

Childrearing and the New Technology :

Mobile Phone Use of Japanese Housewives¹

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the mobile phone use of Japanese housewives who are taking care of infants. By illustrating how they use their mobile phones in their everyday lives and how they reorganize their relationships with their fellow housewives and their kin, it examines the effects upon their social relations and identities within the specific social and cultural contexts. It argues that on the one hand, mobile telephony have been appropriated by them to manage various sorts of structural constraints imposed by childrearing in Japan, and on the other hand it has helped to reproduce the existing parental norm that actualizes the considerable concentration of responsibilities of infant care on women, by consolidating their identities as mothers or wives.

Introduction

Nineteen ninety-five marked sixteen years since the introduction of car telephone services and eight years since the introduction of mobile phone services in Japan. In that year mobile phone subscription in Japan started to grow rapidly, increasing to 10 million from a mere 4 million in the preceding year. This was largely due to the significant decrease in initial sign-up and monthly fees (Nakamura 2001a : 47-8). In 2003, the number of subscribers reached 80 million and the penetration rate reached 63.9%.

In the process of such rapid market penetration, the capacities and features of mobile phones also expanded considerably. For instance, in 1999, NTT DoCoMo, the leading mobile service provider in Japan, introduced *I-mode*, which enabled people to access the internet from their mobile phones. This was followed by the introduction of the W-CDMA format 3G mobile phone in 2001. As a result of these technological innovations, mobile phone users in Japan currently enjoy various mobile internet services including 'global positioning system (GPS), Java applications, picture and video mail, as well as standard email and web browsing services' (Ishii 2004 : 43).

The rapid growth in subscription and the technological innovations in the decade suggest that a considerable number of people from different socio-economic backgrounds use their mobile

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phones in various ways. Quantitative research conducted in Japan have found such different ways of using mobile phones to be particularly in accordance with differences in gender, age and marital status (Okada et al. 2000; Matsuda 2001; Hashimoto et al. 2000). Considering the diversified ways of using mobile phones among various subjects, this paper intends to clarify who, and in what contexts people use mobile phones. Particular attention will be given to Japanese housewives, or *shufu*, who are taking care of infants. The purpose of this paper is therefore to illustrate mobile phone use by Japanese housewives during the period of infant care in their everyday lives, and to subsequently analyze such use with respect to their everyday lives.

In order to understand the meaning and role of the new technologies in people's lives, it is necessary to recognize that 'how one experiences ICTs is not completely predetermined by technological functionality or public representations; it is also structured by the social context into which it is received' (Haddon 2003: 47). The new technologies are appropriated by the consumers within the specific context of the existing patterns of social relations and norms. It is therefore significant to take into account the social and cultural context within which Japanese housewives take care of infants when we examine their experiences using mobile phone.

The significant context that shapes the lives and identities of Japanese housewives during the infants care period is the considerable concentration of the responsibilities inherent to child care on women. The underlying characteristic of child care in present day Japan is that not only are women considered key providers of childcare, but that little support is provided for women who are taking care of infants (Ochiai et al. 2004). This condition leads Japanese housewives to take care of their infants in a socially isolated environment. Moreover, the parental norm that actualizes the considerable concentration of responsibilities of child care on women makes it difficult for them to have different social identities other than mothers and wives. By illustrating how Japanese housewives use their mobile phones in their everyday lives and how they reorganize their relationships with their fellow housewives and their kin, this paper will examine the effects of their mobile phone use upon their social relations and identities within this specific social and cultural context.

The present study on mobile phone use by Japanese housewives is part of a broader concern with 'the highly gendered character of our relations to technology' (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992: 3; cf. Raknow and Navarro 1993; Sørensen et al. 2000). Although quite a few studies have been conducted on mobile phone use in Japan, the focus of much of this research has been on the use by youth (e.g. Okada et al. 2000; Tsuji 2003; Nakamura 2001b; Nakajima et al. 1999; Yoshii 2001; Ito and Okabe 2003; cf. Matsuda 2005a). This trend is understandable when we consider the fact that mobile telephony is widely adopted by youth in general, and the widespread concerns with its role in 'the emancipation of the teen' (Ling 2004: 86). However, aside from some analysis based on survey results (e.g. Matsuda 2005b; 2002; 2001; Hashimoto et al. 2000), there are few studies that relate Japanese mobile phone use in everyday life to the gender norms and relationships.

