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BEING HAPPY AS A WOMAN

The promise of happiness for middle-class housewives in Japan

Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni

A woman can be beautiful, smart, fashionable, rich, and have a respectable career but nevertheless is considered “*unhappy as a woman*” (*onna toshite shiawase dewa nai*) if she is not married and does not have children [emphasis added].

(Sakai 2003)

The book *The Howl of the Loser Dogs* (*Makeinu no tōboe*) by Junko Sakai published in 2003 soon became a best seller. Its publication has produced a heated debate in Japanese society that seemed eager to adopt the rigid division suggested by the popular writer between single women as “losers” and married women with children as society’s “winners.” As it is clearly articulated by Nakano in her study of those considered “losers” or “loser dogs,” for single women who generally wish to marry and have a family, the primary distinction between winners and losers in Japanese society is whether they have a “regular family” or not (Nakano 2011: 133). In other words, a woman’s happiness in contemporary Japanese society seems to be defined by her access to being part of a “regular family.”

What forms a “regular family” has a clear face to most women—and men—in Japan. The process of the “standardization” of the Japanese family pattern has been widely observed in relation to the postwar economic miracle (Allison 1996; Garon 1997; White 2002). This modern Japanese family or “postwar Japanese family system” (Ochiai 1996) is embodied in a nuclear family consisting of a salaryman husband, a full-time housewife, and their children. By the 1960s, the extent of the ideological force of this family pattern was so striking that it “overwhelmed” all other co-existing lifestyles and older forms in social discourse (Gordon 2000: 287).

The hegemonic status of the idea of “middle-class-ness” as both social experience and self-understanding (Gordon 2002: 116) was described by Ezra Vogel

in his seminal work on the emergence of Japan's new middle class. As Vogel observed in the late 1960s, "for the rest of Japan the people who have been able to become salarymen are symbols of the *akarui seikatsu* (bright new life)" (Vogel [1963] 1991: 71). The idea of *akarui seikatsu*, a bright and happy life, was propagated in the mid-1950s with strong government support. The term, which had widespread impact, was promoted as a symbol and promise of Japan's future (Cwiertka 2006: 159). At the focus of this promise of a good life stood the salaryman and his family. The "bright life" actually implied a "modern" home with middle-class standard of living and "a nuclear family with a housewife at its center" (Partner 1999: 137). The salaryman, who became the symbol of hegemonic masculinity in Japan, thus came to symbolize the ubiquitous "everyman" (Dasgupta 2000; Miller 1995), and the housewife became almost synonymous with womanhood (Ochiai 1996: 35), the middle-class "everywoman."

The women who are the focus of this chapter are the daughters of that generation of women who symbolized the promise of bright life and happiness in postwar Japan. The chapter focuses on the ideas of happiness as they are grasped by middle-class housewives of today's Japan. Naturally, there have been changes in what forms the idea of happiness, certainly with the growing economic bubble and moreover after its burst in the early 1990s. However, as I will show in what follows, the ideas of happiness for contemporary middle-class housewives still are strongly related to the ideas or pursuit of stability. The quest of happiness for middle-class women is thus embodied in marriage as the idea of following a standardized life plan and forming a "standard family."

The sociocultural idea of happiness and its promise

As can be seen from the variety in the chapters in this volume, there are manifold ways to study "happiness." In this chapter I do not intend to try to offer any measurement of happiness (Colson 1962; 2012: 7–8). I do not even attempt to decipher whether the middle-class housewives I studied are happy. Also, albeit suggesting a connection between happiness and marriage, I am not interested here in the women's level of marital happiness (Holthus 2010). My focus is on the *sociocultural idea of what happiness is* or what can hold *the promise of happiness* as seen by the women I studied.

In their ambitious attempt to uncover what anthropology can contribute to the study of well-being or happiness, the volume edited by Mathews and Izquierdo (2009a) explores four main experiential dimensions. The first three are the physical, the interpersonal, and the existential. The fourth dimension, which is Mathews and Izquierdo's (2009b: 261) main addition to the study of happiness, structures all other dimensions. It involves how "national institutions and global forces" shape perceptions, conceptions, and experiences of well-being. What anthropology can offer to the study of happiness is, according to Mathews and Izquierdo, a "sociocultural contextualizing that can enable us to make sense of how people in different societies feel about their lives" (2009b: 259). Mathews

and Izquierdo emphasize conceptions, perceptions, and feelings *about* happiness. In this chapter, I offer my interpretation to this “fourth dimension.” I suggest viewing “happiness” mainly as a cultural construct. As such, “happiness” or the conception of happiness is naturally always deeply embedded in a particular socio-cultural context. As anthropologists we cannot see or observe “happiness;” what we can grasp is what is regarded by the people we study as “happiness” or as that which can make them happy.

