



Power, Intimacy, and Irregular Employment in Japan

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Shimizu, a twenty-nine-year-old man, takes a sip of his coffee and pauses. We have been talking about intimate relationships and work, and he feels sure that his unstable employment situation is making it difficult for him to create and maintain a meaningful intimate relationship: “I’m single at the moment,” he says. “To be honest, I would like to be in a serious relationship. If I was working in a full-time [*seishain*] job, then I think maybe I would be. Many of my friends from high school are now marrying, but at the moment I’m not a good catch. I don’t earn much, and my job isn’t stable. . . . I can’t offer much.”

Not being able to offer much is a common concern among men in their late twenties working in irregular jobs. Although characterized as largely a female space in the postwar period, since 1990 the number of men working in the irregular employment sector has risen from 8.8 to 29.8 percent in 2013 (Abe 2008; MIAC 2013a).¹ Such employment now constitutes approximately 35.2 percent of the employment market, up from around 18 percent in 1990 (*ibid.*). The increase of men in this sector is having ramifications not just on life chances and future earnings, but also in the intimate sphere and on opportunities to create long-term intimate relationships.² Examining marriage rates of men in their twenties and thirties, a Cabinet Office (2011) survey reported that just 12.1 percent of men in part-time and temporary work were married, compared to 47.6 percent of full-time employees.³ Research has suggested that male irregular workers are considered undesirable marital partners because of their limited earning potential and because doing such work is understood to signify a potentially weak character with a tendency to not take responsibility for oneself and others,

endure difficult situations, or try one's best without quitting (Cook 2014, 2016; Honda 2002).

The difficulties of irregular workers in getting married are part of changing marriage trends in which delayed marriage is increasingly the norm. One reason given for this trend is that men and women now have different expectations of marital relationships. For example, Sandberg (2010) has argued that women's understandings of marriage in Japan have shifted from a social duty linked with adult status to a prioritization on feelings of attachment, intimacy, emotional closeness, cooperation, and mutual understanding (see also Nemoto 2008; Tokuhiko 2010). In contrast, male expectations have remained more traditional, with many men continuing to expect women to take primary responsibility for the domestic sphere (Nagase 2006).

Despite women's increased emphasis on companionate ideals, practical matters relating to the division of household labor and finances continue to factor into relationship choices and how relationships play out (Cook 2014; Tsuya and Bumpass 2004). The undesirability of marriage to a male irregular worker is linked to the structural constraints that women experience in the workplace. Japan has one of the largest gender wage gaps, almost twice the OECD average, at 25.7 percent as of 2017 (OECD 2017).⁴ Given that women constitute approximately 70 percent of the irregular employment sector (MIAC 2013a), their low wages, combined with a general expectation that many women will stop working for a time to raise children, shape women's life chances, especially those who work in part-time jobs or non-career-track positions.⁵ Because of these constraints on female employment and wage earning, the financial security of potential husbands remains an important measure for marriageability. Thus the general expectation that men should be (or be able to be) primary breadwinners within a household, as well as meet the emotionally intimate criteria outlined above, continues to pervade gendered understandings and possibilities of the marital contract.

These ideas not only reinforce a gendered employment sphere, but also reinforce the primacy of the heteronormative necessity for marriage to consist of specific roles that men and women expect (and are expected) to occupy. The precariousness of the irregular labor market, however, does not easily allow men to demonstrate their ability to fulfill such expected roles to potential marriage partners. Although precarity can be understood in terms of economic vulnerability, Vij (2013) has rightly argued that the condition of precarity is much more than that. She frames it as "the loss of mastery entailed by the movement of men from once secure to insecure work that mobilizes an affective-political turn under the sign of precarity"

(ibid., 122). Vij's focus is primarily on precarity's emancipatory potential in Japan, specifically for feminism, and she argues that within this process of lost mastery precarity "potentially enables the undoing of attachments to gendered social identities and the emergence of nomadic subjectivities" (ibid.). While acknowledging the potential for the transformation of intimate practices and gendered identities under conditions of precarity, I argue that such a process of "undoing attachments," of letting go of structural social identities, is neither easy nor—in many cases—desired. With a loss of male mastery, precarity also engenders significant shifts in power within intimate relationships. The presence—or absence—of such a desire to let go thus significantly shapes the possibilities, practices, and experiences of intimate relationships under conditions of precariousness.

