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Japanese university students, work-related anxieties and sources of support

Tuukka TOIVONEN
Junya TSUTSUI
Haruka SHIBATA

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TUUKKA TOIVONEN

Research Institute for Economics & Business Administration, Kobe University &

Green Templeton College, University of Oxford

JUNYA TSUTSUI

Graduate School of Sociology, Ritsumeikan University

HARUKA SHIBATA

Faculty of Policy Studies, Doshisha University

Abstract

Not unlike many European societies in the 1970s and 1980s, Japan went through a rapid process of post-industrialization in the 1990s and 2000s. Whilst the implications were wide-ranging, young (would-be) labour market entrants were among the most affected groups: youth unemployment more than doubled, as did the prevalence of non-standard employment. Simultaneously, how to remain in employment and achieve work-life balance became serious concerns for women especially. This article builds on existing research as well as interviews with 38 university students in Kyoto to capture key features of such 'new risks' in Japan. Alongside intriguing gender and class differences, we find that the short- and long-term anxieties many students face have not yet been countered with public policy innovations. Emerging support measures outside the context of the family and the company remain not only inadequate but also largely unknown to students.

Keywords: youth, risk, post-industrialization, university students, employment, school-to-work transition, work-life balance

INTRODUCTION

The massive earthquake that shook Japan on 11 March 2011 and the destructive tsunami that arrived in its wake served as powerful reminders of the power of nature to disrupt human life, while the protracted nuclear emergency that immediately followed did much to resurrect worldwide concerns over ecological disaster. These actualized risks have already impacted, and will continue to impact, on tens of thousands of lives, with deep implications to relief and welfare measures. Though without wishing to downplay the magnitude or human impact of this recent tragedy, the present paper turns its analytical

gaze to an earlier – less calamitous but increasingly risky – period that began with the burst of Japan's real estate bubble in 1991 and ended with the global financial crisis of 2008 (known as the 'Lehman shock' in Japan). No less painful to those who bore the brunt of the consequences,[1] this pre-tsunami era saw Japan lose some of its economic might while undergoing an internal transformation from a haven of long-term employment relations, relative income equality and family stability into a 'divided' society (Ciavacci 2008). In this rather unfamiliar Japan, a significant group has to make do with low-paying and low-skilled jobs (Fu, forthcoming); divorces are filed much more frequently than before (Hertog 2009); and 'work-life balance', though now an official government concern, remains as elusive as ever (Toivonen 2011). Disturbingly, recent legal and economic changes have turned one third of Japanese employees into poorly protected – and socially discriminated – 'irregular workers', contributing to the growth of what some call the 'precariat' (Standing 2011). One consequence of this was that, when the global financial shock hit Japan in the autumn of 2008, thousands of dispatched workers were laid off immediately (Fackler 2009), though even some elite university students were denied contracts that had been promised to them by esteemed employers (Brinton 2011:172). Arguably, a new 'post-industrial' Japan was phased in over the seventeen-year period that fell between the inauspicious years of 1991 and 2008, with acute implications to those striving to transition from education to work and seeking to establish themselves in 'adult' institutions.

This paper interests itself with the consequences of Japan's post-industrial transformation to youth and university students in particular. More specifically, it inquires into how the 'risk landscape' that transitioning Japanese youth face has shifted through an analysis of macro-level trends and students' own risk perceptions.[2] Our account finds that while Japanese young people, too, now have to grapple with a set of new risks akin to those articulated, in the European context, by Peter Taylor-Gooby (2004) and Giuliano Bonoli (2005),[3] they are also beset by a number of dilemmas peculiar to Japan and East Asia. These notably include the persistence of a 'one-shot' recruitment system that, remaining highly segmented, is producing ever more intense competition for secure jobs.

Our qualitative interviews with students from two private universities, one ranked significantly higher than the other, throw into sharp relief the continued influence of class and gender on the anxieties felt by university students. Most strikingly, however, the interviews highlight very clearly how even students who recognize the presence of many 'new risks' still plan to fall back on 'old welfare' – i.e. family and company-based sources of support – in times of distress. Clearly, Japanese employment-related services

have scarcely kept up with post-industrial realities, compounding the harmful effects of new social risks for vulnerable groups in particular.

Two main parts follow this introduction. The first surveys macro-level changes in Japan's risk landscape for youth. Here we pay special attention to the sphere of employment, but also note the emergence of certain 'intimate risks'. The second part examines the risk perceptions of actual university students and so supplements our structural account with a qualitative micro-level analysis. In conclusion, we connect the issues highlighted in the main sections to employment-related support structures (including but not limited to social services) that could potentially counter new risks and anxieties.

A brief explanation of our theoretical assumptions is in place. First, we adopt a sociological approach to the study of risk that presumes the social embeddedness of knowledge, including that on risk (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982). Therefore, our purpose is not, in our first main section, to attempt to provide an 'objective' overview of risks that youth face only to then scrutinize the views of the students strictly in light of scholarly macro-data. We do not, in other words, wish to imply that such rather technical data is somehow superior to lived experience. Instead, we wish to merely set out some of the key coordinates of change and highlight salient issues that are widely perceived problematic in Japanese society, but that may not be viewed as risks by all youth alike.[4] Here we agree with MacDonald and Marsh (2001) that risk-related academic concepts such as social exclusion are frequently out of sync with the experiences of the people whom analysts apply them to.[5] We moreover concur with Foster and Spencer (2008) that the imposition of scholarly conceptualizations on young people's diverse situations can, at worst, distort such situations, amounting, therefore, to 'symbolic violence'.