A notable exception is Dobashi's study on the mobile phone use of Japanese housewives. Based on the interviews with housewives living in central Tokyo and the northern areas of Yokohama, located near Tokyo, he pointed out that the mobile phone is 'extremely suitable

technology for many housewives whose responsibilities are multilinear and require mobility' (Dobashi 2005 : 224). He also noted that it reproduces the traditional gender division of labor and power relationships in the Japanese households, both by enabling the housewives to communicate with their kin or friends during the intervals between their multilinear tasks, and by developing an affinity for housewives with mobile phones as opposed to with personal computers.

This paper further explores the issues concerning relationships between gender relations and mobile phones use developed in Dobashi's study, by focusing on Japanese housewives at their particular life stage. Studies on Japanese families indicated that the gender division of labor appears most significantly during the period of infant care (e.g. Inaba 2005 : 51). Attentive to both the gender roles at the particular life stage and the social context of the infant care in Japan, this study examines their mobile phone use in respect to the infant care in a socially isolated environment and its consequent effects on their identity formation as mother or wives.

The paper will first briefly discuss the contextual factors that shape their infant care in contemporary Japan, and then analyze the mobile phone use of the housewives in (1) housework/childcare routines, (2) extending and maintaining their networks of fellow mothers, and (3) the management of their relations with their kin, especially in-laws. In the final part of this paper, the effects of their mobile phone use on their identities will be discussed.

Methodology

This paper is not aimed at presenting a general picture of mobile phone use of Japanese housewives, but rather, through case studies of their detailed lives gathered in Niigata City, a prefectural capital, located northeast of Tokyo, it is aimed at illustrating the individual ways how they have appropriated the mobile telephony to cope with a variety of difficulties associated with their infant care. The difficulties that they face during the period of infant care certainly take place under the structural conditions of child rearing in Japan, but the features of these show subtle differences depending on the localities of research site, the class informants belong to and nature of their respective family, kinship and neighborhood relations. In order to grasp the various and complex processes of the appropriation, this study employed a qualitative research method, enabling the researcher to develop an argument based on the detail of their lives.

In-depth interviews with nine Japanese housewives² were conducted. Eight of them have at least one preschool child. For comparative purposes, one childless housewife was also interviewed. All but one participants reside in Niigata City. The exception resides in a small town south of Niigata City. Interviews were conducted from June to August of 2005. Interviews ranged from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours in length. Among the interviewees, there are five full-time housewives, or *sengyo shufu*³, three *shufu* with part-time jobs, and one full-time employee in local government who is taking child-care leave. The participants ranged in age from their early twenties to their late thirties. All names and some details have been changed in order to protect

² Interviewees were introduced by my students, my students' relatives, my wife and employees at the university where I am teaching. Interviews were conducted in the various settings such as interviewees' houses, my house, meeting rooms in the university and restaurants.

the privacy of the interviewees.

Women and Childrearing in Japan

It has been said that the division of labor in housework is significantly imbalanced between the sexes in Japan. The ratio of the time that men spend on housework to that of women (women as 100%) are : Norway, 54%, Canada, 52%, Germany, 50%, the United States, 49%, France, 47% and Japan, 6% (Iwai and Inaba 2000 : 214). After the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986, the lack of participation in housework by men has been repeatedly criticized (Ishii-Kuntz 2004 : 202). In contemporary Japan, for instance, one would find movements by advocacy groups to promote increased active involvement by fathers in childcare and the processes in which those active family men resist the hegemonic masculine identity and redefine their masculinities (Ishii-Kuntz 2003 ; cf. Ishii-Kuntz 1993). Nevertheless, statistical data shows that the time fathers devote to childrearing has increased only slightly within the last decade (Nagai 2004). Furthermore, it is reported that Japanese fathers tend to shy away from the more 'demanding', 'time-consuming' and 'troublesome' aspects of housework associated with child rearing (Iwai and Inaba 2000).

The significant imbalance in the division of labor between husbands and wives in childrearing is reflected in the pattern of women's participation in the labor market. Although the female labor-force participation rate in Japan has gradually increased since the 1970s⁴, a substantial number of women resign from their jobs upon pregnancy in order to become 'full-time housewives'. There are still large differences in the labor-force participation rates between married and unmarried women. While the labor participation rate of unmarried women in the 25 to 34 age group was approximately 90% in 2004, that of married women in the same age group was approximately 50% (The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2005). Among women who had jobs one year before giving birth to their first children, 67.4% became 'jobless' after their giving birth (The Gender Equality Bureau 2003a).

