Dilemmas of Adulthood

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I finished scribbling down blurbs from the ads for women’s magazines hanging in the center of the subway car and ran for the door. As I made my way through the surge of bodies in the downtown Tokyo station, passing shops and restaurants in the underground mall, my eye was caught momentarily by a young woman in a deep-purple jacket, not a common color in 1993. Wouldn’t it be interesting if she were my next interviewee, I thought. A glance at my watch told me that I needed to rush through the back streets to my small business hotel in time to meet the actual next interviewee whom a mutual friend, a Japanese student of mine from Oregon, had introduced me to. I hardly had time to get out my notebook when in walked the girl in the purple coat. I stood up and introduced myself to Ito-san who, despite her quiet demeanor, would have plenty to say if her purple coat was any indication.

Single in Tokyo

Ordering coffee as we sat in the lime-green plastic chairs of the coffee shop, we were several miles from the place and over a decade before the time when I would conclude that a straightforward analysis in terms of “agency” and “resistance” was not going to work in this study. I relate Ito-san’s narrative at this point because my 1993 vision of her was not mistaken. She was a relatively self-directed agent, even a self-admitted rebel against the status quo. So I have set myself a challenge. If the tension and ambivalence I felt throughout the whole group of women’s narratives also emerge from and enhance the understanding of Ito-san’s interview, then this is one proof of their efficacy.
I pair the analysis of Ito-san’s narrative set in Tokyo with that of a woman named Kawai-san who lives in Morioka, a city in the northeast. Kawai-san wore bland colors and played down, even hid, the changes she brought to her life. Their geographical contrast gives me the opportunity to discuss differences between urban and regional Japan that intersect with gender change in this book. They both serve as concrete examples through which to link concepts of tension, ambivalence, and contradiction with ideas about psychosocial development and social movements that aid my analytical eye and help the reader to understand these narratives in a broader way.

**Ito-san**

1993, Age Twenty-Nine

After we exchanged greetings, I blurted out, “Your jacket is a great color!”

“Oh, this. I went to Hong Kong with my mother. We were shopping and I saw this long purple jacket. I said, ‘I want to buy it.’ ‘Please don’t buy that,’ she pleaded, ‘at least not that. It’s too loud. You shouldn’t walk outside in such loud (hade) stuff.’ But I bought it because I really like purple. I do get looked at, though, when I wear it. Japanese don’t wear such colors much. In Japan when people stand out, people above push them down or people below pull their legs back.”

“Do you look at magazines and find clothes you like usually or what?”

“No. As I walk around town, I see people who look cool, and then I find those kinds of clothes. In the magazines everything has the same look, like uniforms. I like to find things that are like me (jibun nari ni).”

While the coffee was still hot, Ito-san said: “I’m a bit rebellious. My father treated me like a boy. I played with my brother like a boy. I was given discipline, but my parents didn’t say ‘because you are a girl.’ ” In contrast, she described her mother as a “full-time housewife who could have worked. It was a shame but there wasn’t much work in the country. I always thought I wanted to work, looking at my mother. It’s scary to think of always being in the house and not knowing the movements of society.”

Ito-san’s hands lay in her lap, but her brown eyes danced. “I am just doing as I wish, as if I will be allowed to do things.” She looked down. “But my consciousness is weak and I can’t just make strong decisions like Mari.” Mari was her university classmate, my master’s student, and a symbol of daring to Ito-san. Ito-san’s laments were poetic: “Self, what is it? Sometimes I feel lost. I try this and that. I don’t go in a straight line.”
Ito-san had studied in a good Tokyo university that landed her a job with promotions in a top-notch company in the aftermath of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL). “I got a job at Fujitsu as a computer systems engineer. The EEOL had just gone into effect and women, too, worked until midnight. The surface truth was that women could go up, but there were no women on top then. You were just one gear in a big machine. You were just told to do something and didn’t understand where it was going.”

“So you just quit?”