On a related note, we find no reason to expect, as theorists such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens have been criticized for expecting, that risks should be equally distributed across different social locations. Those with robust family resources and respected qualifications, for instance, are likely to fare relatively well in presumably risky post-industrial contexts. Moreover, gender remains a particularly crucial dimension when discussing risks in relation to careers and families in 21st century Japan, for, as we will show, Japanese women and men continue to hold rather different ideals and expectations (see Brinton 1989 for a detailed investigation). To detect important variations in risk and risk perceptions, we chose to conduct interviews with comparable groups of students at an elite private university as well as another institution of relatively low rank (see below for sample details). Dealing with a context where

higher education remains starkly segmented according to institutional rank, this research design allows us to make telling comparisons and to highlight a *range* of perceptions among Japanese university students. Rather than aspiring to make broad generalizations based on our qualitative sample, we aim to discern important patterns, relationships and social mechanisms that may be examined on a larger scale in future research.[6]

THE CHANGING RISK LANDSCAPE THAT TRANSITIONING YOUTH STUDENTS FACE

This section discusses three major points: the transformation of Japan's social system as a whole in connection with post-industrialization; changes in the youth labour markets as well as closely related trends in higher education; and developments in friend and family relationships. We will find that, though the possibilities and choices open to *some* youth have probably increased, distinctive 'new risks' have recently emerged in Japan that affect large swathes of the country's young people.

On a general level, many scholars writing on Japanese society and youth concur that the pre-1990s social system was highly, if not exceptionally, 'functional', and that its main constitutive elements fit together into a symbiotic whole. Different scholars, of course, focus on different elements, from the 'iron triangle' of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, the skilled bureaucracy and large corporations (see Stockwin 2008) to the softer triangle of families, schools and workplaces (Honda & Hirai 2007), but with the assumption that in the economic growth era, each domain found it beneficial and possible to interact with the others. In terms of welfare, Goodman and Peng (1996) argue that postwar Japan had: emphasized *family responsibility* while de-emphasizing state welfare; formed a status-segregated, residual social insurance system; and relied on corporate welfare packages for 'core' workers' (Goodman & Peng 1996:207). Miyamoto, contrasting the Japanese case with Sweden where active labour market policy and public sector employment (for women especially) have been important, reminds us that post-war Japan chose to guard the employment of male breadwinners, via heavy public work investment and other means, at the expense of women's work opportunities (Miyamoto 2008).

As opposed to perceptions of a 'stable' and 'functional' pre-1990s situation, the Japanese society of the 1990s and 2000s has been typically described as 'dysfunctional' and as 'unravelling' at the seams (see e.g. Schoppa 2006). Economic shock, low growth, higher unemployment and disturbing suicide figures (see note 1 again) have been taken as key signs of decline.[7] A rapid process of de-industrialization has accompanied such
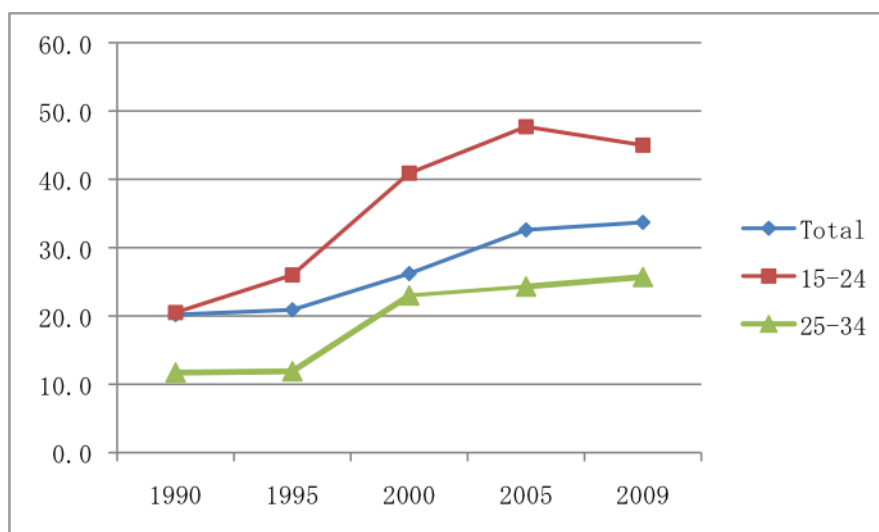
indicators: after remaining at around 35 percent throughout the 1980s, the share of workers employed in industrial jobs dropped rapidly from 1991, falling to less than 28 percent by the mid-2000s (World Bank 2010). In the same period, the share of service-sector workers rose by nearly 10 percentage points to account for two thirds of all employees. Interestingly, in this uncertain period, each of the abovementioned social institutions – traditional political parties, the bureaucracy, corporations, the family, schools and male breadwinner primacy – has been said to have fallen into a crisis. We next review related issues that are most relevant from the perspective of the present account.

1) Growing youth unemployment and the casualization of youth labour:

Albeit from a very low baseline of less than four percent, unemployment among Japanese youth in their 20s rose dramatically from the early 1990s onwards, reaching a peak of 10 percent for 20- to 24-year-olds in 2003 (Statistics Bureau 2011). It then decreased somewhat, but climbed up again in 2009. While still low compared to South European or Nordic standards, the Japanese youth unemployment rate conceals three important factors: the particularly severe long-term consequences of early-career unemployment (see below); the rapid casualization of those who *are* in employment; and the growing presence of 'discouraged' workers. The share of young non-standard workers – labelled as freeters in common parlance – indeed rapidly increased in the 1990s, producing a significant overall increase in economic insecurity (figure 1).[8] This resulted partly from the fact that, reluctant to dismiss existing (more senior) workers, recession-hit Japanese firms chose to curtail the recruitment of university students as full-time staff in favour of cheaper non-standard employees (Genda 2001/2005).