Recently, a changing consciousness regarding how people regard the participation of women in the labor market has become observable. In a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office (Gender Equality Bureau 2003b), asking 'your opinion regarding women having jobs' (a multiple choice question), the percentage of female respondents who answered that 'it is better for women to continue their jobs after having their children' increased from 18.0% in 1982 to 41.0 % in 2002⁵. However, the percentage of the female respondents who answered that 'it is better for women to quit working when they have children and start working again after raising them' decreased only slightly from 43.5% to 40.9% in the same period⁶. From this survey result, we can assume that

³ The social categories that the term 'housewife' in English indicate and the one that '*shufu*' in Japanese indicate have subtle differences in some respects. While *shufu* usually means women who stay at home to do housework, it sometimes refers to married women (but not divorced) in general. That is why it is necessary to distinguish the term 'full-time-housewife,' or *sengyoshufu*, from the term *shufu* in general that may refer to the married women who also work outside the home. In this paper, the term *shufu* or housewife refers to married women in general.

⁴ The female labor-force participation rate in Japan was significantly high at the beginning of the twentieth century. It continuously declined until 1975, when it began to increase again (Ochiai 2004:25-7).

⁵ The percentage of male respondents who chose this answer in 2002 was 38.4%.

women tend to think that on the one hand it is good for women to work, but on the other, the mothering of infants by 'full-time housewives' is also valuable⁷.

In addition to such a significant role of women in childrearing both in practice and in perception, it is reported that Japanese women obtain less assistance for childrearing from relatives and paid-workers than their counterparts in other countries. According to a comparative study recently conducted across East Asian countries, Japanese mothers enjoy the least 'support' for childrearing from their husbands, kinship networks and paid domestic workers, respectively. Japanese housewives take care of their infants with relatively undependable assistance from their relatives and husbands, and with various forms of institutional support that are not highly developed. As a result, childrearing in Japan is carried out almost entirely by mothers (Ochiai et al. 2004). While such a concentration of responsibility for childrearing on women has forced many mothers to abandon their careers, it also leads women to raise children in a socially isolated environment. This social isolation of women during the period of infant care is considered a major cause of mothers' childcare stress, or *ikuji fuan*, which is not uncommon among Japanese mothers (Makino 1982 ; 1987).

Moreover, the gender norm that actualizes the significant concentration of housework on women in the household makes it difficult for them to have social identities other than that of mother or wife. According to a survey of married women in Tokyo, which asked them to 'choose the most important role for you' among 'mother', 'wife', 'child', 'the woman who has married into an *ie* or an extended family' or '*yome*', 'housewife', 'working person' or '*syokugyojin*' and 'member of a certain social activity', the percentage of those who chose 'working person' was 4.1%, and that of full-time employees was 15.2%. In contrast, the percentage of those who chose 'mother' or 'wife' was 82%, and that of full-time employees was 75% (Inaba 1995). This shows that their identities as mothers or wives have great significance, even among married women of full-time employees in Tokyo. It also suggests that they have difficulty forming different social identities other than 'mother' or 'wife'. This could be especially the case for the married women during the period of infant care, given the considerable concentration of responsibilities associated with childrearing on mothers.

'Always with kids and I do not have my own time': Childrearing and Mobile Phone Use

The ways in which interviewees use their mobile phones are closely related to the patterns of their daily housework. This is well illustrated in the case of Yuka, a full-time housewife, who is raising two boys, four years old and one year old, and whose husband is employed in a company. She describes a typical weekday's housework as follows :

⁶ The percentage of women who chose this answer in Japan is higher than that in other countries. The figures in the following countries are, respectively: Sweden, 4.0%, Philippines, 15.0%, the United States, 18.3%, Germany, 27.1%, and Korea, 38.6%.

⁷ The percentages of male respondents who chose the answers 'women should not work', 'it is better for women to work until they get married' and 'it is better for women to work until they have kids' were higher than those of female respondents. This data shows that male respondents value mothering by 'full-time housewives' more than female respondents.