This chapter examines the ways in which intimacy is enacted within the relationships of men who work in irregular jobs and how irregular work shapes gender roles, intimate practices, and power within their relationships. The strong social emphasis on taking particular gendered roles in intimate relationships throws up tensions when individuals find that, in practice, it is not possible for these ideals to be played out.⁶ Although this situation can therefore provide space in which gendered ideals and practices become transformed, as Vij (2013) envisions, this is often simultaneously jarring and deeply uncomfortable for the people involved—especially when it is not desired. Instead of embracing potential changes, individuals try to find ways to redress the (ideal, normative) balance, with ramifications for intimate relations and practices.⁷ I argue that although irregular employment potentially offers the opportunity to undo attachments and create new gendered social identities and nomadic subjectivities, for many men in practice it doesn't. Instead, they have a sense of failure about their inability to live up to the marital ideals embedded in mainstream understandings of manhood (see also Cook 2013; Miles, this volume). Without a desire and commitment to transcend normative ideals of gender or to undo attachments, the effects of precarity and irregular employment on intimacy may be more conflicted and potentially damaging than liberating to intimacy and intimate practices within relationships.

In this chapter, these issues are primarily analyzed through a 2008 documentary film, *Japan: A Story of Love and Hate*, which documents, and puts at its center, an intimate heterosexual relationship within the context of irregular employment and precarity. Issues of power, masculinity, normative gender roles, and the desires and limits of intimacy emerge as key themes for exploration within the documentary. The analysis in this chapter is also informed by, and draws on, long-term ethnographic research I carried out since 2007 with men who work in jobs defined as part-time.

The data presented in this chapter focus only on men in established non-marital relationships; however, for a discussion of intimate relationships of irregular workers who are married see Cook (2014, 2016, 2017).

JAPAN: A STORY OF LOVE AND HATE (2008)

The documentary opens with the British documentary maker running along a river, panting out his frustrations that after two years he had been unable to complete a documentary about “what makes Japan tick.” Originally commissioned to make a documentary about Tokyo for the NHK and BBC, he struggled to find people willing to participate. In the end, after meeting a fifty-six-year-old man named Naoki, he abandoned filming in Tokyo and moved to Yamagata to follow Naoki’s life. This was his “last attempt at getting inside Japan,” provided by a man who had “broken all the rules.”

The documentary revolves around Naoki’s work and personal life. A radical Communist and student protester in his youth, he became a successful businessman running a bar, which was just one of three family businesses. However, because of the prolonged recession since the 1990s, his successes ended with bankruptcy. He had also been married and divorced three times. In 2008, estranged from his only family left in the city, Naoki worked part time in the insurance section of Japan Post, collecting insurance premiums for ¥800 an hour.

Naoki met Yoshie, his long-term girlfriend who was half his age, when he owned the bar. After losing the business, Naoki moved in with Yoshie, and to cover their expenses she took a second job. By day she works in an office, and in the evening she works as a hostess.⁸ Since she started her second job they typically have about an hour to spend together in the evening, which they usually spent napping. Yoshie wants Naoki to get a second job, and it is never expressed clearly in the documentary why he doesn’t; the film leaves unexplored whether he is unable to find extra work because of his age or if it is a form of resistance to a capitalist system that he intensely dislikes.

The documentary deals with individual repercussions of prolonged recession, experiences of being working poor, the difficulties of making ends meet without access to social welfare, and the effects these conditions have on mental health and intimate relationships. Throughout the documentary it is clear that the director and Naoki have become good friends. This works in the film’s favor, leading to direct conversations about the situation of the working poor in Japan and the realities of Naoki’s life.

However, the director's tendency to assert his own cultural expectations—for example, with regard to workplace relations and practices and to intimacy and physical contact—often provide viewers with an overly simplistic view. Such a view reinforces stereotypes that Japanese social life is somewhat incomprehensible and that the working environment is “crazy” without exploring in depth the multiple structural-economic reasons for the current situation. Despite these limitations, it is a gritty portrayal of living on the breadline in Japan, and the conversations and interactions between Naoki and Yoshie are a rich resource for analysis. They reveal a complex interplay of power in their relationship that is clearly linked to their socioeconomic situations and understandings of normative expectations of gender roles.⁹

INTIMACY, EMPLOYMENT, AND POWER

Quietly smoking a cigarette and resolutely watching television, Naoki asks Yoshie if he can borrow ¥1,000 (\$10). Yoshie grumbles quietly, gets up, finds her wallet, fishes out the money, and hands it over. Once she sits back down, she looks at the floor. “It’s very dirty in here,” she says. Naoki puts his cigarette down, grimaces sheepishly at the director, picks up a sticky roller, and begins to clean the rug as Yoshie looks on.

