people from all levels of Japanese society aiming at ameliorating the situations. However, for more than 12 years since the Japanese government began tackling this problem, and in spite of numerous programmes or projects aiming at the improvement of the situations, carried out by local government and by many NPOs all over Japan, the latest statistics still show a record low birth-rate, with no sign of the decreasing coming to a halt, let alone that of a rise.

The decrease in the number of children born in Japan is not a phenomenon that can be attributed to a few causes, nor is it the result of some short-term social changes. It seems to have taken at least a few decades for the problem of *Shoshika* to emerge. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an adequate historical analysis of this phenomenon. What will be attempted in this paper is to suggest that the so-called *Shoshika*

problem is a reflection of drastic changes in at least three aspects of Japanese social life: 1) the disorganization of local communities, 2) the individualization of everyday life, and 3) the decrease in infant mortality. While many other post-industrial societies in the West have witnessed similar changes after World War II and have suffered from decreasing birth rate, Japan seems to stand out in the severity of her problems concerning low birth rate and child rearing.

Although '*Shoshika*' is currently considered an important issue in Japan by many researchers, notably sociologists and developmental psychologists, because of its implications on manpower, economic burden of the working population in supporting the older generation of the population, and Japanese economy in general in the near future, there are also disagreeing views as to its solutions. One of the dominant views is to promote equal right for women, arguing that the main cause of '*shoshika*' is the absence of an environment in which women can be freed from having to sacrifice child bearing in order to keep their jobs. For example, one critic argues that the condition, demanded by some feminists and supported by current government policy, in which both male and female members of the society can participate equally (*danjyo sankaku shakai*), will not guarantee to cure '*shoshika*'(Akagawa, 2004). In this paper, attention will be directed to the significant recent changes in the developmental niche of Japanese child rearing. In particular, the concentration of population in large cities and the trend toward the nuclear family, processes which started when Japan began modernization, but have gained great momentum beginning with the economic growth in 1960s, have led to the breakdown of the cycle of nurturance formation in modern Japanese society. It will be pointed out that as a result, more than two generations of Japanese have grown up to have their own children while suffering from serious failure in their formation of nurturance. It is this breakdown of the cycle of nurturance formation that will have more serious consequences on not only the development of the individuals but also on the quality of Japanese society as a whole.

DRASTIC CHANGES OF DEVELOPMENTAL NICHE

As a result of urbanization, a trend which became more prominent during 1960s, the majority of Japanese come to live in nuclear families in the cities, leaving their aged parents in under-populated rural and/or fishing areas. Whether it was in the *danchi*, the housing estate, during the 1960s and 1970s, or in the high-rise apartment buildings afterwards, the greater majority of households were nuclear families, consisting of the husband and wife and one or two children (Figure 1). According to the national census in 2000, over 71% of all households in Japan had fewer than 4 people.

This is a significant change from the conditions prevalent up to the end of 1950s. In earlier times, it was not unusual for 10 or more people to live under the same roof, and for household members to include three or four generations of kindred, as can be seen in photographs of a rural family in Akita Prefecture in 1953 (Figures 2a, 2b, 2c).

In contrast, the size of today's nuclear families usually does not exceed five members. The percentage of the so-called multi-generation-household (i.e., nuclear family plus the parents of either the husband or the wife) is around 10 percent, with a tendency of decreasing. This change in the structure of the household is especially significant