Statistics demonstrate the increasing severity of the employment environment for students in the era this paper investigates: the job-to-applicant ratio (kyuujin-bairitsu) for fresh college graduates, having hit a peak of 2.5 at the start of the 1990s, sank to the region of 1.0-1.5 in the 2000s, and is estimated to be 1.28 for 2011 (Recruit 2010). A swelling in the ranks of 'NEETs' (Not in Education, Employment or Training) that was reported in the mid-2000s partly reflected an increase in 'discouraged workers', similar to the unemployed in substance but not *actively* looking for a job for the time being (Genda 2007). Taken together, these trends mean that an expanded share of young workers is now excluded from major aspects of company welfare. As for university students specifically, around 20 percent of fresh graduates could not find a stable job at the end the 2000s compared to just seven percent in 1992 (Ministry of Education 2010).

Figure 1. Trends in 'irregular employment' among Japanese youth.

2) Crisis of 'life-time employment' and its exclusionary effects:

This deepening job insecurity must be understood in relation to the distinctive prior characteristics of the Japanese labour market. While the majority of Japanese workers never enjoyed 'life-time employment' in the idealized sense of the term, a system of long-term employment has been central to Japanese labour markets in the postwar era. However, after the early 1990s, the underlying recruitment system transformed from a powerful system of inclusion to an exclusion mechanism (Toivonen 2012) for many young would-be workers. This is because most companies have continued to prioritize the recruitment of fresh graduates over mid-career recruits under the so-called *ikkatsu saiyō* (lump hiring) system. The result is that those who miss their one chance to enter a large company – still the preferred option for most middle-class youth – at graduation are likely to end up working for a small or middle-sized company.[9] From there it is almost impossible to get transferred to a higher-paid job in a large firm. The same has come to apply to form of employment: for non-professionals who have once taken up irregular work at any type of company, it is very hard to move into a regular job, partly because they have not received the same degree of on-the-job training as 'standard' workers. Hence, under unstable economic conditions that often lead to abrupt reductions in graduate hiring, not finding a permanent position at the time of graduation seems a major 'new risk' with immediate and long-term consequences to students' lives. Clearly, a system that provides only a narrow time-window for the transition from education to

work (and little mobility thereafter) produces a rejected 'lost generation' every time the economy deteriorates.

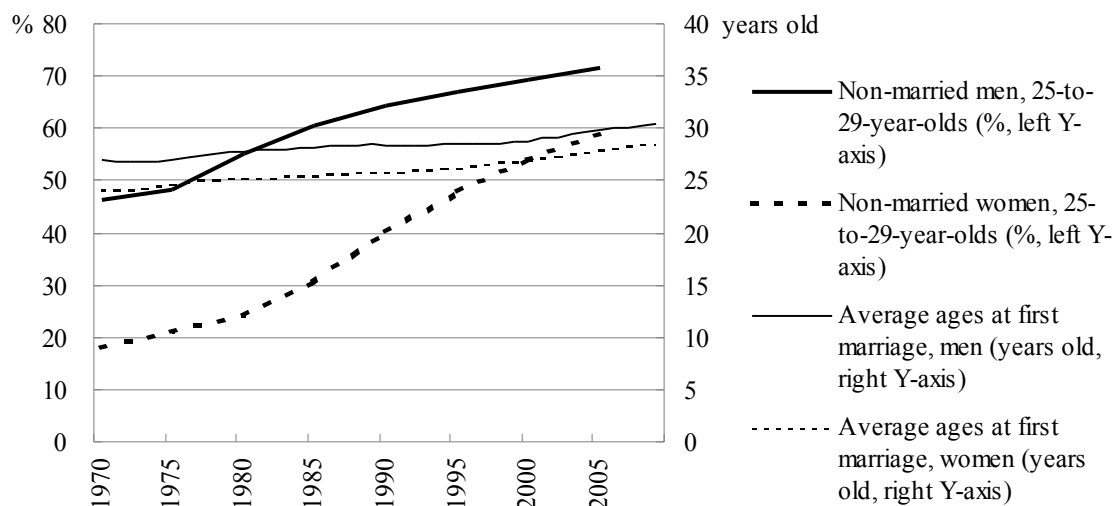**3) Higher education expansion with intensifying competition for stable careers:**

Helping to explain some of the above picture, Japan has recently experienced an expansion in higher education, with up to 50 percent of high school graduates enrolling annually in four-year universities. While this has meant broader access, a paradoxical side-effect is that educational competition has become, in some respects, more and not less intense than before. As we already saw, a degree from a four-year university no longer guarantees entry into stable employment, and graduating from a high-ranking elite university appears to have become more central than ever (Kariya 2010).[10] Competitive pressures are driven by the fact that, while higher education has become more universal, the labour markets have simultaneously grown much less secure and service-oriented, leading graduates from low-ranking university to take up jobs that used to be performed by non-university graduates (Kariya 2010:88). Accordingly, the risk landscape for university students has become much more heterogeneous and stratified than before, to the point that it makes much less sense than before to view (four-year) degree-holders as a coherent socio-economic group.[11]

4) Delayed marriages and stronger reliance on parental households as well as friends:

In addition to the domain of employment, it is increasingly important to scrutinize Japanese young people's intimate relationships to understand the social risks they face. First, the average age at first marriage has risen significantly, hovering now at around 29 for women and 31 for men (figure 2). These rates are virtually on par with those in European countries such as Finland and the UK. Strikingly however, co-habitation has *not* increased in Japan and remains extremely uncommon. Hence we have seen a delayed entry into (potentially) protective relationships between young people which used to give many women access to male-breadwinner incomes early on. If we believe statistics that consistently tell us the vast majority of youth in Japan still *want* to get married, late marriages and the prospect of non-marriage emerge as salient new risks, especially for women who still earn significantly less than men on average and who are usually not willing to have children out of wedlock (Hertog 2009). In pure non-marriage-rate terms, however, men of lower socio-economic status seem worst off

(Shirahase 2009). Though not formally a 'low' socio-economic group, men at low-ranking universities – such as those in our own sample – can also be expected to face a comparatively high risk of non-marriage.