Money and housework have become hotspots for Naoki's and Yoshie's gendered power struggles. Naoki does all the housework, taking on what has typically been a female responsibility, in an attempt to make up for his low earnings.¹⁰ Yoshie's role as the primary breadwinner, earning double Naoki's yearly wage, has affected their intimate relationship in important ways by creating a balance of power that goes against normative expectations and is—crucially—unwanted by both Yoshie and Naoki. A number of themes are apparent throughout the documentary: communication problems, powerlessness and impotency, gender role reversal, poverty, and the fear of homelessness. Throughout runs the narrative of Naoki's irregular work status.

It is pertinent here to reflect briefly on what is meant by “power” in the context of this chapter. In feminist theory there have been generally three ways of understanding the issue of power: power as domination (or subjection/oppression, understood as power over someone or something); power as a resource to be redistributed; and power as empowerment (Allen 2011). In the latter articulation, it is argued that power is an ability or a capacity. Layder, in his work on intimacy and power, expresses the sense of capacity in the following way:

In a general sense, power is an abstract *capacity*; it is not a particular kind of behaviour or an outcome of that behaviour. That is, power is about the *ability* to do things, transform circumstances or bring about change. Thus, power and control may be in the service of either benign or malign intentions, and their behavioural consequences. In this sense benign forms of power and control are essential to the capacity for love and for the caring responses that go with it. (2009, 19; emphasis in original)

While power is a capacity, an ability to do things, not all people feel they have power or the capacity to use power. They may feel significantly disempowered and powerless. The political theorist Mark Haugaard offers a helpful way to understand this. Drawing on Wittgenstein's idea of a "family resemblance," he argues that power should be understood to consist of "a cluster of concepts, each of which qualifies as 'power'" (2010, 420).¹¹ He points to a number of different aspects:

Episodic power refers to the exercise of power that is linked to agency. *Dispositional power* signifies the inherent capacities of an agent that the agent may have, irrespective of whether or not they exercise this capacity. *Systemic power* refers to the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring possibilities for action. (Ibid., 425; emphasis in original)

Haugaard also argues that power may take the following forms: power over, power to, domination, empowerment, and legitimate power. However, he doesn't argue that consequently "anything goes," but instead highlights how these different manifestations of power may be drawn upon, used, and rejected by the signifier and referent at different times and in different ways. In this chapter I build from Haugaard's conceptualization of power to explore how individuals within intimate relationships draw on different types of power as they negotiate personal values, desires, and structural conditions. Acknowledging the complex ways in which power may be present in interactions frees us from looking for the "best" definition and instead allows us to analyze the various manifestations of power that can occur within intimate relationships.

WORK, IMPOTENCE, AND POWERLESSNESS

A dominant tension that runs through Naoki and Yoshie's relationship relates to their employment situations. Yoshie appears exhausted and frustrated at Naoki's lack of earnings. Naoki, meanwhile, finds Yoshie's job at a hostess bar particularly threatening:

NAOKI: Her customers believe she is single. So every night, every day, they invite her out, propose to go on a date.

DIRECTOR: But they just want to talk, just want to eat; they don't want anything else, or do they want . . . ?

NAOKI (interrupting): Yes, they just want to talk and eat and sing a song together.

DIRECTOR: Nothing else?

NAOKI: Nothing else.

DIRECTOR: No kissing?

Yoshie shakes her head in the negative, and Naoki continues: "No kissing. Sometimes they touch." Yoshie, with lips pursed, shakes her head more vehemently, and Naoki turns to Yoshie and asks if they kiss; again she shakes her head and responds negatively. Naoki goes on, "Her boss suggests to her, like this [he mimes pressing his legs together]. This is so polite." Yoshie interjects by clapping her hands and exclaiming, "Waa, sugoi! Nandemo homenai to," and Naoki translates it into English: "You have to compliment the customer for everything," and they both laugh as if it is ridiculous.

The scene cuts to Yoshie applying makeup in preparation to go to her second job. "Are you happy?" the director asks. Yoshie responds that she is too busy to think about if she is happy or not, but she enjoys her second job more because she feels like a woman: she must praise anything men say, but in turn she is treated to meals and given attention. In her office job, however, she feels like a robot. For Yoshie, feeling like a woman is tied into ideas of emotional labor and gendered interactions with men (Hochschild and Machung 2012). It is clear throughout the documentary, however, that the energy she has to do such emotional labor is exhausted by the time she returns home. Naoki continues: "Every night, every day, it's work, work, work to get money. It's poverty, our level. Yoshie works fifteeen [he draws the word out] . . . hours a day. . . . It's capitalism." Yoshie rejoins: "Today, I want to sleep, really. But now I have to go to work." Although she feels more "womanly" in her second job, she is tired and reluctant to go. The tension it causes in their relationship is apparent when on another occasion Yoshie says, "I have to go to the sushi shop. He says, 'I envy you,'" and she laughs quietly but incredulously and shakes her head slightly.¹² In contrast, Naoki worries about whether she will come home or if she'll meet someone else. This concern is not only because of the financial situation in which they find themselves, but also because it relates to issues they have with physical intimacy.