The notion of happiness as suggested by Sara Ahmed (2007, 2010) is very useful in this sense. Happiness, Ahmed tells us, operates as “something that is hoped for, creating a political and personal horizon that gives us an image of the good life” (2007: 12). Happiness is “a wish, a will, a want” (2010: 2). Happiness is always associated with some life choices and not others (Ahmed 2010: 2). More than anything, it involves a promise, the promise that if you do this or if you have that, happiness will follow (Ahmed 2007: 12).

Marriage has been widely considered as one of the main social institutions that holds the promise of happiness. Recently it has even received “the imprimatur of hard science” in the new science of happiness that demonstrates a link between marriage and overall life satisfaction (Heather 2007: 53). In these recent studies, as suggested by Heather, the promise of happiness is largely related to the prospect of “normal family life.” It can be thus argued that marriage has gained its position as one of the primary happiness indicators (Ahmed 2010: 6) since it is culturally regarded as the normative or “taken-for-granted” path of life, and because “happiness is expected to reside in certain places, those that approximate the taken-for-granted features of normality” (Ahmed 2007: 9).

Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 166, cited in Mathews 1996: 209–10) emphasized the power of normality with regard to how our social world shapes us to see its structures and the parallel structures of our minds as “natural” rather than as human-made and arbitrary. Gordon Mathews (1996) has observed the power of this taken-for-granted cultural perspective with relation to people’s idea of *ikigai* (what makes life worth living) and more specifically to one’s cultural fate. Comparing the accounts of American and Japanese men and women, Mathews depicted the power of the unconscious “taken-for-granted” in its shaping of the way in which people conceived of or discussed their goals in life. As another contribution to the anthropological study of the pursuits of happiness, Mathews (2009) uses the concept of *ikigai* in a cross-cultural perspective in an attempt to capture the existential dimension of well-being.

In my previous work (Goldstein–Gidoni 2012), I drew attention to the power of normality or taken-for-grantedness (*atarimae*) as related to the way modern Japanese women enter the social role of the full-time housewife upon marriage as part of the normative life plan that they follow as members of society. In the following, I will underline the strong link between the taken-for-granted normative life plan and the idea of happiness as it is conceived by housewives residing in a typical suburban middle-class neighborhood. I will also demonstrate how these concepts of happiness are for the most part shaped by significant

agents of the state. The latter include the strong corporate sector, the media, and the market, which are vigorously involved in producing and endorsing the idea of happiness for women as residing in normative middle-class marriage and in particular in the promotion of the idea of the “happy housewife.” The second part of this chapter relates more closely to the influence of women’s magazines in forming and reproducing notions and images of the socio-cultural idea of “being happy as a woman.”

The women of Royal Heights

Data for this chapter were collected between 2003 and 2011 and in 2013 and 2014 when I went back to the same women to further discuss their idea of happiness (*shiwase*). The majority of the over 50 women involved in this study reside in a typical middle-class neighborhood that I call Royal Heights, a suburban condominium complex (*manshon*) located in the Kansai area and at a convenient commuting distance from central Osaka.

The women who formed the largest age and social group in the neighborhood, and who made up the majority of the interviewees, were born between 1966 and 1970. They were in their 20s during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the last days of the bubble economy. This generation was described as a generation that celebrated the consumer lifestyle. Cultivating so-called individualistic and hedonistic ideas unknown to former generations of women in Japan, they were dubbed the “*Hanako* tribe” (*Hanako zoku*), after a women’s magazine titled *Hanako*, whose advice on fashion, dining, and travel was almost religiously followed by its readers, most of them young women (Pollak 1993). The *Hanakos* were expected to make a change both in women’s lives and in the nature of the Japanese family. However, as lamented by the family sociologist Ochiai Emiko, they broke this promise of social change, as reaching their 30s, “one after the other [they] married, had children and became housewives” (2005: 161).

When women in Royal Heights are asked to define their identity or status, whether it is for formal purposes like surveys or questionnaires or on any other occasion when a self-introduction (*jiko shōkai*) is required, they mostly use the label “*shufu*” (housewife). As suggested by Robin LeBlanc (1999: 28), for the women of suburban Japan, “‘housewife’ is a label for *public* identity.” However, attentive listening to the women’s narratives reveals some other factors that have affected their lives and more particularly their perspectives with regard to their idea of what constitutes a proper housewife, a proper woman, and consequently what can make a woman “happy as a woman.” These include some usually neglected “thin” class differentiations, certain generational gaps, and other structural and personal characteristics. In the following, I will try to make some distinctions among the women I interviewed to give a fuller account of their background and their attitude toward their role as housewives and women.

Model housewives

A “model housewife” (*shufu no kagami*) can be described as a paragon of perfect role performance as a wife and a mother. She is in fact a somewhat modernized version of the “good wife, wise mother,” who emerged in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century and at least until the 1980s epitomized the role of the married woman who devotes herself to taking care of the house and her husband and to raising her children.