Figure 2. The rate of non-married Japanese men and women (25-to-29-year-olds) and average ages at first marriage, 1975-2010.

Sources: For non-married rates, Statistics Bureau (2011); for average ages at first marriage, Cabinet Office (2010).

Puzzlingly, while young women are now more active in the labour market yet they are also more likely to co-reside longer with their parents.[12] This reflects not only later marriages and cultural norms but the fact that over two fifths of employed females work as poorly paid 'irregulars' (Statistics Bureau 2011). Living at home, though branded negatively by the media as productive of 'parasite singles' (Yamada 1999), can hence be seen as a risk management strategy amid low incomes, high urban rents as well as late marriages. Society has, in any case, become more tolerant regarding women's and *mothers'* employment, with the majority agreeing that it is fine for mothers with children to work outside the home. Actual behaviour still reflects the belief, however, that women with *young* children (0- to 3-year-olds) should stay at home, for around 70 percent of child-bearing women quit their jobs at child-birth (see Toivonen 2007).

Interestingly, it is in this context of postponed marriages and value change that *friends* seem to have become a yet more crucial condition for avoiding social isolation and for leading a stable life (Asano 2006; Doi 2008). Most authors in this line of research claim that, in post-industrial Japan, common values have become so unstable

and variable that youth must now more *actively* avoid the risk of conflict with others and, to this end, they are required to constantly communicate with others in their community. This argument implicitly draws on David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) in which it is argued that, as industry and economy shift from a material base to a service base, people will become more communication-oriented. According with this hypothesis, the importance of friends seems to indeed have steadily increased over the past three decades (Cabinet Office 2008). At the same time, the importance of family (for a person's sense of fulfilment) appears steady or even increasing, which suggests that friends are not necessarily prioritized *at the expense* of the family. It is still probable, of course, that friends and family play qualitatively different roles in Japanese young people's lives. Amid such trends, losing contact with, or the company of, friends and family can be expected to produce significant anxiety, and we therefore view it as one variety of 'intimate risk'.

THE RISK PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN KYOTO

Having investigated key structural issues in relation to new risks and youth in Japan, we next examine two groups of university students regarding their risk perceptions. We interviewed altogether 38 students using a pre-designed survey consisting of 33 items. The purpose of this survey was to generate open-ended answers and rich qualitative data on the aspirations and anxieties of third-year undergraduate students in the process of transitioning from university to work. In analyzing the responses we focus on the students' immediate concerns regarding their job-seeking activities; their views regarding non-standard employment; aspirations and anxieties vis-à-vis the longer-term future; support-seeking tendencies at times distress; and their perspectives on geographical mobility and intimate risks. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, generating a substantial amount of promising data.

Our choice of universities requires some explanation. We selected these so as to ensure our interviews could illustrate a broad *range* of risk perceptions across contrasting but comparable social locations. We agreed that one way to operationalize this idea was to choose students who were taking similar majors at two universities of different rank. Although no official, comprehensive rankings of universities are published in Japan, there is a high awareness of university rank in general, based on historical legacies, the accumulated prestige of particular institutions and their

performance in terms of student employment and entrance examination difficulty level. Taking the last of these measures, the Department of Sociology at our University A (where half of our interviewees studied at) was ranked in the top five percept among a total of 700 private liberal arts departments in 2011 (Yoyogi Zeminaaru 2011). By contrast, the Department of Humanities at our University B ranked in the lower middle range of liberal arts departments. We took this stark difference in prestige and ranking as a useful (if not perfect) proxy for the class and academic backgrounds of the students in our survey, with University A students expected to come from middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds and University B students from the lower middle-classes.

The sample and the survey

All of our interviewees were recruited through personal contacts at both of the chosen universities. Here, university instructors were in a key role as they asked students if they would like to take part in the survey. As the survey was fully voluntary, those who were busy or otherwise reluctant to cooperate were excluded from the sample. All respondents were third-year students. University A's Department of Sociology had 4,500 students in 2008 out of which 53 percent were female, while University B's Department of Humanities had 1,000 students of which as many as 80 percent were women (overall, University A had 33,000 students who were 64 percent male, whereas University B enrolled 4,000 students out of which only 38 per cent were male). We conducted 38 interviews in total, 21 at University A and 17 at University B. Table 1 gives an overview of our sample and key responses. Only two of the respondents were non-Japanese, both at University B. All interviews were carried out in Japanese by the three authors, and they were subsequently transcribed verbatim and transferred onto NVivo for analysis.

When recruiting students, we called our survey a 'job-seeking awareness survey' in order not to prime the respondents to think solely about risks. At the beginning of each interview, we furthermore stated that we wished to hear about the students' hopes *and* anxieties regarding their future working lives. Crucially, instead of employing the term 'risk' (*risuku*) – which is a loan word from English the use of which is not common in Japanese everyday speech – we opted for inquiring the students about their 'anxieties', or *fuan* (不安). *Fuan* is very commonly used in regular speech and it can also mean feeling insecure, worried or uneasy; we thus found it the most readily comprehensible word to employ in our survey.

Table 1. Overview of interview sample.