Since Naoki lost his bar and began working part time, he and Yoshie have struggled with the shift in dynamic in their relationship, both emotionally and physically. Naoki turns to the camera: "These days I have no sex [he shrugs]. It doesn't work. [He and Yoshie laugh slightly.] It's broken. I have depression. It doesn't work, my baby [referring to his penis and laughing sadly]." The director asks Yoshie if it is difficult for her, given her young age. Looking at Naoki, she responds: "Even if I'm young, there are times when people don't need sex." Naoki continues: "If I had a more stable life, I could have sex, maybe. She's young. But I'm afraid. She loves me, but sometimes she needs a friend who can have sex. I'm afraid. I worry about her having a new boyfriend."

Although Naoki's narrative here suggests mostly that the loss of his business and ensuing depression caused his sexual impotence, his fear that Yoshie will leave him for another man—perhaps someone she could meet at her second job, a man with the money to go to such bars—feeds his feelings of impotence. Naoki was also concerned that they were not communicating well and that she would eventually leave him. Yoshie, meanwhile, seemed unable to provide the kind of emotional support for which Naoki expressed a need:

NAOKI: My life, when I had a wife, I talked, talked, talked. . . . Yoshie dislikes talking. She told me, "You're noisy; shut up [*urusai*]. . . . I love talking."

DIRECTOR: Why is she with you, do you think?

NAOKI: I don't know. I am sure it's not my speaking. Maybe I'm useful. Maybe she loves me. But she cannot allow me my [small] income. Every day it causes stress and struggle.

DIRECTOR: Does she blame you?

NAOKI: Yes, she drinks too much every day. She . . . is tired. Maybe tonight, after drinking, she will strongly express her true mind.

The scene shifts to a bar after work where Naoki and Yoshie are sitting talking. Holding some peanuts, Yoshie drunkenly tells Naoki to "open up" his mouth so she can feed him:

NAOKI: I'm not your client.

YOSHIE: Just open up.

NAOKI (forcefully): I'm not your client!

YOSHIE: No, you're not. No, you're not. My clients are easier to handle.

NAOKI (frowning): I have no money, but I do have pride. . . .

YOSHIE: I don't have clients like you who have no money. . . . [She turns to the director.] Always, always, always the same. He has nowhere else to go. [She turns back to Naoki.] Where's your home then?

NAOKI (looking hurt and upset): Do you think it's funny to tease someone?

YOSHIE: No, but you started it.

NAOKI: You're blaming me again.

YOSHIE: No, I'm not. [She throws some peanuts around and toward Naoki's beer glass.]

NAOKI: Who's going to clear that up?

YOSHIE: You. . . . Where do you work then? What kind of job have you got then?

NAOKI: Shut up!

YOSHIE: You're so annoying. [She starts to grab his collar and pushes him. Naoki grabs her around the throat and shoves her back.]

NAOKI: Stop it. Just stop it! You're being rude!

YOSHIE: No, you're the rude one.

NAOKI: Why are you doing this?

YOSHIE: Oh, forget it. [She takes up Naoki's glasses and says:] Look what I can do. I can crush it to bits. See what I can do? I always have to pay for him. [She starts to cry.] Always, always, always, always I am paying. I'm working so hard, and I never have any money. No matter how hard I work. I give him ¥1,000 a day. [She laughs slightly through her tears.] That's the way it is.

They get home, and Naoki helps Yoshie get into bed fully dressed and covers her gently with the duvet. A few weeks later things have gotten worse. Naoki says, "I've stopped talking with Yoshie because I'm afraid she'll retaliate. She has a place to run away: her hometown. I have nowhere, just here. Or if she decides to fuck me away, I have to go. . . . On the road maybe [homeless]. I couldn't borrow. No bank, no friend, no home. So this is a way to become homeless. It's very near to my position; it's very close."

After not speaking to each other at all for nearly two weeks, Naoki appears desperate to discuss the situation. Sitting in their tiny living room, the scene begins with Yoshie.