Inoue-san¹ is considered such a model housewife. She is married to a university professor and is a mother of two girls, aged eight and nine at the time of interview. She worked as an office lady (OL) at an insurance company after graduating from junior college. Like most of her fellow OL, she quit her job upon marriage. Very similarly to other model housewives, Inoue-san talked about her lifelong yearning to become a housewife:

From a very young age, my dream was to become a cute young wife (*kawaii oyomesan*). It wasn't as though my mother [clearly] told me so, but I was raised in such a family. My mother never worked after graduation. She did her bridal training (*hanayome shūgyō*), without working, and then got married. I was often told this story, so I thought I should follow her. Since I was a child, I was always told, “women should be women, men should be men,” so I just thought this is how things should be.

This same alleged strong yearning to become a housewife seems to characterize other women who are considered model housewives in the neighborhood. In all these cases, the impact of their mothers on cultivating such childhood or adolescence dreams is evident. Sakai-san can be described as one of the prominent second-generation model housewives. She was raised in a model family: her father is a highly dedicated and successful corporate worker, and her mother has always been a perfect wife who followed her husband dutifully in all of his numerous job transfers. In an in-depth interview I conducted with her in 2003, Sakai-san talked about her longtime yearning to become a dedicated full-time housewife just like her mother. Furthermore, she said that she could hardly imagine any different kind of life:

As my father was a salaryman, I could never imagine myself getting married to an owner of a small company or a store, nor with a craftsman. I can hardly imagine how they live.

Wannabes

In a society that has proclaimed itself to be a middle-class one, class distinctions are naturally too “thin” to be observed, let alone acknowledged. Nevertheless, within the context of the mass of narratives of the “standard” middle-class

family background, the protected aristocracy of model housewives was not the only one to stand out. What I term as “wannabe” middle-class narratives were no less intriguing. Take for example two Royal Heights residents, Shibata-san and Yamada-san. Unlike Inoue-san and Sakai-san, neither was in any manner raised in a pampered environment. Yamada-san’s father was in fact not a regular salaryman—he had his own small business, and her mother had to work as his income was irregular. Shibata-san’s father was a salaryman, but he worked for a small company that allowed the family only a relatively meager middle-class lifestyle. In both cases, however, the parents made efforts to produce a middle-class environment or consciousness. Yamada-san recalls how her father always insisted that her mother would quit her job at some point in time, which is very typical of salarymen who wish to create the right middle-class image of the male breadwinner. Shibata-san’s mother was so eager to play the proper role of a housewife that she did not work outside although the family needed the money, and instead she became intensely involved in typical full-time housewives’ activities such as voluntary work and a demanding PTA participation.

Both Shibata-san and Yamada-san married atypically young, in their very early 20s, and they both left home before their marriage. Whereas after marriage both families were lucky enough to purchase an apartment in the comfortable *manshon* of Royal Heights, their husbands’ definition as salarymen seems to relate to those stretches of the term that have come to cover almost any more or less regularly working man, especially in office jobs or in administration.

Unlike model housewives, Yamada-san and Shibata-san do not mention any memory of a yearning (*akogare*) to become a housewife at adolescence; nevertheless, they both convey a rather strong identification with the role of the housewife. Moreover, they hold to a very rigid and patriarchic concept of the division of gender roles.

As we will see later, their views of being happy as a woman differ from those of model housewives as well as from the new generation of housewives soon to be discussed. They cannot accept happiness that comes with consumption and “easy life.” As Yamada-san explains, she cannot tolerate the “*shufu* of these days who have lunches at nice restaurants while their husbands (*otōsan*), who are working so hard, have the cheapest lunches.” Likewise, Shibata-san has a strong aversion toward “new-type housewives,” who forget their proper role of total dedication to house and child rearing, and is particularly disgusted by their latest tendency to “have their nails done.”

The younger generation of “happy housewives”

Some of the women in the neighborhood pronounced “a kind of generation gap” when describing a group of slightly younger mothers, or mothers of younger children, who enjoy themselves much more than most other women did while raising their children. Some of these women in fact formed a “young” group of close friends who met daily and often held joint dinners with the young children or even drinking parties.

These women seem to represent a somewhat novel attitude toward the idea of the “good wife, wise mother,” or even the basic ideal of the housewife. Whereas their life plan appears to have followed a very similar route to that of “regular” housewives, they seem to have never had any clear aspirations to become “model housewives.” However, their position is not a result of any inferiority they may feel toward perfect housewives. This new image of the housewife, who does not necessarily have to be hard working, suffer (*kurō*), or endure (*gaman*), has been defined as the “new orientation of housewives” (*shin sengyō shufu shikō*). This new wife and mother is allowed to enjoy herself, to pursue her own hobbies and interests, and, very importantly, after finding the “right” husband, she knows how to use him and his money to do so (Ogura 2003).