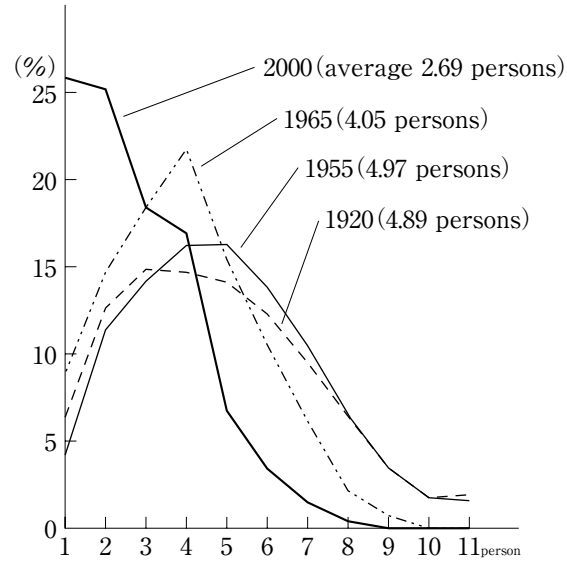

Figure 1 Curves indicating percentages of different household sizes in different years. Small size households became dominant around 1965. (Source: Statistics Bureau, General Affairs Agency)

Figure 2a A family with different generations of people. Children of different ages were seen participating in a after-dinner chat with adults other than their own parents. (Niigata, 1951, photograph taken by Nakamata Masayoshi).

Figure 2b A household consisting of different generations of people.
Children of different ages Were taken care of by their grand parents. (Niigata, 1957, photograph taken by Nakamata Masayoshi).

Figure 2c A household of more than 10 members was a common scene in the rural area, such as Akita Prefecture (1953, photograph taken by Kikuchi Toshikichi).

when one considers the implications it has on the formation of nurturance in the younger members/generation of the society.

The diminishing of household size means that the component of the household is simpler, with the nuclear family consisting of parents and children becoming the dominant type. This results in a very different ways of interaction within the household. Before this change, children were cared for by not only their own parents; but also by other members such as grandparents, the aunts and uncles, married or unmarried, or other relatives who lived together. Although child care was considered mainly the responsibility of the parents, other members of the household also took part in child rearing. Even children took part in the child rearing activities. Before the advent of is change, it was not unusual for adolescent, or even younger, children to participate in assisting the care of their younger siblings when their parents and other adults in the household were occupied (Figure 3a). It was through the actual participation, and/or through participant observation in child rearing such as in these activities that young people of earlier generations fostered their nurturance. They learned about the necessary skills for interacting with their younger siblings. It is not unreasonable to hypothesize that before the changes in household component as described above occurred, young people before marriage, or adults in general of earlier generations of Japanese were more nurturing than their modern counterparts. This can be seen in the difficulty in child rearing as experienced by many young parents in recent years, with lack of experience in child rearing as one major complaint. The significant increase in the number of cases of child abuse reported in recent years also seems to suggest the general lack of experience with young children among adults in Japan.

Figure 3a
Even male adolescent children participated in the caring of younger children. Photograph taken during early 60s.

Figure 3b Children were common scene in the neighbourhood. Older children participated in the caring of young children, learning to be nurturant.

When one looks beyond the household level and towards the neighbourhood, one notices many changes in the developmental niche too. First, in pre-60s period, children of all ages were much more visible, if not ubiquitous. Children were seen playing at the corner of the street, in the alley, or in the neighbourhood (Figure 3b). Second, not only children themselves, but also their caretakers were commonly to be seen together with them in previous time. Third, the activity of child rearing itself was more open, in the

sense that adults in the neighbourhood took part in the caring of each other's children, or in sharing their experiences with each other (Figure 4). In contrast, in recent years, the local community has become an environment hazardous for young children, as indicated by the increasing number of incidents involving young children such as traffic accidents, kidnapping or murdering at school or in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, as a reaction to the worsening of security in local community, especially for young children, adults in the community began taking protective measures such as organizing patrolling squads to accompany children to school, or cutting down trees in the park in order to clear the view, etc. However, while it seems natural and rational for adults to take these measures in an attempt to protect their children, one ironical side effect of these protective measures is that they tend to result in further segregation of children from adults in the community, making children even more inaccessible. This situation further reduces the already scarce opportunities for the adolescents and adults in the community to learn about children and be nurturant to them.