I wake up around 6 : 30. First of all, I wash clothes, prepare breakfast and clean the house. I finish this up by the time I send my kid to kindergarten (the kindergarten bus picks him up) at around 9 o'clock... After sending my older kid to school, I put my baby to sleep. He sleeps for an hour. When he is sleeping, I cook lunch and prepare supper. When he wakes up, we go out to walk around. It usually takes an hour. At around noon, we eat lunch. After lunch, he sleeps for about an hour-and-a-half. The time when he is sleeping after lunch is the only time I have for myself.... After he wakes up, I fold washed clothes. My older kid comes home around 3 : 30. I give him snacks. After that, I take my kids out. Usually they play in the play area in front of our apartment. There are about five other mothers and children there in the late afternoon.... At about 5 : 30, we go home. At about 6 o'clock, the kids eat supper.... After that, at about 7 o'clock, I give the kids a bath. I eat supper either before or after they go to sleep, but sometimes I miss my supper. At 8 : 30, I make them sleep. My husband comes home between 7 o'clock and 11 o'clock. He almost always goes drinking with his clients. When he comes home, what he does is take a bath and go to sleep. I sometimes wait up for him, but sometimes I go to sleep before he comes back.

Her husband's working pattern is not typical among those of the other interviewees. Most of the other husbands come home earlier and usually do more housework. However, her way of explaining her daily housework as 'always with kids and I do not have my own time' is common among the mothers. The following comment regarding her own time being when her baby falls asleep after lunch, demonstrates her feeling about her own time well :

When my kid is sleeping, I watch TV, read magazines and use the computer.... But even when the baby is sleeping, it is not unusual for me to do housework, such as pressing clothes. Yes, it's like reading magazines or novels when I find a moment.... When I go through a few pages of a magazine after pressing clothes, my baby wakes up, it's like that.

The lack of the time for themselves away from their children during the period of infant care reflects the general pattern of childrearing. According to a survey of mothers who have children under three in a prefecture capital in western Japan, more than 80% of the mothers spend less than four hours a week away from their children to do things for their own selves (Nakatani 2004 : 56).

Their daily routines influence their mobile phone use in the following two respects. Firstly, during the interviews, it was found that they prefer mobile phone mail to e-mail from their personal computers. Mobile phone mail was first introduced in 1997. Unlike 'short message', its predecessor, it enables people to exchange messages with subscribers of different mobile service providers. Furthermore, by mobile phone mail, people can send longer messages and attach pictures and video. However, aside from the capacity to send pictures and video, Japanese users perceive 'little differences between text messages sent as short messages and those sent as Internet e-mail [through mobile phones]', and they 'refer to both as *meiru* (mail)' (Ito 2005 : 35).

It is not necessarily common for them to have and use the PCs in their everyday lives. In fact, an interviewee insisted that she has never used a PC, though she is planning to buy one in order to make their new-year's greeting cards. However, even if they get used to using PCs, and recognize the difficulties associated with typing in mobile phone mail, upon becoming mothers they usually come to communicate through mobile phone mail rather than e-mail from PCs. An interviewee who bought a PC when they got married said, 'Recently, I am sending and receiving "mail" mostly by mobile phone. For what do I use our PC? [Pause] Yes, I use it to buy things.'

The reasons why those who occasionally use their PCs prefer mobile phone mail are well illustrated in the following comment :

Miho : I think, to start up a PC you needs *kiai* (much power or a strong spirit). On the other hand, we can use mobile phones anywhere and anytime. When I am waiting for something, I can do it.

They emphasized the feature of mobile phones being able to use 'anywhere and anytime'. As we saw in the case of Yuka, their daily routines are tightly organized and they have to perform a variety of housework duties one after another. It is in this context that the mobile phone mail capacity of enabling them to use it in any places while doing something else, is highly valued, as Dobashi mentioned in his study on mobile phone use of Japanese housewives (Dobashi 2005 : 224). A mother spoke highly of this feature by saying 'you can send a reply to someone's message when you are waiting for the kid's kindergarten bus.'

Furthermore, for them, sitting in front of the PC for a certain length of time without being disturbed by their children is considerably difficult, if not impossible, given that they have little time away from their children. The housewife who prefers to use the e-mail from a PC told me that she can check the e-mail only at night when she stays up after her kids fall asleep, and that it was accordingly difficult for her to respond to my e-mail immediately. The nature of PCs requires the mothers to stay in a fixed place for a certain length of time without being disturbed by their kids, making it difficult to communicate through e-mail constantly. They thus perceive that e-mail from PCs is not a suitable means for regular communication during the period of infant care.