Another “new” characteristic of this group of women is that they tend to talk openly about their interest in shaping their (female) bodies, often in ways once considered right for unmarried women only. Such is Hara-san’s passion for Hawaiian dance. Mori-san once stated even more clearly that she had decided to “shape [her] body” as the preliminary step to reentering society. In her interview, she admits that recently she had been feeling that raising kids, while very significant, was not enough to give her a feeling of self-fulfillment (*tasseikan*). She desires “to have something that [I] can say [I] am good at.” She feels inferior looking at other women around her, especially those appearing in women’s magazines, who seem “so talented.” She has decided that losing weight through diet and working out will be the first step for recovering “my self-confidence” and “recharging myself” on the way to finding something that will give her some new sense of self-fulfillment and a sense of happiness.

A standard life plan as the key for being happy as a woman

Albeit the significant diversity among the women of Royal Heights, as the women narrated their lives and especially as they talked about moving through life stages, one of their striking realizations was the strength of the “natural order of things” (*atarimae*) that governed these transitions. There was no marked distinction between the women on this point. As I further explore in my previous work (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 58–60), for many of the women our conversations about their lives and ideas often provided a rare angle for observing the natural way in which they had made their role transitions in their lives so far, from a student to an office lady (OL) and then from a company employee to a full-time housewife (*sengyō shufu*) upon marriage.

Murakami-san can hardly be described as a model housewife. She insists that she has been always questioning her own abilities and propensity to be a good housewife. She is certainly not the domestic type; she likes being outdoors and active. Similarly to other “new-type” housewives, she enjoys swimming and going to the gym as well as going to lunch with her friends.

Nevertheless, during the interview when she talks about becoming a housewife at marriage she says:

I have never asked myself if it's okay to be always inside the house as a housewife only. My mother was there to guard the house (*ie o mamoru*). I thought it was so natural (*atarimae*) to resign when you get married.

In her illuminating research on pregnant women, Ivry (2010: 138) found that Japanese women who could economically afford to quit their jobs when they were expecting their first child basically saw this act as replacing one full-time job with another. The stories I heard from Royal Heights women strongly support this idea. Moreover, retiring upon marriage or pregnancy did not merely mean an occupational change but surely also signified a transition into a new *social role*. I suggest that this significant transition should be regarded in the context of a general social order that has developed in corporate postwar Japan, in which individuals tend to identify themselves at each life stage with a *single role* that is clearly gendered.

Japanese women's life transitions thus seem to deeply reflect a tendency to follow a carefully written script of a strictly ordered life plan in which each life stage is firmly fixed. This tendency has been described in statistically revealing terms showing that Japanese women's entry into a position both in the educational system and in marriage is carefully timed and typically occurs once in a lifetime (Brinton 1992). In their stories, Royal Heights women gave a very significant role to their parents, especially their mothers, in decisions such as retiring from work upon marriage or during pregnancy with the first child. They also related to the way their employers or more generally their work environment influenced their decision to quit their work upon marriage by often suggesting this as the key for their happiness "as women."

This is how Sakai-san, who is considered by her neighbors and friends to be one of the leading model housewives in Royal Heights, explained how her yearning and dream of becoming a happy full-time housewife was shaped:

Initially, I was planning to take maternity leave [and resume working]. However, even though the company's regulations offered such an option, no one had taken it before. Moreover, it was my first child and my mother strongly objected. She herself was a full-time housewife so she advised me to follow her way for the sake of the child. She said that I should first become a housewife and only after that [the years dedicated for child raising] could I think about what I would like to do next [...]. Then again, I had always longed (*akogare*) to become a housewife, so I retired.

Brinton (1992) highlights the influence of "stakeholders," key adults such as parents and employers in shaping Japanese women's crucial life-course transitions. She describes this pattern as "socially embedded," as compared with the more "self-directed" lives of American women. Significant figures in the educational

system such as teachers seem to also have impact on women's ideas of social roles and consequently their concepts about happiness even in early age. This impact may be more pronounced in the ultra-protective private schooling system that "good families" can offer to their daughters. Yamaguchi-san, whose firm attachment to her *shufu* role was very distinct as she declared that she saw her role as housewife as "number one and anything else is number two," was raised in such a comprehensive private and sheltered schooling system that allows students to matriculate from one school to the next without entrance examinations. When talking about how her concept of social role was shaped, she gave a significant role to the unforgettable words of her schoolmaster, who from junior high school through university strongly taught his female students that they *should* become good mothers (*ii okāsan ni nannasai, ii okāsan ni*). Her determination to become a model housewife and actually her conviction that this would surely bring happiness was accentuated by her mother's advice:

'Ii oyomesan ni natte, ii okāsan ni naru no wa shiawase' [becoming a good wife and a good mother will bring [you] happiness]. All my life, since I was very small, I was [thus] told by my mother, so I accept the idea as *atarimae*, very naturally.

In 2013 I went back to Royal Heights to discuss the idea of happiness (*shiawase*) with the same women whose life I had been following for over a decade. This is how Sakai-san, the model housewife who is cited above with regard to the way her yearning (*akogare*) to become a full-time housewife was shaped, explained her idea of happiness:

[...] but I think that if we have a job and a house we already have everything. It depends on each person how much he or she enjoys life. We got married because we wanted to become happy but besides, we wanted to make our parents content. We also were surrounded by an atmosphere suggesting that "it is better to get married."