	Univ. A	Univ. B
Female	14	13
Male	7	6
Average age (age-range)	20.8 (20-22)	21.3 (20-29)
Occupation of household earner	/21	/19
- Large company	5	7
- Size-unidentified company	4	2
- Middle or small company	3	3
- Self-employed	4	3
- Civil officer	5	4
- Unidentified	1	1
Company size orientation	/21	/19
- Large company	17	3
- Size unspecified	3	16
- Middle or small company	1	0
Working in or near hometown	3	3
Preferences regarding form of employment		
- Wishes to find regular employment	20/21	18/19
- Worries about possibly becoming an irregular employee	7/21	8/19
Persons to ask for help during distress (multiple answers allowed)		
- Family members	11	15
- Friends or ex-seniors	14	13
- Superiors, seniors or colleagues in the workplace	5	8
- Lover	3	1

The timing of our survey – the first week of December in 2008 – was very important and carefully chosen: at this point in time, the respondents were approaching the end of their third year as undergraduates and were generally expected to have started their job-seeking activities (or at least to have started considering different opportunities).[13] Had we interviewed second-year students, the issue of job-seeking would most likely not have been very relevant yet; conversely, fourth-year students would have been so close to graduation that the majority of them would already have made final decisions about

their next steps. So, interviewing third-year students was an ideal way to inquire about risk perceptions in relation to immediate job-seeking concerns as well as long-term anxieties. It should be added that, at the time of our interviews, the global financial crisis was already in full swing and discouraging news regarding hiring were in wide circulation.

Immediate anxieties: finding a good job

Our interviewees' most immediate concern in the majority of cases was to find desirable employment to move into after graduation. In the case of University A, the most popular 'ideal jobs' were those at large manufacturers, mass media corporations, trading companies and in finance. Very few had a specific job or occupation in mind – the exceptions were one student who wanted to become a financial planner and another who wanted to create sounds for computer games – and most thought in terms of company or industry type. Some had decided though that they wanted to be involved in marketing or sales. Most students clearly remained open to many possible options and avoided clearly defining their 'dream jobs'. For one student, this was a source of anxiety as she puzzled whether to send out dozens or even hundreds of applications, or alternatively channel all her efforts towards a narrower goal.

Over half of the respondents from University A expressed worries regarding the deteriorating employment situation at the time, citing the 'Lehman shock' (the financial crisis that fully emerged in late 2008, so-called naitei torikeshi (cancellations of informally promised positions at companies), and an impending 'employment ice age'. In addition to common concerns over landing a job and over not being able to realize expectations, there was a clear pattern where female students were anxious regarding whether they could manage in a male-dominated sector (e.g. trade companies) and whether they could balance their work and family duties in the future (see below). Although few of the interviewees discussed their explicit 'risk management strategies' in length, it appears that at the stage of job-searching, most respondents were striving to minimize risks by keeping an open view and by applying for a wide range of jobs as long as they were at relatively well-known companies.

While University A students were on the whole rather upbeat and confident about their future employment prospects, over a third of University B students we interviewed stated directly that they were *at a loss regarding how to go about looking for jobs*. In other words, they felt they had little knowledge about the concrete steps required during job-seeking activities. Furthermore, a similar share said they lacked confidence

regarding their ability to find a job at all, citing the fact that they studied at a low-ranking university as one major reason. They, too, were concerned of the worsening employment situation, but compared to University A students, the sense of anxiety among University B students was significantly more tangible and acute. Though a handful were aiming to enter sectors such as mass media (including TV programme and videogame production and events management) which they feared were fiercely competitive, well over half were thinking of customer service jobs and retailing where, needless to say, employment tends to be generally precarious and low-paid. In contrast with students at University A, there were only three respondents who placed stress on finding work with a large corporation: the rest did not find this all that important. One way to interpret this result is in terms of a value difference; another is that University B students may have simply viewed it as far too unlikely that they would be hired by a major corporation to warrant high hopes. Either way, the responses seem to show, at the very lest, that our interviewees had a clear sense of their place within Japan's hierarchical labour market structure and that certain mechanisms were 'sorting' them into dissimilar segments of the labour markets.

Perceptions about irregular employment

As table 1 shows, almost all students in our sample nevertheless wishes to find *regular* employment. However, a large proportion said that they were in fact worried about the possibility of becoming irregular employees. When prodded further, most students expressed the view that irregular employment was less stable and they associated it with a higher risk of unemployment, as follows:

> *[22-year-old female at University A]*
> -My teacher says that we had better become regular employees first when we graduate from university. I agree that regular employment is more stable than irregular one.

> *[21-year-old female at University B]*
> *Researcher: Would you feel anxious if you had to become an irregular employee?*
> -Yes I would. When the economic situation is unstable like now, irregular employees will be laid off first. Among the seniors around me, even some [academically] excellent individuals are unable to become regular employees

and are therefore at risk of becoming unemployed. When I think of such things I feel anxious.

[21-year-old female at University B]
-My teacher says that thirty percent of graduates end up working as temporary staff […], but temporary workers tend to become unemployed at times like this, so I strongly prefer to work as a permanent staff and be economically stable.

However, there were a few exceptions:

[20-year-old male at University A]
-Among my friends from junior high school and high school, there are many *freeters* (part-time workers). I'm in contact with a few of them. I don't [specifically] ask them about their daily life, but they seem to be happy so far. I haven't heard them saying they were anxious about the future.

[21-year-old female at University B]
-I think that we do not necessarily have to become permanent staff. If one wants to do something other than being employed, for example global travelling between stints of irregular work, one may well do that.

These students do *not* think that irregular employees necessarily become too poor or insecure to do what they want to do. Once again, this view can be interpreted in many ways, but it clearly illustrates that becoming a so-called freeter (young irregular worker) is not perceived as inherently problematic or 'risky' by all university students, although many are taught about the associated insecurities at home or at university. It may well be that most students do not fully grasp the vast earnings gaps between irregular and regular workers that do not necessarily become salient during the first working years but grow dramatically thereafter (see note 8). However, it may also be that values have changed and diversified to the extent that high incomes and employment stability are no longer desired very strongly by a considerable proportion of Japanese young people.

