

Extended abstract

The Changing Transition to Adulthood in Japan: Delay, Diversification and Increasing Atypical Cases

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1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood is conceptualized in demography and sociology as the process during which young people obtain social roles as adults (Raymo and Vogelsang 2009). This transition includes the key life-course events of: (1) (final school) graduation and (permanent) employment for the school-to-work transition; and (2) leaving home, partnership behavior (including dating, cohabitation and first marriage), and the first childbearing for the family-formation process, where young people become independent from parents and form their own families. Relevant migration may also be considered another aspect of the transition. The research target age group spans teen years to early 30s.

In Japan, studies based on the framework of the transition to adulthood first developed in family sociology. The Japan Society of Family Sociology has continuously conducted the National Family Research of Japan (NFR) since 1998. NFR data have been used for studies (including Kato 2006) to integrally analyze school graduation, first employment, leaving home, marriage and other major life-course events by sex or birth cohort, for the transition to adulthood. In Japan's population studies, however, research on the transition to adulthood is just beginning, so no comprehensive research reports have been given yet.

This paper aims to provide the full picture of characteristic changes in the transition to adulthood in Japan over recent years by collecting a variety of reports based on government statistics, nationwide sample surveys and the like and by reviewing past efforts to measure events related to the transition.

2. Measurement of the transition to adulthood in Japan

(1) From school to work

A) School graduation

By breaking down the population by education level in the Population Census and a school advancement survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT, we can estimate the extension of the school education period for young people. According to the census, the percentage of people ages 20 to 34 who received or were receiving higher education (at universities, junior colleges, graduate schools or technical colleges) increased from 8.1% in 1960 to 30.3% in 2000 for males, and from 2.6% to 33.6% for females. According to MEXT, the senior high school advancement rate soared from 42.5% (48.0% for males and 36.7% for females) in 1950 to 96.3% (96.0% for males and 96.7% for females) in 2004. Almost all junior high school graduates now advance to senior high schools. The MEXT data also indicate that the university advancement rate rose from only 7.9% (13.1% for males and 2.4% for female) in 1955 to 42.4% (49.3% for males and 35.2% for females).

These data indicate that the advancement to senior high schools was universalized with the growing popularity of universities by the mid-1970s and that the university advancement rate has increased further to the point where almost half of young people advance to universities or junior colleges.

B) Employment

According to the census, the employment rate for people ages 15 to 34 declined to 93.4% for males and 93.1% for females in 2000 from 97% or higher levels for both between 1950 and 1975. This means that the unemployment rate for the generation soared to 6.6% for males and 6.9% for females from levels that remained below 3% for both males and females until 1975. Over recent years, the number of “freeter” youths in unstable employment has increased. According to a 2006 report that the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare based on its labor force survey, the number increased from 500,000 in 1982 to more than 2 million in 2005. According to an MHLW survey, the job separation rate after employment has also increased. Those who found jobs in 2002 and quit them within three years accounted for 48.6% for senior high school graduates and 34.7% for university graduates (MHLW 2006). Recently, the presence of young people not partaking in education, employment or training, often called “NEETs” in Japan, has been taken up as a new problem. According to the labor force survey, young “NEETs” (non-workforce people ages 15 to 34 who are not involved in domestic work or education) numbered 640,000 in 2005 (MHLW 2006). According to the MEXT basic school survey, the percentage of senior high school and university graduates not in education or employment rose from around 5% in the 1990s to 9.7% for senior high school graduates and 26.8% for university graduates in 2004 (MEXT 2005). As noted by Honda (2005), the changes indicate that the school-to-work transition, or employment through schools, had been smooth in the past, but has become difficult now.

(2) Becoming independent from parents and forming families

A) Becoming independent from parents

(a) Leaving home

According to Suzuki (2002), who computed the median age for leaving the parental home by birth cohort based on the Fourth National Survey on Household Changes by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, or NIPSSR, the median age rose by some three years from 19.3 for cohorts born in the first half of the 1950s to 22.5 for cohorts born in the first half of the 1970s for males and from 21.3 to 24.5 for females.

(b) Economic independence

Nishi and Kan tabulated labor force survey data and found that number of young people (ages 20 to 34) living with parents was notably rising. The unemployment rate for these people stood at 4.1% in 1980 and 9.7% in 2004, higher than 2.5% and 6.8% for the entire age group, indicating that many youths live with their parents because the youths have failed to find jobs that meet their requirements (Nishi and Kan 2005).

B) Family formation

(a) Mating and partnership behavior

The Vital Statistics indicate that the average age for first marriages rose by some four to five years from 25.9 for husbands and 23.0 for wives in 1950 to 30.1 for husbands and 28.3 for wives in 2007. The proportion of those who were never-married in the Population Census (1980 and 2000) stood at 55.1% for males and 24.0% for females between 25 and 29 years old

among people born in the first half of 1950s and at 69.3% for males and 54.0% for females among those born in the first half of the 1970s. In Western countries, cohabitation has increased as a partnership pattern, replacing marriage. According to the Japanese National Fertility Survey by the NIPSSR, the proportion of those who experience cohabitation in Japan is far lower than in Western countries. The survey also indicates that the percentage of youths with any type of opposite-gender partners is also lower in Japan. Since couple formation in Japan is less brisk than in Western countries, Atoh (2000) suggested that an “immature dating culture” was factor in later and fewer marriages in Japan.