Scientific studies of happiness seem to concur that some conditions favor happiness. Unsurprisingly, these general conditions include an economically prosperous background and social and political stability. Following this same rationale, happy persons are more likely to be married, to be part of majority or mainstream normative groups and at the top of the social ladder rather than at the bottom (Veenhoven 1991: 16). Whereas empirical research on happiness, based on the notion that happiness can be measured (Veenhoven 1984, 1988), generally attempts to locate "happy persons," the perspective of cultural studies critically offers a different approach. This critique is eloquently put by Ahmed when she suggests that instead of assuming happiness is simply found in "happy persons," we should see how claims to happiness make certain forms of happiness more valuable than others (2007: 10).

In the following I will further show how the entitlement for happiness is being formed in the lives of middle-class Japanese women. Claims for “normal” happiness are formed not only by following the expected life path, marrying the right husband, and forming a standard family. Focusing on the image of the “happy housewife,” I will relate to the high involvement and impact of social and cultural agents and agencies in determining how some forms of happiness for women are more valuable than others. Special focus will be put on women’s magazines that play a significant role in women’s lives.

The emergence of the new “happy housewife”

As was already observed by Betty Friedan in her study of American housewives in the late 1950s, the market, the mass media, and especially women’s magazines have great impact on carving the “right” female image and role ([1963] 2001: 34). Women’s magazines form a large part of the Japanese print media. From early in the twentieth century, the massive publishing industry found women of all ages a good target. Studies of these magazines have revealed their vast and varied impact on women’s lives. They influence women’s consumption habits and play a significant role in the formation of women’s identities and the cultivation of ideas of self-fulfillment (Assmann 2003; Sato 2003; Skov and Moeran 1995).

Women’s magazines, especially *Very* and *Story*, which aim at women in their 30s and 40s, respectively, seemed to be very popular in Royal Heights. Some of the most enthusiastic readers went as far as to take the promise offered in those magazines as something to cherish and follow. Kudoh-san, who always made an extra effort to look fashionable and stylish even though she was not working outside the house, carried with her in her purse the embodiment of her idea of a perfect and happy housewife in the form of a scrap from an article that appeared in *Very* a few years earlier. The woman portrayed in the magazine piece, she said, was an “ordinary housewife,” who, however, never neglected doing her makeup and her nails. She also took French lessons as she sometimes accompanied her husband on his business trips to Paris. “I cherish this scrap,” Kudoh-san said, “as [this housewife] was so stunning (*suteki*), and moreover she looked so *totally happy* preparing good food for her husband.”

Nancy Rosenberger (1996: 22–23) describes Japanese magazines targeting married women with children in the early 1990s as purposely de-emphasizing sexual attractiveness and international sophistication. Unlike those bygone publications, new ones for young married women with children, such as *Very* and *Story*, are replete with images of fashionable and attractive housewives. These women are not only exhorted to polish and paint their nails and to wear fashionable clothes, but often are also presented outdoors in the setting of the urban consumer scene, and hence are not restricted like housewives of the previous decade to finding their freedom and individuality within the home.

The changing cultural concept of happiness of Japanese housewives seems to have been largely related to the emergence of a new type of “happy housewives”

as depicted in popular women's magazines. The changing point coincided with the launch of a new type of women's magazines in the mid-1990s. As observed by Ishizaki (2004), these magazines not only created a new type of housewife but also new ways for being a "happy (*kōfuku na*) full-time housewife." As Ishizaki clearly demonstrates, the magazine industry made this clever shift by using the format of young women's fashion magazines to target housewives.

Ishizaki (2004) provides an illuminating and detailed account of the gradual change in the image of the housewife as portrayed in women's magazines. She focuses on *Very*, a women's magazine that from its first issue in 1995 addressed housewives using the format of *JJ*, a popular fashion magazine for young women. Unlike the disappearing practical housewives' magazines, *Very*, targeting mainly women in their 30s, offered its housewife readers the image of a "maiden" (*shōjo*) and a fashionable housewife by using imaging and vocabulary previously closely identified solely with young unmarried women, including "cute" (*kawaii*) or "sweet" (*amai*) clothes. It also began applying the language of self-fulfillment and the pursuit of happiness through fashion and hobbies with regard to housewives.

By ascribing youth, cuteness, fashion, and self-enjoyment to housewives, *Very* seemed to have done something previously atypical of women's magazines in blurring age and social-role differentiation. However, at the same time, this shift in the housewife image can be regarded as the creation of yet another new "tribe," the tribe of happy and fashionable housewives. The latter can be explained in terms of the tendency of media and advertising people that developed in the hyper-consuming bubble years to invent age and social categories for easier targeting of fairly discrete groups, whose members can be made to think of themselves in a certain way (Clammer 1997: 10–11). This same spirit of the new happy housewife was carried over later on to other new magazines: *Story*, a magazine for women in their 40s, launched in 2002, and *Hers*, a "lifestyle magazine" targeting women in their 40s and 50s, launched in 2008. All are issued by the same publishing house, Kobunsha.