Figure 4 Children were more visible and child rearing took place more publicly. Two women were seen conversing about the infants in their arms. (Akita, 1958, Photograph taken by Sato Hisataro)

PARENT AND CHILD IN A NUCLEAR FAMILY

In addition to the facts that children nowadays are fewer and that they are hardly seen playing in the neighbourhood, situation in the nuclear family has another negative aspect which contributes to the plight of the children. Unlike in previous period, when different kindreds were living together, undesirable interaction between a child and his/her parent was more likely to be intervened by other adults or older children. Nowadays the same undesirable interaction, when occurs behind the closed door of a nuclear family, has no others to rely on for intervention, nor is it easy for a person outside of the family to help. The increasing number of cases of child abuse reported nowadays are partially the result of such condition.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NURTURANCE FORMATION

We have seen above the consequences of what drastic changes in the developmental niche of Japanese child rearing have brought. However, the focus of the majority of current discussions in Japanese society is on '*shoshika*', or the decrease in the number of

children. As a consequence, attention is being directed to address the issue of how to alleviate the stresses experienced by the caregivers, so that people will want to have more children. One of the most popular activities engaged by the local governments and the NPOs is to provide 'child rearing saloons'(*kosodate saron*) or 'child rearing platforms'(*kosodate hiroba*) for caregivers, to offer information about child rearing as well as counsellors to talk to. While assistance in these forms is not unhelpful, or it is even necessary in many cases, it does not address the developmental problem of '*shoshika*', which is really the problem of nurturance formation.

It should be pointed out that assistance to caregivers in the form of counselling or child rearing information does not solve the problem of the growing adolescent population who will become tomorrow's caregivers. If they have to grow up without any opportunity to learn about young children and to be nurturant, many of them will be the desperate caregivers needing more 'saloons'or 'platforms'. Furthermore, these latter efforts do not seem to be effective in stopping the trend of '*shoshika*' for which they were first designed.

An analysis of the '*shoshika*' problem from a developmental and systems point of view suggests that while there are a multitude of factors contributing to the present condition, the breakdown in the cycle of nurturance formation is an important one to consider, if the issue is to be solved. The '*shoshika*' trend and many problems of child rearing can be traced to the lack of experience with young children and child rearing in genera in many caregivers. Lack of experience with child rearing increases child rearing stresses, which in severe cases, tend to increase the risk of child abuse and/or discourage caregiver to have more children, thus forming a kind of vicious cycle. A more effective way of breaking this cycle is to take a developmental approach by fostering nurturance in adolescent people before they bear their own children, rather than providing them with information and/or giving them counselling when they become desperate parents, although the latter will also be necessary.

A POSITIVE CYCLE OF NURTURANCE FORMATION SYSTEM

If one of the consequences of Japanese society after the beginning of high economic growth, population concentration and the nuclearization of family, is the breakdown of nurturance formation cycle, the custom of baby-sitting in some North American communities can be described as a positive cycle of nurturance formation (Kawada, 2006, Chen & Kawada, 2006). In comparison with young people living in most North American communities, Japanese young people have been raised with little or no experience with younger children. This state of situation was clearly recognized in a preliminary survey carried out by Kawada in 2006, showing that while more than 70 percent of university students from the United States interviewed had constant contact with children under six years of age, only less than 10 percent of their Japanese counterparts said they had some limited experience with children of the same age range (Kawada, 2006). In addition, the content of their experience with young children also differs a great deal. American students know the children as babysitters, they feed and change diapers as well as provide supervision for these children, on average, one to three times per month, while Japanese students mainly play with children for a short time occasionally, if at all (Kawada, 2006).

If some kind of scale on the degree of child rearing skills, knowledge and appropriate attitudes necessary for good enough child development acquired is to be administered to people before child rearing in both populations, a reasonable hypothesis is that the Japanese young people would score far below their North American counterparts. In other words, judging from the observations mentioned above, we hypothesize that, in comparison with their age mates in North America, the younger generations of Japanese are suffering from a failure in their nurturance formation. It goes without saying that this does not mean there is nothing left to be desired in North American communities in their formation of nurturance in young people, or in their human development in general.