The longer term: concerns over marriage and 'work-life balance'

The questions we asked regarding how the students saw themselves in ten years' time and how they planned to balance work and family duties yielded intriguing results.

First, 11 out of the 13 female students at University A insisted that they wished to get married over the subsequent ten years, whereas most male students wanted to get married only in their 30s after they had built careers. By contrast, at University B, only 50 per cent of the female respondents expressed that they were keen to marry; the remaining half either gave ambiguous answers or *did not believe in their marriage chances*. The male students at University B seemed, on the average, even less interested in matrimony.

In both groups, only two to three of the women voiced an intention to become ambitious 'career women', but on the whole, the females at University A were keen to find a viable way to combine paid work with family duties. The women at University B, on the other hand, strongly doubted that they were smart or 'agile' enough to handle both paid employment and domestic work at the same time. The concrete ways in which the female respondents at University A planned to achieve a desired work-life balance consisted essentially of working for a company with a good family leave system; of finding an 'understanding' partner; and of possibly quitting at child-birth (if it seemed necessary) and later entering another job.[14] Nevertheless, while clear about their hopes and ideals, few were absolutely confident that they could realise their plans, with one interviewee commenting as follows:

> -I think that, for the most part, I will try my best to manage both work and family. However, I'm sure it will be tough…You know, working and then returning home to do the housework and to wash the dishes, both being a type of work, it'll be tough because that means I'll be working practically all the time…
> *Researcher: Will you coordinate these tasks with your partner?*
> -I would like very much to do so, but I suspect there are only few men in today's Japan who are willing to cooperate on such things. So if I have a child, I may choose a short-hours job or a company that allows for that.

This kind of ambivalence and underlying pessimism characterised the responses of females at both University A and University B, with women at the latter university more willing to compromise their jobs and expecting to find only 'traditionally-minded' husbands. The latter group was also more likely say they might avoid marriage altogether.

Crucially, notions of 'work-life balance' and 'taking good care of the family' (*kazoku wo daiji ni suru*) meant starkly different things for the female and male respondents. Whereas women were willing to both work outside the home *and* adopt responsibility

for their children's well-being, men planned to look after their families by working hard at their future jobs and by spending part of the weekends with their children. The male interviewees had clearly thought about work-life balance strategies much less than their female course-mates, but their responses expressed this overall disposition.

Seeking support: family, colleagues and friends over public services

Interested in the students' support-seeking tendencies, we first inquired about who they would turn to in times of work-related distress and second about whether they could imagine consulting any professional institutions if faced with serious difficulties. The reactions to the first question were rather uniform, with over half at both universities saying they would turn to either their families, friends, or to both families and friends for support. As many as half of the students at University B also planned to consult their superiors, seniors or colleagues at their future place of work. The responses to the second question were more surprising: while half of the interviewees at University A admitted they knew of no professional support institutions, *none of the students at University B said they were aware of such support institutions*. Three did indicate that they might search for some if they were faced with a serious issue, but another four expressed a negative attitude towards consulting of formal institutions about work-related hardships. Seven out of the 21 University A respondents mentioned labour unions as a possible source of support and three thought they might use the services of counsellors attached to their companies. The response of one University A male student is in any case illustrative of our interviewees' reactions:

> -Well, it's really more like *I* will be consulted by my employer. What, you mean that there are places that you can consult regarding work? I think that I'll manage alone somehow, by myself.

Our respondents accordingly appeared all but completely unaware of existing employment-related support services. The responses further revealed that many may feel *uncomfortable* about sharing their problems with 'strangers', i.e. counsellors who they are not acquainted with on a personal level, and thus feel pressure to deal with (or withstand) problems on their own. In this sense they fall in line with the neoliberal ethos that tries to reduce problems and risks that have social roots to 'self-responsibility'. It is clear that the students we interviewed had not been taught very much about employment-related services at school, in their communities, or at university.

Mobility and 'intimate risks'

We next investigate whether and how those who hope to take a job in or near their hometown think of 'intimate risks'. Our interviews tell us that some indeed do consider such risks and perceive a trade-off between high work orientation and intimate risk. The following response from a female student at University B (who lives alone but is from the adjacent Shiga prefecture where her mother lives) illustrates this:

> -If I could, I want to return to my hometown [after graduation]. […] I don't want to go to Tokyo very much.
> *Researcher: why?*
> -Because there are many people in Tokyo, some of them being good and other being bad. I'm afraid of the city. Since I had lived in countryside, I'm not accustomed to such a crowded place.

As the only child, this interviewee has to continue her family line and intends to be a housewife in the end, exemplifying 'high family obligation' and 'low work orientation' (Hirao and Shigematsu 2006; Satou 2005). At the same time, she highlights the perceived risks of living in a crowded city like Tokyo. Other more 'work oriented' respondents, however, had begun to consider living in this particular metropolis if it should further their career goals:

> *[21-year-old female at University A from Osaka Prefecture, living alone, hoping to enter cosmetic or commodity manufacturing companies]*
> -I had thought, "I absolutely don't want to go to Tokyo." Since I'm from Osaka, had lived in Kyoto, and had not moved out of Kansai area, I had thought, "I cannot go to such a place (like Tokyo)." But, […] one of them told me that, " […] if you want to get a better job and hope to improve your life, Tokyo is still a place full of big chances." […] I, after listening to the talks, came to think that, if companies I want to enter are based in Tokyo, I may as well go to Tokyo.

Respondents like these have concrete hopes regarding work and they think quite positively regarding living far from their hometowns; they are not completely averse to taking intimate risks (of losing close friends in a community where they live and work) if this gives them a better chance to realize their hopes. Yet, at the say time they clearly

wish to stay in or near their hometowns if possible to avoid intimate risk, indicating an ambivalence regarding the attitudes of even work-oriented university students towards job-related and mobility. Though we do not have the data to probe the issue more deeply, it is possible that, in a context where reliance on parental families is extremely high overall (see above), young people's ambivalence on this count reflects *economic* insecurity as much as appreciation of close relationships.