Secondly, most of interviewees insisted that they use mobile phone mail more than voice calls on mobile phones and landline phones (*ieden*⁸). As explained in the next section, many if not most of their mobile phone mail correspondents are fellow mothers with infants. Considering their tightly organized daily routines during the childrearing period, it is difficult for them to know when to call their fellow mothers. As the following mother who works part-time at a supermarket explains :

⁸ *Ieden* is the recently emerging word that refers to the landline, or home telephone, in contrast with the mobile phone. The word *Ieden* is created by combining the word *ie*, which means house, and the word *den*, an abbreviation for *denuwa*, which means telephone.

Reiko : I sometimes think it would be faster and easier to call them (rather than sending mail from my mobile phone). But, will it be inconvenient for them? I am wondering if her kid is sleeping or not. But, if I send mobile phone mail, they can see my messages at their convenience.

Mothers are very careful not to interrupt the sleep of their fellow mothers' children, since they share the feeling that the time when their kids are sleeping is extremely precious for mothers of infants. That is actually the only time when they can do things for themselves and do housework they cannot finish when their kids are awake. It is also in this context that mobile phone mail is perceived as a highly useful means of communication for mothers taking care of infants.

Constructing and Maintaining Networks during Childrearing Period

Those housewives interviewed actually make use of a fairly limited amount of available mobile phone functions. Of these, they make most use of voice call, mobile phone mail, internet access, the alarm clock and camera. Housewives mainly access the internet through their mobile phones to download *chakumero* or *chakuuta* (ring tones or songs) and to obtain coupons for restaurants. A few of the housewives frequently download popular baby songs for their children's enjoyment. One interviewee told how she registered her mobile phone address on web sites where she can obtain various sorts of information regarding childrearing, but her case is the exception rather than the rule. Housewives mainly use their mobile phone camera to take pictures of their children, and then send these pictures through mobile phone mail. Despite the capacities and features of mobile phones in Japan being highly developed, the interviewees, aside from their limited access to the internet and taking pictures of their children, follow the general pattern of Japanese mobile phone use (Matsuda 2005a : 35), by almost exclusively limiting their use to voice calls and mobile phone mail.

Regarding voice call, many housewives told me that the person they call most is their husband. The content of these calls is usually 'instrumental' in nature (Ling and Yttri 2002). They talk mostly about their schedules, such as what time their husband will come home, and what they will have for dinner.

On the other hand, regarding mobile phone mail, husbands are not always near the top of the list of those with whom they exchange mail. This is related to the relatively indifferent attitudes of men toward mobile phone mail in general (cf. Ling 2004 : 164). According to a nationwide survey conducted by a newspaper, Japanese men tend to prefer voice calls to mobile phone mail. Asking 'What do you do more, make voice calls or send mobile phone mail', male respondents who answered 'voice calls' totaled 52%, while among female respondents the figure was 24%. On the other hand, male respondents who answered 'mail' amounted to 13%, while among female respondents the figure was 28% (Asahi Shinbun Sha 2004 : 146-7).

The housewives' view on the way men use mobile phone mail corresponds with this trend. During the interviews, they sometimes explained with laughter how inept their husbands are at

sending mobile phone mail, for instance, by saying ‘the other day, he typed a message for an hour, but the mail he made was only two or three lines in length [laughs].’

Given the relative indifference of their husbands to mobile phone mail, many housewives related how those with whom they exchange mobile phone mail most are their female friends. Although it was also found that mobile phones sometimes enable them to keep in touch with their old friends who are still single, many of the friends they exchange mail with most are those who also have infants.

The reasons interviewees stated for communicating mostly with their fellow mothers were, firstly, their needs to exchange various kinds of information regarding childcare with their fellow mothers as illustrated below. Secondly, they feel they have less common interests with their single friends after they have children. One interviewee said, ‘I got a mail (from my single friend), saying “we are having *gokon* (a party to provide opportunities for groups of men and women to get to know each other) tonight”. Mail like that makes me feel we have so little in common’. Furthermore, they insisted that in order to mitigate their stress, they want to air and share the discontents they feel from their relationships with their parents-in-law. The interviewees may feel that it is difficult to share this sort of topic with their single friends.