The new image bestowed on housewives since the mid-1990s has thus carried with it also new ideas of happiness. Many of these ideas, as we will shortly see, are related to the joy of consumption. The relationship between consumption and cultural ideas and ideals of happiness has been observed as related to our contemporary world at large. This should not be surprising against the background of global trends in which "the mantra of 'consumption equals happiness' is fabricated and fed to individuals from birth to death" (Johnston, quoted in Johnston et al. 2012: 15).

Consuming the promise of happiness

The first generation of proper postwar housewives was not expected to paint their nails (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 123). Instead, they were expected to endure and be hard working and to improve their inner beauty. This kind of beauty, which conservative social critics still esteem and wish to restore (Hayashi 1998),

was often related to a “proper Japanese spirit” characterized by internal strength and stamina. This is no longer the case. As was stated by another very perceptive Royal Heights resident: “For our mothers’ generation, endurance (*gaman*) was considered a virtue. A woman was expected to endure, as if it were Japanese culture. Nowadays a woman like that is no longer considered attractive (*suteki*).”

Whereas magazines for housewives even as late as the early 1990s were described as purposely promoting “Japanese femininity,” or the image of the “good wife, wise mother” (Moeran 1995: 118), magazines from the mid-1990s and especially since 2000 are replete with images of fashionable and attractive housewives. This new kind of femininity is not restricted to the improvement of looks and style but has been increasingly connected with the pursuit of happiness for women and their families. Take for example Yamamoto Rikako, one of those women who “cannot stop being cool mothers” (*kakkoi okāsan wa tomaranai*), presented by *Very* (December 2007: 42–43). Rikako, 34, is a former airline stewardess and a full-time housewife “struggling” to raise four children, but nevertheless, she declares, “As a woman [I] always want to be pretty.” Rikako, who never neglects doing her hair and makeup even on busy mornings, is lucky to have three daughters whom she feels obliged to teach about girls’ femininity (*onna no ko rashisa*). Rikako shares with the readers her unique precious moments of pure happiness. These occur especially in the morning time when she nicely braids her daughters’ hair. Rikako sometimes dresses up neatly when engaged in activities with her kids, and she even enjoys coordinating colors and sharing smart dressing (*oshare*) with her eldest daughter when they go together to a hula dance class. Nevertheless, she saves her special hairstyles and dresses exclusively for the special happy occasions when she and her husband—“just the two of us”—go out to dine.

The idea that a wife and mother should be attractive to her husband is one of the most striking recent ideas promoted by women’s magazines. Until at least the mid-1990s, sexuality seemed “not to be an issue” for readers of popular housewives’ magazines, in terms of their own self-image or in the way they related to their husbands (Moeran 1995: 117–18). Conversely, new magazines encourage housewives to smarten up before collecting their husbands at the train station on a rainy day and to dress fashionably when they go out to dine with them. Their own and their daughters’ new fashionable femininity and smiling faces are said not only to raise their own prospects to become happy as women, but they are also encouraged as the ultimate cure and indeed a prescription for happiness for their hardworking and exhausted husbands:

A sudden rain shower; it’s the same train station as always, but today I will go to greet [my husband] dressed more fashionably and beautifully than usual. [...] What could make him [my husband] happier than getting off the crowded and exhausting train and seeing the smiling face of his daughter, fashionably dressed waiting for him? And the truth is, I also wanted [to come and] show off my newly bought fashionable high boots.

(*Story* August 2009: 27)

So says the chic reader model, photographed with her cutely dressed daughter. The August 2009 issue of *Story* dedicated several pages to a number of short episodes from the lives of “real” wives and mothers. The stories, which are accompanied by full-page pictures of the women posing with a range of fashionable items (with the details of prices and where they can be purchased), allow a glimpse at the new idea of the pursuit of happiness of middle-class urban families.

The new-style magazines for housewives in their 30s and 40s urge them to stay “cute” (*kawaii*), a quality formerly related only to young, not yet married women. “It doesn’t matter how old you are. For women, the best compliment is being ‘cute’ (*kawaii*). That is why when [a woman] enters her 40s, more than her 20s or 30s, [she] likes cute clothing, so that the romance will not end” (*Story* June 2006: 77). One of the main aims of being a “cute adult,” however, is the discovery of new means for happiness that will be nourished by self-love. As was declared in *Story* “We announce a plan for ‘In five years I will still love myself’” (*Happyō shimasu: “Gonengo mo I love Jibun” keikaku*) (December 2007: cover page). Women are thus encouraged to consume and be happy as wives and mothers. The feminist Ogura Chikako describes *Story*’s concept as a “trap.” The magazine makes the “*Story* generation” of readers, namely women who have been living as cooperative wives and mothers, now believe that the time has come for them to start living independently, looking for “their own selves” (*jibun*). “Falling into the magazine’s trap,” they naively believe that they really can begin pursuing an independent and joyful lifestyle (Ogura 2003: 83). The alleged stylish independence offered to those housewives who can economically afford it can indeed be regarded as a kind of a “trap.” I suggest that this is the trap of the promise of happiness. However, being entrapped in the promise that lies in fashion and consumption does not necessarily imply that the old and more common path for happiness for housewives, that which remains in the confines of the safe home, had to be extinguished. On the contrary, the joy of domesticity has had a conspicuous revival as it has gained a new fashionable aura.