CONCLUSION: NEW RISKS, OLD WELFARE

Focusing on university students in particular, this paper set out to explain how the landscape of social risks faced by Japanese youth changed in the period that fell between the tumultuous years of 1991 and 2008. The analysis began first with a macro-level account that was then supplemented with a qualitative analysis of the risk perceptions of 38 transitioning university students. In conclusion, we re-articulate the salient risks that were identified; consider students' risk management strategies; and briefly highlight some unacknowledged risks and subtle mechanisms that impinge on the transition from university into working life.

What are the dominant new risks that Japanese university students increasingly encountered from the early 1990s onwards and that shape the lives of current students? There can be no doubt that, as reflected in our employment statistics, the prospect of falling into labour market marginality and prolonged insecurity looms as risk number one for this demographic. This risk is clearly aggravated by the persistence of a rigid hiring system that gives only a narrow time-window for securing a stable job. Not surprisingly, the interviewed students felt strong concern over the possibility of failing to secure permanent employment at graduation and having to labour as a so-called irregular (*hiseiki*) worker – a status they associated with a heightened risk of lay-offs during economic crisis. At the same time, there were a handful of exceptions, but it is possible that, in addition to less work-oriented values, the students who saw nothing wrong with living as a part-time-working *freeter* had enough (family) resources to protect them from *economic* hardship during labour market marginality. In any case, compared to the extremely low rates of unemployment and paucity of non-standard work in the preceding decades, the labour market environment became radically more insecure for Japanese youth in the 1990s. University students, who, with the expansion of higher education, faced increasingly stiff competition for stable jobs, were not exempted from these trends.

Resembling western Europe in some ways, another major set of risks emerged at this time around issues of marriage and family. The risk of late and forgone marriage as well as severe work-life conflict have clearly sharpened since the 1990s. Macro-data and the low marriage expectations of students at University B illustrate the former concern well. The latter risk is articulated with surprising intensity and consistency in the responses of the young women at University A, hinting that on some level, 'work-life balance' is a middle-class and elite issue in Japan. It is hardly novel to note the persistence of gender role differences, but what astonishes the authors is the persistence of dramatically different expectations between *young* Japanese men and women. Although both male and female interviewees expressed their wish to 'take good care of their families', the former clearly intended to serve as weekend dads dedicated to their jobs during weekdays, while the latter wished to attend fully to both families *and* jobs, but anticipated this would result in severe stress. Females at both of our universities were pessimistic regarding the prospect of finding a 'cooperative' partner in this respect, and not one individual expected to rely largely on public childcare or other family services to balance family and work (though some hoped to join a work-life-balance-oriented company).

If we approach this emerging landscape of new risks from a Nordic or West European perspective, several points seem deeply confounding: Why does Japan retain its exclusionary hiring system in a post-industrial environment that demands flexibility and second chances, especially for those hit by economic downturns around the time of graduation? How is it possible that so-called 'standard' and 'non-standard' workers are so unequally treated, or that education in Japan has been reduced to a win-or-lose race to achieve a modicum of labour market security? And why, despite later and ever later marriages, is a massive share of young adults in their 20s relying on their ageing parents instead of cohabiting with their partners? All of these questions are fascinating in their own right, and each of them is to some extent the subject of political conflict and societal re-negotiation. Here we have space to touch only upon the question of risk management: how do young people intend to counter the new anxieties they face, and what degree of support do they expect to receive from public services?

The short answer, based on our interviews, is: first, by striving to get hired as permanent workers (preferably, by a stable large corporation), and second, by relying on their parents, colleagues and friends in times of distress. In the Japanese context, these strategies fall under 'old' welfare since the enterprise and the family have functioned as the two main social security pillars in the postwar era. The finding that many intend to consult and/or rely on friends during distress emerges as an interesting novel factor.

Even as many continue to work long hours, unmarried Japanese youth certainly now have more time than before to spend with friends, and, with the proliferation of social media and e-mail, they also have more nimble means to attend to friend relationships. (Indeed, Furuichi Noritoshi, one of the leading young social scientists in Japan, identifies friends as a leading well-being factor among Japanese youth). Unfortunately, our data does not reveal the extent to which support from friends matters at times of genuine work-related hardship, such as when an individual is faced with pressures to work extremely long hours, workplace bullying, a sudden lay-off, sexual harassment, denial of parental leave and so forth.

What about public services, then? Although several of our interviewees at University A said they might consult the relevant labour union at times of distress, what stood out from the responses overall was the *near-complete absence of public services* from students' risk management strategies.[15] Japan, of course, is well-known for having downplayed the role of formal social services throughout the 20th century, opting instead for sparse and less costly types of informal services (Goodman & Peng 1996). More recently, however, certain new employment services such as the Job Café (a counselling centre for students and part-time workers) and the Youth Support Station (a counselling service for non-employed youth) have been launched to cater to young people specifically (Toivonen 2012). Such services arguably remain limited in scope and funding, but it is ironic that none of our interviewees seemed to be aware of them or express a general willingness to consult professional institutions outside the framework of the company.

This paper has thus clearly highlighted not only the emergence of significant new risks, but also a continued reliance on 'old welfare' Japan. It is important to acknowledge that industrial-age welfare policies may still be serving rather well those who manage to secure permanent jobs at large companies or those who enjoy support from affluent parents. Yet non-standard workers, employees at small companies, those from poorer backgrounds (including single-parent families that remain predominantly poor in Japan) and those who fail to marry despite a preference for matrimony have strong needs have effectively become outsiders (to varying degrees). They urgently need new services and innovations to counter deepening social risks. These risks include long-term poverty that accompanies labour market marginality, exclusion from social security measures (pensions, unemployment benefits) and limited access to social care and social contact more generally (see Abe 2010).