Many of the housewives interviewed listed two to five fellow mother-friends, or *mama-tomo*, as those with whom they exchange messages regularly. Those intimate mothers are either their old friends, who they got to know during their schooldays, or their new friends, who they got to know after they had children. One interviewee who with her kids used to visit The Support Center for Childcare established by the city government explained how she made her fellow mother-friends with whom she exchanges mails most now.

Yoko : When we get to know each other, we exchange (mobile phone) mail addresses. Then, she sends me a message like ‘I will go to the Center, won’t you?’... When we talk for the first time, if we have something in common, then we exchange (mobile phone) mail addresses. For example, if we know that our houses are near. I say, ‘we are neighbors,’ and ask ‘would you go to visit and see the kindergarten with me? Because I am planning to go.’ Then, I ask ‘do you have (a mobile phone) mail (address)?’ We exchange (mobile phone) mail addresses... Usually we exchange slips of paper on which our (mobile phone) addresses, home addresses, and names are written.

In this way, mobile phones facilitate the construction and maintenance of networks among mothers who have kids in the same age groups through regular exchanges of mobile phone mails.

This network building is important for those who do not have friends with infants in the same age groups in the area where they are living because it enables them to gather a variety of information regarding childcare in the area. This is particularly the case for those who are not originally local to the area. Mothers are usually supposed to gather information regarding childcare, such as reputation of kindergartens. That task would, of course, be difficult for the non-locals without the networks of fellow mothers living in the neighborhood. A mother related

that she is extremely lucky because she has a friend who was a neighbor in her home village. This old neighbor has coincidentally come to live in the new neighborhood after getting married and, incidentally, has a child of the same age. She stated that they always go to visit kindergartens together and exchanged their views on the kindergartens they visited. However, many of the non-local housewives are not as lucky as her. It is accordingly imperative for them to construct networks with their fellow mothers in the area. As shown in Yoko's case, although the institutions for mothers like The Support Center for Childcare in Niigata City provide opportunities for mothers to get acquainted with their fellow mothers, maintaining and strengthening their networks are made possible through their mobile phones.

The contents of mail exchanged between mothers vary. Information regarding childrearing and questions about daily schedules were repeatedly mentioned as typical topics in mail with fellow mothers during the interviews. Here are some examples:

—With whom do you exchange mobile phone mail most?

Yuri: A friend from my high school days. She is now our neighbor and gave birth almost the same time I did. I exchange messages most with her. 'I am going on a stroll (with my kids), how about you?' So, we'd go on a stroll together with our kids, usually for about an hour.

Asuka: The one with whom I exchange mail most is a friend from my high school days. Her kid is as old as my second child. She lives in Nagoya (more than four hours by train from Niigata). She sends me mail, for example, 'what did you give your kid for a snack when he was one year old?' I replied 'When my older kid was one year old, I always thought about that. But for my second kid, if the older one gets a snack that's not good for a one-year-old, the younger one also gets that. So, don't think about it too much'...

The first example may be considered as a case of 'micro-coordination' (Ling and Yttri 2002) among them. Given that their daily routines are tightly organized and their fear that telephone calls may disturb their sleeping kids, exchanges of this sort make it easier to arrange their meetings during the childrearing period. From the second example, it is found that they obtain some information regarding childrearing from exchanges of mail. When they want to exchange more detailed information, their exchanges sometimes develop into other forms of communication, such as phone calls and fax messages. In such cases, exchanges of mail provide a starting point for further communication regarding childrearing among mothers.

This sort of 'micro-coordination' and exchange of valuable information through mobile phones is not unique to the mobile phone use by Japanese housewives and may be observed in different settings. Moreover, the phenomenon of mobile telephony facilitating the construction and maintenance of their networks is not limited to usage among housewives. However, given the tightly organized daily routines and the socially isolated conditions under which Japanese mothers take care of infants, the impact of the introduction of this new technology upon the everyday life of Japanese housewives cannot be underestimated. It is in this context that we

should consider their mobile phone use.

Mobile Phone and Family Relationships

In this section, I will illustrate how housewives use mobile phones to reorganize their relationships with their relatives. Particular attention will be given to their relationships with their parents-in-law.

During the interviews, the housewives frequently talked about their relationships with their mothers-in-law or parents-in-law. There are several reasons why their relationships with their parents-in-law are considered significant. Firstly, the parents and parents-in-law are usually the main, if not only, ones who give to them support with childrearing under the socially isolated condition of childrearing in Japan (cf. NIPSSR 2003 : 6). It is not uncommon that couples choose to live with their parents in order to get support raising the kids despite the well-known difficulties associated with co-residence. Even when living separately from their parents, it is found that many interviewees obtain assistance with childrearing from their parents and parents-in-law. This is especially true in time of need, such as when they get sick.