YOSHIE: So why are we together?

NAOKI: I don't know.

YOSHIE: How can you say you don't know?

NAOKI: You think it's macho to not talk about feelings. I'm not that kind of man. I need to say how I feel. . . . People aren't human if they can't even say how they feel. In Japan, it's cool if you keep quiet; that's bullshit. I

used to be like that; no one talks, people get frustrated, families break up . . . and it leads to suicide. Sean [the director] said it in a roundabout way: you're the boss here. If you get into a kind of master and slave relationship that means you could say, "Get out of my house and die on the street." If we are going to stay together, don't oppress me in that way. You can do that at work but not to me. [Yoshie begins to cry, and there is a long pause.]

YOSHIE: I didn't do anything wrong. I don't know why you blame me. I don't want to listen.

NAOKI: You've never listened in the past anyway.

YOSHIE: Do you think I like to work?

NAOKI: I know you don't like your job or having to drink to make money. You work hard, and then you drink to find yourself again. I ran a bar for eleven years. I know very well.

YOSHIE: It sounds like I enjoy my job.

NAOKI: In the past I used to blame you for coming home late. Now I just want to know that you're coming home. Because I don't want you to leave me.

YOSHIE (sighing): My face will be swollen tomorrow [from crying so much].

Living in a state of insecurity, always worried about whether Yoshie would leave him, Naoki feels powerless and impotent in a myriad ways: he is a previously successful, independent man who is now reliant on his girlfriend working two jobs to put a roof over their heads; he depends on her desire to still be with him and give him a place to live; and he resents his own job, which he hates and which doesn't pay enough for him to afford the rent on an apartment of his own. The impotence in his financial life is reflected in his sexual impotence. The dependence that his employment situation engenders significantly affects their relationship, and the picture that emerges is one of exhaustion, anger, and need. The stress caused by Naoki's financial instability and the necessity for Yoshie to be the main breadwinner clearly illustrate the strong normative ideals that continue to hold sway: men should be the primary breadwinners, and when they are not—or are not able to be—significant issues and effects on intimacy can be seen. Maciel, Van Putten, and Knudson-Martin (2009) argue that to understand gendered power we need to look beyond a couple and their personal dynamics to analyze the individuals' positions in a wider society. The importance of this argument is clear in the documentary. Naoki's and Yoshie's worries, silences, and arguments, while intimate and individual to the couple's dynamic, are also embedded in their tiredness and frustrations with their relative positions in the world.

In an attempt to redress and reclaim the earlier gender balance of their relationship Naoki expresses how it is his responsibility to stay with and protect Yoshie because of her depression. She takes an anti-depressant each night that provides a minimum of six hours sleep; however, it also causes memory loss, and she doesn't remember what happens before falling asleep. Naoki says, "We cannot get special treatment from the government. If we were European, the nation [would] give me a kind of welfare, a kind of mental support. [There are] so many types of support. First, I have to protect her. I'm afraid she has a kind of disease. So I can't separate from her. I can't leave her. Who will look after her?" Here we see the contradictions inherent in the precarious situation in which they live. Dependent on Yoshie financially and psychologically, Naoki also strives to create a narrative of protection in which he is a central needed figure crucial to Yoshie's health and well-being. This approach helps manage his anxiety and profound sense of rupture and provides him with a narrative that is inherently normative and patriarchal, even as he has lost other symbols of patriarchal power.

Through the conversations presented above we can see the complex ways in which power is enacted and drawn upon. At times Naoki suggests he has no power—he is subjected to forces outside his control (capitalism and labor) that exert a type of systemic power and provide different amounts of agential power that structure Naoki's potential to act (Haugaard 2010). At the age of fifty-six and with a failed business, he was unable to find any job except one that was part time, paying ¥800 yen an hour. Contrary to Vij's (2013) argument that precarity and large structural changes create opportunities for individuals to let go of structural social identities, Naoki's precarity, irregular employment, and age are at the heart of his impotence. He is unable to let go. Naoki feels he is at the whim of the economy, of his low-paying job, of his advancing age, and of Yoshie to keep him from homelessness. His impotence appears to be the result of feeling that he has less agential power than at any point in his life thus far. The buttresses of his identity prior to the loss of his bar—the confident, successful, self-employed businessman in control of his destiny and with the ability to conspicuously consume (and support the women in his life)—have crumbled. Therefore, instead of embracing this new situation as an opportunity to embrace new norms, Naoki and Yoshie struggle. They both feel at the mercy of systemic power—that their situation as working poor leaves them with few options to act.

