Friendships before (and beyond) marriage: Contemporary Japanese women’s intimate relationships

a talk by
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University of Southern California

ABSTRACT
The average age of first marriage in Japan has steadily increased over the last century, as has the likelihood of never marrying for both women and men. In conjunction with the decline in average length of marriage – a result of greater divorce and later marriage – these patterns suggest that Japanese people are spending more of their lives outside marriage.

Japanese feminists have advocated for a reconsideration of women’s unmarried (single, divorced, widowed) life as liberating, interesting and inevitable (Haruka 2001; Sakai, 2003; Ueno 2007, 2009).

In the context of demographic shifts, friendships, romantic relationships outside marriage, and work relationships represent possible support structures in a period of economic uncertainty.

But what of the emotional benefits of extra-familial relationships? What do platonic or romantic relationships outside the family offer women, when marriage is no longer inevitable or enduring? Scholarship in other societies suggests that relationships outside the nuclear reproductive family may constitute a “set of counter-heteronormative relationship practices...in which sexual/love relationships are decentred, and friendship is prioritized” (Roseneil 2010: 79-80). Does this suggestion also hold in the Japanese context? What do unmarried Japanese women’s perceptions of friendship suggest about intimacy?

In this paper I use data from recent fieldwork to explore the affective and practical implications of intimate relationships outside the family for women. In particular, I explore the ways that extra-familial relationships of intimacy support or destabilize the reproductive family, and the meaning attributed to these relationships by Japanese women.

BIO
Laura Dales is Assistant Professor in the Discipline of Asian Studies at the University of Western Australia. Her research interests include women’s groups, sexuality, singlehood and gender in Japan, agency and feminist ethnography. Recent publications include the monograph Feminist Movements in Contemporary Japan (Routledge, 2009). Laura is currently working on an Australia Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher (DECRA) project examining intimacy beyond the family in contemporary Japan.