Regarding changes in the sexual behavior of youths, six sexual behavior surveys for junior high school, senior high school and university students by the Japanese Association for Sex Education between 1974 and 2005 and other data have generally been interpreted as indicating that ages at first sexual intercourse have fallen. According to Matsuura et al. (2005), who used the survival analysis to compare cumulative sexual intercourse rates in male and female birth cohorts based on a survey on livelihood and awareness of Japanese males and females between 16 and 49 years of age, ages at first sexual intercourse fell for generations born from around 1960 to 1975 but tended to stop falling for younger generations. However, ages have risen for the current young generation. This finding is very interesting in that it suggests that the activation of sexual behavior among young people has been a limited phenomenon and that their sexual behavior has been deactivated over recent years.

(b) Fertility behavior

Cohort cumulative fertility rates, as computed by the NIPSSR based on the Vital Statistics, show that the rate declined from 1.90 for 34-year-old females born in 1935 and 1.23 for those born in 1970. The rate halved from 0.24 for 22-year-old females born in 1935 to 0.11 for those born in 1985 (NIPSSR 2009, p.61). According to NIPSSR estimates based on the Vital Statistics, the mean age of females at first birth rose by nearly four years from 25.11 for mothers who gave birth in 1955 to 28.86 for those who gave birth in 2007. At the same time, we see increasing cases of “shotgun marriages” or premarital pregnancy, a rise in induced abortion rates (Sato et al. 2008) and other changes that cannot be explained by simple delays in marriage and parenthood.

3. Characteristics of changes in the transition to adulthood in Japan

How can the transition to adulthood in today’s Japan be described through a measurement of various events related to the transition? Details cannot be made available as the measurement is still in progress. But we may look at the three tendencies of delay, diversification and increasing atypical cases. “Delay” means delayed timing for key life-course events for the transition and longer life stages before the transition. “Diversification” means widening gaps between individuals. For example, the above Matsuura report is very interesting in that it suggests that the activation of sexual behavior among young people has been a limited phenomenon and that their sexual behavior has been deactivated over recent years. “Increasing atypical cases” means the recent collapse of youth behavior patterns that became typical around the 1970s, including universal marriage, bearing 2 or 3 children during several years after marriage, blanket employment of new graduates, long-term employment and moves in population from rural regions to urban areas. Demographic analyses will be developed in the future to test these theories and propose new hypotheses. As for approaches to research, there are

growing interests in micro approaches, including panel surveys, as well as traditional macro approaches. In this respect, expectations are placed on continuous panel data, including the MHLW 21st-century longitudinal survey of adults.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study, to some extent, depicted the full picture of characteristic changes in the transition to adulthood in Japan over recent years by collecting a variety of reports based on government statistics, nationwide sample surveys and the like and by reviewing past efforts to measure events related to the transition. In summary, we have to pay more attention to the three tendencies of delay, diversification and increasing atypical cases.

Once the transition to adulthood as a demographic process has been measured, the next challenge will be to link the process to other demographic phenomena, or social, economic and cultural phenomena. This may be a matter of concern to many academic disciplines, including health, welfare, education, labor, household budget, business trends, politics, and administration and fiscal policy. This study focuses on the link between the process and low fertility. Since first marriage and first childbearing are key events for family formation and thus elements in the transition to adulthood, as a matter of course, the delay in the transition to adulthood and low fertility represent two sides of the same coin. As the total fertility rate fell to the unprecedentedly low level of 1.26 (2005), the postponement of marriage and parenthood, or the higher age for participation in the reproductive process, has clearly become a decisive factor behind the low fertility. Undoubtedly, the postponement of life-course events, or the delay in the transition to adulthood, has been an important mechanism for the very low fertility.

Attracting attention over recent years, among economic factors behind the postponement, is the relationship between growing non-regular youth employees and other problems in employment/working style, and marriage and fertility trends (see Sakai and Higuchi 2005, Moriizumi 2005, etc.). The youth employment environment is expected to grow even more severe, attracting greater attention as a factor behind the low fertility. Sociologically, the diversification of views toward marriage, inclinations toward personality, risk-avoiding tendencies and the like are attracting attention from such viewpoints as value/discipline, genders, parent-child relationship and family/society systems.

In addition, we are strongly interested in historical and cultural backgrounds. In the distant past, the youth period had been viewed as a training period where abstinence was seen as natural. In Japan after World War II, the so-called youth culture emerged, prompting the public to tolerate premarital sexual intercourse. This has become one of the conditions for later and fewer marriages in present society. Attracting attention as a mechanism for later and fewer marriages is the fact that couple formation in Japan is less brisk than in Western countries, as indicated by lower cohabitation and extramarital parenthood rates (Sato and Beppu 2009). Insights into the widely defined sexuality and its historical and cultural background may be major research challenges in the future. These challenges include international viewpoints leading to cultural comparison between the “Second Demographic Transition” in Western Europe, as advocated by R. Lesthaeghe and D. J. van de Kaa, and the very low fertility in East Asia, including Japan and South Korea.

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