Secondly, it is found that the housewives interviewed are well aware of the ideology of traditional family in Japan, or *ie*, which gives a special role to the eldest son. Under the *ie* ideology, the eldest son and his family are expected to live with his parents. The eldest son usually inherits the property of his parents and succeeds to the status of head of family. At the same time, he becomes responsible for supporting his parents and guarding the family tombs.

During the interviews, the phrase 'because he is the eldest son' was repeatedly used by housewives when explaining the present make-up and future arrangements of their households. For instance, one interviewee, who lives in her parents' house in order to continue her jobs and whose husband is the eldest son, stated that she is very worried about her relationships with her parents-in-law, since her husband would normally be expected to live with his parents. In this way, the expectation for the eldest son to live with his parents is well recognized among housewives.

Given that their parents and parents-in-law are significant as a source of support in childrearing and that *ie* ideology is recognized among the interviewees, the issue of how they manage to keep relationships with their parents-in-law is significant for housewives. However, their structurally close relationships with their parents-in-laws may also become sources of conflict with them. In fact, one interviewee, the wife of an eldest son, told me that she had a severe conflict with her husband's mother regarding their household arrangements. According to her, the cause of the conflict was their decision not to live with her mother-in-law when they built a new house. During a period of continuous quarreling, she frequently exchanged mobile phone messages with her intimate friend who also lives with her husband's parents. As she explains :

We always exchange complaints about our family relationships through (mobile phone) mail. She complains about her father-in-law. He is like a kid, she said, 'he said such things to me', or 'he took such an attitude, what do you think about it?' Like that... when they have severe

quarrels, I get a lot of mail on my mobile phone.... I also sent mail about my mother-in-law. It was like, 'she said such things! What can I do?'... I talked with my friend, 'let's get rid of our stress by exchanging mail.' It is very important to have friends with whom you can talk about things that you cannot tell your husband. It is difficult to complain about his mother even if he also has conflict with his mother.... If we talk on the telephone, for example, someone may overhear that.

In this case, mobile phone mail provided them opportunities to complain about the stressful relationships with their parents-in-law, without being noticed by their families. The nature of mobile phone mail that made it possible to communicate silently, is highly valued here. For them, mobile phone mail is a considerably significant means of their communication with their fellow mothers not only because they do not have to consider whether children of their friends are sleeping or not, but also because they can communicate without being overheard by others.

In another case, one interviewee discussed how she had recoiled from the frequent landline calls from her mother-in-law, regarding her husband and her childrearing. The interviewee explained the effects of her mother-in-law's recent mobile phone purchase.

Before, I got her telephone calls every three days. That was terrible. But, since she got her mobile phone, she frequently sends me mail instead of making landline calls.... Before, we talked on the telephone for about 30 minutes. But receiving and sending mails is very easy. She sent 'how are you?', 'we started this activity' like that. I send her pictures of my children. Interestingly, she has come to really like it.... I feel we have much less conflict now. We had much conflict before. She does not tell me directly, but I got her complaints from my husband. But, I can contact her more easily with mail now, because I can send messages very easily. So I can inform her of my situation much more frequently with mail. Then, she can understand my situation well. I used to hesitate to talk with her on the telephone, because I was afraid that what I said would be misunderstood. So I couldn't tell her my situation.

Living separately from their parents is one of the ways to avoid possible conflicts. However, the landline phone has enabled these parents to keep frequent contact. Though the telephone has made it easier for young couples to ask about childrearing problems, it also may expose them to undesirable calls from mothers-in-law, as illustrated in the above case. It appears especially true for recently married young couples, who have fewer siblings and fewer children than their counterparts in previous generations, that the pressure of the couple's parents' attention to their grandchildren tends to become greater. In this context, talking with her mother-in-law requires a great care, since, from her words, her mother-in-law may find faults with her childrearing practices. Ironically, for her, not so much exchanges of mail, but voice calls that last for a certain length of time are dangerous in that some words in their conversations may be misunderstood. Accordingly, it was her desire to avoid thirty-minute-long conversations as much as possible. However, by doing so, she could not tell her mother-in-law her situation regularly. Her mobile

phone mail has given her a solution for the dilemma whereby on the one hand she wants to avoid her long conversation in order to not be misunderstood, and on the other hand needs regular contact with her-mother-in-law. Mobile phone mail enabled her to keep constant contact with her mother-in-law without having to worry much about misunderstandings she had to before. By exchanging frequent messages with her mother-in-law, sometimes with pictures of children, she manages to preserve her relationship with her mother-in-law in a subtle way.