Instead they engage in a power struggle within their relationship, struggling to adapt to the new conditions in which they find themselves. Naoki

clearly tries to reassert his position through the exercise of episodic power, as when he tries to force Yoshie to acknowledge that she has been treating him as a slave and to stop it (a type of “power over”). Yoshie, meanwhile, also uses episodic power through her passive-aggressive accusations that Naoki’s low earnings are not acceptable, as when she taunts him that her clients have money and are easier to handle or when she gives him ¥1,000 but then comments that the floor is dirty, leading to Naoki’s cleaning it (both “power over” and “power to”). The ability to act (agential power) is focused *within* the relationship owing to their sense of their limitations within a structural situation that they feel powerless to act on. They therefore act where they feel they can—on each other.¹³

These power struggles, born predominantly from frustration at their economic and intimate situation, are also, however, interspersed with what Layder terms benign forms of power, which are part of “intimate strategies” as a “means of getting what they want or need” (2009, 6). We see such benign power from Naoki when he covers Yoshie gently with a duvet after she drops into bed drunk and exhausted, when he ruffles her hair affectionately as he passes her, and when they settle down to sleep in each other’s arms. Thus, while the documentary portrays the ways in which their physical and emotional intimacy have been worn down and the various ways they use power over each other to try and redress the balance, the protagonists also episodically reach out through small caring gestures—what Jamieson (2011) refers to as “practices of intimacy”—as a means through which they attempt to maintain their intimate links.

IRREGULAR EMPLOYMENT, INTIMATE POSSIBILITIES, AND FUTURE PLANS

In the documentary we can see how significant Naoki’s employment situation is on the internal workings of their relationship and how narratives of the future were muted; they were focused primarily on surviving day to day. For irregular workers, work and financial (in)stability often emerge as a focal point around which intimate practices and possibilities revolve, and these concerns significantly factor into future plans.

Sumiko (twenty-nine) and Masao (thirty-two) had been together for six years and living together for four, sharing a council (*danchi*) apartment with Sumiko’s father.¹⁴ Masao had years earlier worked as a full-time employee for a year but had disliked the work environment and quit. He had spent the previous ten years in the irregular employment sector. Money and work were a significant cause for concern when considering future plans:

SUMIKO: It made sense for Masao to move here. I live with my dad and look after him and the apartment. My mum died when I was younger, so he relies on me a lot. Masao and I want to get married but don't know when. But we definitely want to marry. It will make the living situation complicated, though. At the moment it's a secret that Masao is living in our apartment. We can't afford to rent privately. If the city office finds out that he has moved in, I think the rent will go up, and we can't afford that. I'm afraid they might make us move out, so that is complicated too. Also, we both have credit card debts that we are paying off each month.

MASAO: We want to marry and perhaps move out. I like Sumiko's dad, but it's not ideal. It all depends on work. Now I am searching for full-time work. . . . It's hard, really hard. I'm thirty-two, and my previous work is irregular. I've been working the whole time, but still. . . . I should get a full time [*seishain*] position. I have to really. I will need one if we get married; it will be my responsibility to be a breadwinner. I accept that. But I feel a lot of pressure about it. . . . I don't even know if it's possible now for me to find full-time work.

As Masao stopped talking, he looked slightly harried. He took a sip of his drink, and Sumiko took up the thread:

I want us to marry, and I really want to have kids. But I don't want to work seven days a week any more. I want to get married. I want to be a housewife and work part time, two or three days a week. It is not my responsibility to keep earning all the money. That is my dream. But at the moment it's not possible for us to marry and have children yet. We can't afford it; we have no money, and we have credit card debt.

Sumiko felt that time was running out because of her age, and pressure on Masao—though not ideal—was necessary.

SUMIKO: I'm twenty-nine. I'm worried. I thought that I would be married with children by now. . . .

MASAO: I'm trying to find work. I'm searching every day and going to interviews, but they hire other people. I think they want to hire younger people, not people like me who have changed jobs a few times. They probably think I am not going to stick at it. . . . I don't know how to persuade them. I will keep trying, though. That's all I can do.

Despite his determination to find something, Masao gradually began to feel that finding a full-time position was not going to be possible. He increasingly looked stressed, and Sumiko worried that they would not be able to marry and achieve the family ideal that she imagined. In a later meeting Masao confessed:

We argue quite a lot these days. Sumiko knows I am trying to find work, but she is worried about her age and wants to marry and have children. Maybe she thinks I should try harder. . . . I don't know. To be honest, I know I should get a full-time job, but at the same time I don't really know if I want one. I worked that way before, and it was not good. There was a lot of pressure all the time. But at the same time, if we have children, it is better to have a stable environment. So I am trying.