The joy of female domesticity

I have always done my housekeeping job fully, polishing each and every window, but we shouldn’t perform such duties feeling it is an obligation. When you have your window polished, you can enjoy the sunlight, or even on rainy days, you feel like looking outside through a well-polished window. [On the contrary,] if you leave the window dirty, you never feel like looking outside. I believe that if you live that way [neglecting cleaning], you cannot fully enjoy your life. You are wasting your life.

(Kurihara Harumi, interview, November 2007)

Despite her insistence that she is only a “simple housewife” (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 147–51; Newcomb 1997) who made a comeback into society after dedicating many years of her life to child raising and the home, Kurihara Harumi is in fact largely considered as “Japan’s Martha Stewart” and is undoubtedly the most

renowned of Japan's "charisma housewives" (*karisuma shufu*), a rather recent media invention of female idols who are leading figures of the housekeeping world. No wonder Kurihara was dubbed by the *New York Times* the "Empress of Domesticity" (Moskin 2006). Not only has she built a business empire in the field of cooking and lifestyle, she also insists on delivering the message of the joy of domesticity. The joy of polishing the living room windows while feeling the "warmth of the sunshine filling the room" (Kurihara 1999: 34) is an example of such ideas that Kurihara, though ever intimate, never preachy, nevertheless repeats in every one of her public presentations, including the so-called "private meeting" I had with her in 2007.

"Female domesticity is fun" is one of the main messages Kurihara delivers to women of the 2000s. *Mō hitotsu no okurimono: Ie no naka ni mo tanoshii koto ippai* (One more gift: In the house too there are plenty of fun things [to do]) is the title of one of Kurihara's successful books, or one of the "gifts" she has bestowed on Japanese women (Kurihara 1999). Like her numerous other books, this one is a blend of allegedly intimate accounts of scenes from her own private domestic family life, such as a quasi-poetic description of her family's house cats (title: "Just being with them makes us happy, our house cats") and tips about household management, and the like, all interwoven with Kurihara's ideologies or truths about the joy of female domesticity.

Like many women in Japan, Royal Heights women are great fans of Kurihara. Her vast popularity can be partially explained by her relative accessibility. As one of her Royal Heights fans explained, her easygoing ways and simple recipes are what make a housewife "self-confident." Others also related to her extremely simple and down-to-earth behavior, noting how "she is always smiling and has an air of happiness around her."

The message of domestic pleasure seems to be catchier (and in fact usually also cheaper to achieve) than the happiness that lies in shopping for elegance offered by women's magazines as described above. Allegedly, there is no need to do the extra step "back into society" after the years spent at home dedicated to child raising. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that Kurihara is falling behind the trends that produce and promote the new happy (and happily consuming) housewife.

"I like creating things that make women smile," said Kurihara in an interview in November 2007. Admitting that the life of *shufu* has a tendency to become "boring and full of routine," Kurihara went on to relate how she had always tried to design products that would make the life of housewives enjoyable and thus meaningful. Aprons are regarded as one of the leading designer wares in her line of products. A full section in her shops is dedicated to aprons, just as it is on her official website, which chose to use a quote from the "priestess herself" to explain the significance of aprons:

[Kurihara] Harumi says "When I tighten an apron, I feel that I am ready to work. I would like to enjoy cooking and housework, dressed fashionably. A nice apron does something to create an opportunity to enjoy daily life."²

Just like Kurihara's adherence to traditional values, her sense of elegance and fashion is also highly admired. In fact, one of the secrets of her success can be found in her unique ability to combine old and new. On the one hand, she is esteemed for her adherence to traditional values as she is regarded as "respectful to her own aging parents and to [Japanese] tradition," as another one of her admirers explained. But, on the other hand, this does not deny or replace Kurihara's keen eye to current trends.

Through her commercial empire of feminine domesticity, Kurihara Harumi sells both material and non-material products, beautifully adorned in the latest fashionable attire, that in fact produce, or rather reproduce, old patriarchal family values and conservative divisions of gender roles. Using the power of "traditional Japanese" values, Kurihara's unique promise of the joy of domesticity seems to carry with it deeper meanings and in fact it involves a larger promise of happiness and "Japanese-style" harmony (*wa*).