Reproduction of the Mothering Norm

In this paper, I have illustrated how Japanese housewives use mobile phones in their everyday lives and the subsequent effects this use has on their social relationships.

Mobile phones have been readily adopted by many Japanese housewives who have infants as a means to overcome difficulties of communication caused by their tightly organized daily routines during the childrearing period, which are aptly illustrated by the phrase, 'always with kids and I do not have my own time'. It helps them to construct and maintain networks with their fellow mothers, and enables them to easily exchange information regarding childcare. For those who have stressful relationships with their parents-in-law, it also becomes a tool to manage these relationships. This evidence shows that mobile telephony has become embedded in the everyday lives of Japanese housewives, and that it has been appropriated by Japanese housewives to manage various sorts of structural constraints imposed by childrearing in Japan.

Many of the features of their mobile phone use, however, are not particularly unique to them. For instance, their practices of 'micro-coordination' by making use of mobile phones to 'adjust and rework a person's schedule and movement' (Ling 2004 : 72) is generally observed in people's mobile phone use. Moreover, the trend whereby the extent of their regular mail partners does not expand beyond more than two to five intimate friends corresponds to the phenomenon of formation of 'full-time intimate community' (Nakajima et al. 1999) or 'telecocoon' (Habuchi 2005) among Japanese youth. Previous researches into the mobile phone use of youth showed that the capacity of mobile telephony to develop and expand people's networks beyond their intimate and close circles is not fully utilized, and that 'most communication gets channeled into a narrow and highly selective set of relationships' (Ito 2005 : 10). However, similarities observed in mobile phone uses by the subjects who occupy different social positions may have different effects on their respective lives. Given that the interviewees take care of infants in a socially isolated environment and that they need to expand and maintain their networks, formation of 'full-time intimate communities' among them should be understood as not merely the results of their selection regarding with whom they form intimate relationships, but as their coping strategies to deal with various sorts of structural constraints on them.

However, while mobile telephony enables them to cope with the structural constraints of childrearing in Japan, it seems that such management simultaneously strengthens their identity as 'mothers' or 'wives'. The content of their mobile phone mail mostly involves childrearing and their relationships with their relatives. Moreover, almost all of those with whom they exchange mail and talk are fellow mothers who also have infants.

In one case, an interviewee used to use her mobile phone heavily for her volunteer activities. For her, her commitment to a volunteer group that manages a festival in Niigata City was very exciting, since she could learn many things from her fellow volunteers — people of different ages with a variety of career backgrounds. However, her deep commitment to the volunteer activity endangered her relationship with her husband, who once considered divorce. At the time of the interview, she had come to limit, for the most part, her mobile phone use to communication with her husband and fellow mothers. In this case, the capacity of mobile phone to expand social networks once helped her to form her new social identity, but that situation did not last long due to the tension with her husband.

This case suggests that mobile telephony has not become a means to emancipate Japanese housewives from the structural constraints on them in Japan that prevent them from having different social identities other than mothers and wives. Rather, by frequently exchanging messages about childrearing and their relationships with their relatives and by forming 'full-time intimate communities' with their fellow mothers, it has helped to consolidate their identity as mothers or wives. As mentioned above, forming 'full-time intimate communities' among them is considered to be one of their coping strategies for dealing with the structural constraints of childrearing. However, we can also say that it helps to reproduce the existing parental norm that actualizes the considerable concentration of responsibilities of child care on women, by consolidating their identities as mothers or wives.

The findings are consistent with those of previous studies that pointed out the reproduction of gender inequalities consequent upon the introduction of the new technologies, including the mobile phone (e.g. Rakow and Navarro 1993). However, in this paper, I have limited my discussion to the mobile phone use of housewives during the infant care period. The effects of such usage on people at different life stages may be different depending on the social contexts that shape their everyday lives and identities. In order to understand the diverse and complex effects of the mobile phone upon the social relationships and identity formation of Japanese women in more detail, further studies on their use at their different life stages will be necessary.

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