The expectation for men to be or become primary breadwinners thus significantly mediates intimate possibilities and realities (Cook 2013, 2014, 2016; Silva 2013; Tichenor 1999). Sumiko appeared to feel that marriage was not a possibility until Masao had found full-time work. Moreover, like Yoshie, she was unhappy that she was working more than Masao, and she clearly articulated that she felt it wasn't her responsibility. In research on power in marital relationships in the United States, Tichenor (1999) found that 60 percent of status-reversal couples—defined as couples in which the women earned 50 percent more than their spouses—were dissatisfied with their marriages, in part because they wanted to be part of a conventional relationship. Their unhappiness was also related to how they had come to be a status-reversal couple. It is perhaps not surprising that choice was the key element in satisfaction. The spouses that had not chosen the situation—where husbands' opportunities had dwindled and those of wives hadn't—were the most dissatisfied.

Choice, and the power to make that choice a reality, were critical factors in the intimate relationships of men in irregular employment. Sumiko and Masao both talked of wanting to create a legal family unit and have children but felt unable to, in part because of limited full-time employment possibilities, but also because of their own imaginary of what the intimate sphere of family should look like. Difficulties regarding employment, cash flow, debt, and their own desires and expectations of individual roles within a family unit effectively limited the intimate possibilities to which they aspired in their relationship. Crucially, neither seemed to want to create a family outside of the roles they envisaged, and they did not seem overly willing, Sumiko particularly, to negotiate non-normative marital gender roles within a dual-income family. The tension created by balancing traditional role aspirations and the realities in which they found themselves were arguably creating a situation in which they necessarily would have to negotiate alternative gender roles if they were committed to remaining in the relationship. It is in this context that Vij (2013) argues that there is considerable scope for existing gendered attachments to become undone and in which there is much emancipatory potential. The two examples given in this chapter suggest that while this emancipatory

potential exists, individuals may not view this positively nor desire such changes. Instead, these couples expended considerable energy in trying to achieve a balance based primarily on traditional gendered and intimate norms, rather than creating new ones.



In this chapter I have argued that intimacy and intimate possibilities are significantly challenged by the precarity of irregular employment. Although such precarity could potentially lead to new gender norms, this was not particularly desired by either of the couples discussed above. Rather than feeling the emancipatory potential of the situation, they felt rather helpless in terms of the reversal of gender roles it engendered.

Naoki and Yoshie sought to re-reverse their roles and the balance of power in a number of ways. For example, although their household labor roles were reversed, their communication strategies revealed the contradictions inherent in their positioning, swinging from Naoki's argument that he was in a master-slave relationship and one step away from homelessness to asserting Yoshie's need for him to protect and look after her. Throughout the documentary film, Naoki is trying to find ways in which to create a gendered balance of mutual dependency in a way that makes sense to him. Sumiko and Masao, meanwhile, were attempting to move past Masao's status as an irregular employee. His inability to make this a reality, however, was creating much strain within their relationship, and Sumiko was adamant that marriage was not possible until Masao had achieved the conventional male role of primary breadwinner. Through anchoring the possibilities of intimacy and family creation to money and financial stability, both couples appear to understand male value primarily in terms of earning ability, creating a commodified masculine selfhood (Takeyama 2010, 2016). Naoki in particular illustrates the deep psychological struggle this may entail.

Maciel, Van Putten, and Knudson-Martin have argued that "pushing the gender line"—a line they understand to demarcate the division of power and equality in an intimate relationship—is a process of adaptation that happens quietly:

Contextual shifts . . . inform couple decisions and behavior in ways that subtly challenge the old gender structure while at the same time limiting overt disruption to the couple's existing gendered power system. This tension between stability and change involves a balancing act as alternative constructions of gender are either required in the new societal context or made possible as consciousness and opportunities. (2009, 15)