The expression *sengyō shufu* might give foreigners the impression that we [Japanese women] are bound by our obligations, but I believe it is in fact the opposite. The housewife holds the power to make the family stick together. Some housewives may complain that they are working so hard with no one really appreciating their great contribution. However, I keep on working hard, believing that one day they [my husband and children] will understand the value of my existence. I believe that it is the mother, and not the father, who actually creates the family's peace and harmony (*wa*).

(Kurihara Harumi, interview, November 2007)

Finally, the promise of happiness is surely vital in a time of crisis. Kurihara's message to women on the heels of the 2011 triple disaster in Northern Japan was revealing in this sense. Coming as a savior, her post-disaster basket was full not only with easy recipes carrying names such as "joyful salad plate" and "relieving potatoes." It was in fact also full with national images such as the vital "mother's smile" that will bring harmony (*wa*) not only to her own family but also to Japan at large (*Harumi Magazine* June 2011).

Conclusion

The renewed image of "the happy housewife" is surely not a Japanese invention. Sara Ahmed (2010: 52–53) describes a new generation of bloggers who take up this new identity. Very much like women's magazines, websites, and blogs in Japan, these English-speaking blogs typically include recipes, tips on doing housework, and belief statements that register the happy housewife as an important social role and duty. In the Western case as described by Ahmed, this role and duty must be defended, as with the fall of domesticity (Matthews 1987) housewives have become a minority. As explained above (see also Goldstein-Gidoni 2012), housewives in Japan have not become minority subjects. Moreover,

the promoters of the image of the “happy housewife” in Japan are less bound to present counterclaims against feminist claims. Nonetheless, there is a striking similarity between the two cases with their claim that the housewife’s “*duty is to generate happiness by the very act of embracing this image*” [emphasis in the original] (Ahmed 2010: 53).

This chapter offers my own reading of the “fourth dimension” of happiness as suggested in the work on happiness by Mathews and Izquierdo (2009b). My focus here is on happiness as a socio-cultural idea and on the way people in a specific cultural context *conceive* happiness. The chapter suggests that the cultural idea of happiness or the idea of what forms the promise of happiness is closely related to leading an expected and normative lifestyle and life plan. Following Mathews and Izquierdo’s lead, which suggests we look at the power of national and global forces as shaping perceptions of happiness, this chapter aimed at showing the high involvement of social and cultural agents in the formation of this promise of happiness. For the women, it seems not to be enough to follow the right path and marry (right). Marriage as a common indicator for happiness seemed a good starting point from which cultural agents like women’s magazines and domesticity sages and mentors suggest or rather reaffirm “if you do this or if you have that, then happiness will follow” (Ahmed 2007: 12).

Japanese women’s magazines provide not only details and information, they also often tell their readers what to do and what not to do (Tanaka 1998). Magazines and other mentors provide their followers with “happiness scripts,” a kind of set of instructions for what they must do in order to be happy. Certainly, the majority of those who read the magazines and follow charisma housewives like Kurihara Harumi will never reach the same level of success in their redebuts into society after child raising as the celebrities presented in the media. Chances are that the magazine readers would have to be content with dull occupations such as supermarket cashiers or other manual low-paid jobs like most women in Royal Heights, excluding the few most fortunate ones with the most “right” husbands. Moreover, the recent cracks in what was formerly experienced as a stable and secure system have obviously strengthened not only feelings of insecurity but also some kind of class awareness. However, this does not really harm the status of magazine idols and role models whom other women admire and dream of emulating.

Moreover, as Janice Winship rightly suggests in her critique of women’s magazines, reality does not harm the fantasies these magazines sell to their readers. Readers are often aware that the visual and verbal representations are first and foremost fantasies for the sake of pleasure or “instant satisfaction” rather than for practical action (Winship 1983: 55). As I demonstrated in this chapter, women’s magazines and other forms of media not only reaffirm what constitutes a “woman” (Winship 1983: 38), but also what constitutes a “happy woman.”

Suggesting “happiness” as a cultural construct as I have done in this chapter obviously implies that the idea of what constitutes happiness is bound to gain new meanings with changing social conditions. The scripts for happiness offered to

the younger generation of housewives differ from those that were bestowed upon the former generation of hardworking housewives. The new happy housewife is allowed and often even encouraged to enjoy life through fashion and consumption. However, as we could clearly see through the example of the wisdom and advice given by Kurihara, who may be dubbed the epitome of the “happy model housewife,” even those of the younger generation of joyful housewives are constantly reminded that the greatest joy is indeed the joy of domesticity. Being happy as women, or wearing the “mother’s smile,” they are advised would finally bring happiness and harmony not only to their families but to Japanese society at large.

Notes

- 1 All names are pseudonyms.
- 2 “Yutori no kūkan,” Harumi Kurihara official website. <http://www.yutori.co.jp/en/products/index.html>. Retrieved March 29, 2015.

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