Because of the dysfunctional nature of the 'one-shot' recruitment system and the great demands placed on students by job-seeking activities, it is tempting to

recommend, as scholars such as Honda and Kariya have effectively done, that reforming this system should be a top priority. While we agree that reforms in this area are crucial, altering recruitment practices will not by itself alter the dual nature of the post-industrial labour markets in Japan. With the risk of unemployment and economic marginality so high, it is an urgent imperative to strengthen the entire social service and security infrastructure so that those who fall into economic marginality are not automatically excluded from welfare.

That said, probably the most cunning aspect of new risks during times of post-industrial transition is that many aspects of them remain unacknowledged by vulnerable groups. Risks that are not anticipated or are brushed off ('it won't happen to me') are the most difficult ones to mitigate, especially in the absence of readily accessible public services. Those with anthropological sensibilities will easily note a battery of such hidden new risks in Japan. These seem to include not only the risk of non-marriage but also the growing risk of divorce and single-parenthood (the crude divorce rate in Japan is now on par with that in Germany and Sweden; Hertog 2009:4). Entering a non-elite university with high hopes only to find, at the start of job-seeking activities, that one is less than well-received by esteemed employers, is another aspect of new risks faced by youth. Last but not least – and with clear connections to class – paths to post-industrial labour markets are paved not just by an unequal university system but also by implicit *information* inequalities. Students at University B, finding themselves on the wrong side of the divide, demonstrated this well when they expressed confusion at simply not knowing how to go about conducting job-seeking activities. Relatedly, whereas students at University A were particular about seeking employment with large, well-known companies, students at University B did not really pay attention to company size or reputation even as they wished to attain secure standard worker status. Granted, the latter faced considerable disadvantages due to studying at a lower-ranking institution (through which they were being subtly channelled towards service-sector jobs in smaller companies) but they almost certainly would have benefited from *knowing* more about the job-seeking process, predominant risks and various sources of support. Sharing information more equitably and thoroughly, for instance via rigorously executed career education curricula from middle school level onwards, could at make central new risks more visible and increase the likelihood that those for whom the future looks less than rosy will take personal or political action to reduce their vulnerability. However, in light of the relative rigidity of Japanese educational institutions, public services and commercial personnel agencies (that are not necessarily interested in protecting students from employment-related risks), it is likely that various Internet-savvy social

entrepreneurs – rather than the managers of existing institutions – will be the ones to drive positive changes in this realm.[16]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 A total of nearly *half a million people* took their own lives in 1992-2008, with the annual number of suicides averaging at 29,000 (Keisatsuchou 2011). This suicide wave may pale with the Touhoku disaster (that resulted in around 25,000 people dead or missing) in dramatic effect but not in the number of lives impacted.

2 We approach risk more from the perspective of empirical social policy studies rather than theoretical sociology. Our focus also differs in emphasis from, but is relevant to, many studies that examine 'at-risk youth' or 'risky transitions'.

3 These include: work-family conflict, single parenthood, (long-term) unemployment, poverty despite employment and insufficient social security coverage.

4 Kosugi (2008), for example, notes in her studies of young irregular workers (problematized as 'freeters' in the early 2000s by scholars such as herself!) that not all such youth view their status as 'problematic'.

5 In taking stock of interviews with youth in economically marginal neighbourhoods, MacDonald and Marsh (2001) note that many young people who are labelled as socially excluded can still subjectively feel 'included' in their localities, implying that their risk perceptions differ markedly with the views of (elite) policy-makers.

6 A 'social mechanism' can be defined as 'a constellation of entities and activities that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome' (Hedström & Swedberg 1998:11).

7 A major real estate bubble that had developed in Japan burst by 1991, ushering in a decade-long recession that led the country's GDP growth rate to sink from 3.4 percent in 1991 to -2 percent in 1998,

after which growth recovered only modestly.

8 According to the Cabinet Office (2006), non-standard workers earn roughly 85 percent of what their standard worker contemporaries do in the early 20s, but only about 60 percent in their early 40s.

9 Compared to 21.1 percent who wished to work for large companies and 5.9 percent who wanted to become government bureaucrats, just 4.2 percent of college students in 2008 actively hoped to work for small- or medium-sized enterprises upon graduation (The Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Agency 2008).

10 Japan's top public universities are Tokyo University, Kyoto University and Osaka University, while the universities of Keio and Waseda head the private university rankings. There is considerable consistency over time in the ranking of both top public and private universities in Japan.

11 It should be added that the popularity of masters degrees has remained highly limited in Japan as employers, under the legacy of the Japanese employment system, prefer younger hires due to their trainability and due to workplace authority issues.

12 Though 75 percent of 25-to 29-year-old women in 2005 worked compared to only 54 percent in 1985 (Statistics Bureau 2011), an impressive 80 percent of unmarried women – almost half of *all* women in the age-group – lived with their parents in the same year (IPSS 2006).

13 The academic year begins in April at most Japanese universities. As Honda (2010) reports, Japanese university students now spend about 10 months on job-hunting activities on average, which represents a large increase compared to the 1990s.

14 See Toivonen (2007) and Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen (2011) regarding the development of employment-oriented family policy and related dilemmas in Japan.

15 With membership at less than one fifth of the labour force, labour unions are currently a limited source of support for young workers, as are (partly corrupt) Labour Standards Inspection Offices (Weathers & North 2009). These institutions usually refuse to deal with issues faced by non-standard workers.

16 Yamamoto Shigeru's 'Newvery', committed to reducing drop-out rates among vocational school and university students, is one well-known example of an educational social enterprise that is effectively addressing new risks in the Japanese context.

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