Changing employment opportunities for men and women, and the difficulties people have in achieving normative ideals of gender roles because of these employment realities, contribute to a pushing of the gender line for irregular workers in intimate relationships. However, it is important to stress that this was often not a conscious or desired pushing but a side effect of the practical realities of irregular employment in terms of finances and social status. Moreover, this is a contested process in which both men and women often seek to reassert a balance based on preexisting cultural narratives of heterosexual romantic relationships and personal expectations of what marital roles should look and be like. Therefore, while acknowledging the potentiality of Vij's (2013) argument that precarious conditions create opportunities for individuals to let go of normative gendered expectations and identities, I have argued that many couples appear to be unable to take these conditions as an opportunity to create alternatives. With a primary focus on the here and now of economic survival, individual potential to act is constrained by the structural conditions in which individuals are embedded and is focused within the relationship. Furthermore, an individual's agential power is structured through the expectations of the person with whom that individual is interacting, in this case a romantic partner. The power to act for the couples discussed above—through the use of episodic and dispositional power—thus became focused on re-reversing relationship roles rather than creating new ones. What results is a sense of stasis, an inability to move forward. The difficulties for male irregular workers in getting married are thus more complex than a lack of financial stability and are deeply embedded in heteronormative understandings of gender roles in intimate relationships. Moreover, it is not simply the case that women don't want to marry irregular workers, but also that men themselves may feel deeply uncomfortable if they are unable to embody the responsibilities they envisage of a male partner/husband. Therefore, rather than throwing out their understandings of intimate roles and creating new ones that broaden intimate possibilities, many individuals continue to hold onto normative ideas while negotiating the complexities of intimate relationships in a precarious landscape.

NOTES

1. These figures exclude students who are working in the irregular employment sector.
2. In this chapter intimacy is explored only in the context of romantic heterosexual relationships.

3. This trend is not specific to Japan but can be seen around the world, with male wage earning exhibiting a strong link with marriageability (Sweeney 2002; Tichenor 1999).

4. The gender wage gap is calculated based on the difference between the median earnings of men and women as compared to the median earnings of men (OECD 2013). Japan's gender wage gap, while the third highest among OECD countries, has gradually dropped from 32.8 percent in 2005 (OECD 2017).

5. The average gap between men's and women's monthly earnings differs in large, mid-size, and small companies. In large companies of over one thousand employees, men and women start out on approximately the same salary but then diverge. Men in their thirties earn on average ¥400,000 a month, a figure that rises to approximately ¥550,000 for men in their fifties. Meanwhile, women in their thirties earn approximately ¥280,000 a month, a figure that rises to approximately ¥330,000 for women in their fifties. The same trend bears out in midsize and small companies (though with lower wages for both). These differences result from the fact that men are promoted to management positions at greater rates than women and that, as per the M-shaped curve, women are more likely than men to leave the workforce in their late twenties and early thirties after marriage and childbirth (MIAC 2013b).

6. Of course, not all men are able (or want) to live up to expectations to be the main breadwinners and patriarchal heads of household. Different spheres of masculinity and understandings of gender roles are emerging, and many people live on the margins of these norms, picking and choosing the ones that work for them, depending on their individual situations and values. However, it is important to note that these normative ideals remain strongly articulated and aspirational in individual narratives of both men and women when they discuss expectations of marriage and marital roles (see Cook 2013, 2016).

7. I follow Jamieson (2011) in understanding intimacy as being both feeling and practice. Jamieson argues that feelings of closeness are created and sustained through practices that "enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other" (*ibid.*, 1). Such practices include, for example, sharing time and affection, taking care of each another, and actively knowing each other. However, they are also tightly interlaced with relations and practices of power, the subject that is the focus of this chapter.

8. Hostesses work in bars where they facilitate an enjoyable evening for (mostly male) customers. For a detailed analysis of hostess clubs, see Allison (1994) and Gagné (2010).

9. A note on language: throughout the documentary Naoki shifts between English (that is often broken) and Japanese. A translator is behind the camera most of the time but not always. In the documentary Naoki's English remains as it was spoken, but for ease of reading and meaning in this chapter I have edited some of the grammar. Most of the conversations between Naoki and Yoshie are translated from the Japanese, whereas most of the conversations between Naoki and the director were conducted in English.

10. The Statistics Bureau of Japan's basic survey of social life in 2011 (<http://www.stat.go.jp/data/shakai/2011/>) illustrates that on average women do significantly more hours of unpaid household chores each week than men.

11. Wittgenstein's idea of "family resemblance" denoted "concepts that overlap in usage while there is no single essence that unites all these usages" (Haugaard 2010, 424).

12. Yoshie often gets invited out for dinner by long-term customers, and she accepts such invitations in order to maintain the relationship. After the meal the customer and Yoshie make their way to the bar.

13. Various issues of power within intimacy can also be seen in the context of domestic violence and in the redefinitions of intimacy noted by Kuwajima (this volume).

14. The relationship of Sumiko and Masao is described briefly and in a condensed form in Cook (2013, 38; 2016, 120–121).

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