The relative lack of nurturance formation among the younger generations of Japanese can also be inferred from the following facts that emerge from Kawada's comparative study mentioned above (Kawada, 2006). The first concerns with the young people's confidence (or the lack of it) in taking care of young children. The majority of North American students studied stated that because they had had much experiences baby-sitting from about 13 or 14 years of age, they felt they were confident that they could take reasonably good care of young children when asked. On the contrary, the majority of Japanese students studied said they would be hard put to it if they had to take care of young children, because they had hardly any experience. Many Japanese students interviewed by the present author even said they would be scared to hold an infant, for fear of dropping it. The second concerns with the attitudes of mothers of young children toward asking students to baby-sit. It was found that 56 percent of Japanese mothers of children under 6 years said it was 'unthinkable' for them to ask students to baby-sit, and only 2 percent said they would like to consider doing so, if they could be assured of having a reliable student (Kawada, 2006). Although the study did not ask the American mothers of young children the same question, judging from the fact that 71 percent of the American students studied (n=40) said they had had extensive experience in baby-sitting, and that 90 percent of them had had baby-sitters themselves when they were small, it seems not unreasonable to infer that mothers of young children in many North American communities have much more confidence in the ability of student baby-sitters in general, as compared with their Japanese counterparts.

In addition to the confidence of mothers of young children in their student baby-sitters and the student baby-sitters' own competence in baby-sitting, all the American students studied said they considered baby-sitting not only an important way of learning about child rearing skills, or a way to earn some pocket money, but also, more importantly, about how to be a responsible person in the society. Most of them also stated that their parents encouraged them to baby-sit, and helped them in their first attempts with useful tips.

The baby-sitting custom as we learn from interviewing students from North America seems to function to some extend, thanks to the positive reinforcing cycle of three component parts forming the system: the parents' encouraging attitudes toward baby-sitting, the attitudes of the adolescent baby-sitters, and the trust/confidence of caregivers of young children needing the service, with each of these parts reinforcing the others, creating a positive cycle. Although in North American communities, baby-sitting is perhaps only considered a supplemental means of child care, its function as a nurturance forma-

tion device for the growing adolescents who will be tomorrow's parents of the society is important.

NURTURANCE FORMATION AS ONE COMPONENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL NICHE

In developmental psychology literature, parenting, caregiving, or child rearing is an important topic (Hoffman, Gandelman & Schuffman, 1982, Michaels, & Goldberg, 1988, Bornstein, 1995). However, the term nurturance is not widely used, except in one book edited by Fogel and Melson published in 1986 (Fogel & Melson, 1986). According to Kojima, the first mention of the concept of nurturance in psychology was by Murray in his 'Explorations in Personality' of 1938 (Kojima, 1986, Murray, 1938). In Japanese literature, however, the equivalent of nurturance, '*yoikusei*' is being used more often (e.g., Kojima, 2001). In addition to its infrequent usage, the concept of nurturance has been used, if at all, both in English and Japanese, as describing the psychological attributes of an individual person.

As can be seen from what we constructed above to be the baby-sitting system found in North American communities, the concept of nurturance also has a societal, or collective, aspect. This is a phenomenon beyond the individual baby-sitters, their parents, and the beneficiary as it were of the system, the caregivers. Rather, it can be the characteristic of a period of time (such as pre-1960s Japan), or a particular geographical area, such as North America. Thus, not only an individual person can be described as nurutrant or not, his/her progression in its formation to be assessed, a society or a historical period can also be described as nurturant, for example, and if this society or period of time has a functional system for cultivating its nurturance.

Nurturance (or its formation) in this sense is closely related to the concept of developmental niche, which is said to be a framework for examining the cultural structuring of child development. It has three components: the physical and social settings in which the child lives; the customs of child care and child rearing; and the psychology of the caretakers (Super & Harkness, 1986). The societal or collective aspect of the nurturance concept developed above would add a value, or content dimension to the concept of developmental niche, which seems to emphasizes the formal or structural dimensions of child development.

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