“Yes, after two years. I went to work in a small company where I could see the whole picture. I was in charge of the office. I wouldn’t say I felt a sense of worth (yarigai) in it, but it was enjoyable because it was small. I liked the people and I knew what was going on. I quit last year in September.”

“Mari said that you are studying English now.”

“Yes. I want to do things that enter in between people and machines so people can understand machines easily. I want work that I would like to continue for my whole life. My mother wants me to come home to the country, but there would be no work there. Anyway, when I go home, we argue. She says, ‘You are uncouth (darashi ga nai).’ ”

“What do you mean? Does she think you should marry?”

“She would always send pictures—won’t you meet this person? In Tokyo, if you don’t marry, no one asks why you aren’t married at twenty-nine, but in the country, they ask, ‘Was she not able to marry?’ So I don’t want to return there. My mother is an old human being . . . but she has changed somewhat. Now she says, ‘Do what you want to do.’ ”

Ito-san ran her well-shaped fingernails along the edge of the low coffee table between us. “Actually, I lived together with a guy for four years. We didn’t talk of marriage to each other. We were just good friends. It wasn’t that period of time to think of marriage. We just lived together—not really in love (suki ga nai).”

She said little more and we ended with pleasantries.

I had a note from Ito-san in 1994 that she was still unemployed and wished “there were a way to live legally with a close friend and partner.” She told me that I would understand young women better if I read Kitchen, a novel by Yoshi Banana about the loneliness of young people and their search for relationships. Its characters felt emptiness but found friends with whom to build a new kind of family that accepted them just as they were.
1998, AGE THIRTY-FOUR

In 1998, we met in the same plastic chairs in the mezzanine lobby of the business hotel. This time Ito-san wore a long, sleeveless knit dress with horizontal wide black-and-white stripes. She launched quickly into an explanation about the question that her narrative had harbored for five years. Why did her mother call her “uncouth”?

“Before I lived with a guy—I told you, didn’t I? It was a half-marriage life. But I felt that I didn’t need that guy. I thought I would just go according to myself (jibun nari ni). I think now it was good that I did as I wanted and didn’t go into his family’s register (koseki). There is a power difference between just living together and legally entering the family registry.” The latter was the legal process of marriage.

“Yeah, you’d have to get divorced to get out.”

“Right. At that time, my parents couldn’t understand. They were surprised like it was a crime. They said, ‘You’re uncouth!’ But in the end, they said, ‘Okay, if you want. It can’t be helped.’”

“Wow—that must have been difficult to tell them.”

“It was hard. But I didn’t like hiding it. I thought it [living together] was right. It wasn’t hurting anyone. I wanted them to understand. Now when there is something, I usually talk with my brother first by e-mail. And then I try saying it to my parents. Sometimes he acts as a go-between.”

“Hmm,” she mused to herself. “Am I overly dependent?”

Ito-san used the word amaeru—to be dependent on or indulge oneself in accepting the goodwill of intimate others (Doi 1973). It was both seductive because it was comfortable, and alarming because it threatened her search for “self.” Complex in its meanings, “dependence” is a term of debate among women in this study to which we will return.

Despite the 1990s recession, Ito-san had managed to find a job at a translation agency, a new-style company that was a subsidiary of a large electronics firm. Luckily, her age still fell within the “age limit” applied to women in the employment market, which had moved from thirty to thirty-five.

“We have flex time! I couldn’t live without it!” She exclaimed. “I go ten to eight because I don’t like to work early. The superiors are not strict. They leave the work to each person. And we can wear jeans unless you have to meet a customer.”

“And it’s so nice to be in charge of your time,” I said. “I like that about my job, too. What about promotion for women?”
“There is a wall. Of the assistant managers, only one is a woman. I am not a full company member. I’m a contract worker. My job is the same for salary and vacation but I wouldn’t get maternity leave or retirement payments and there is no promotion. Now people are just glad to have work. People think of getting experience and skill and then they can go elsewhere. It is like America.”

“Yeah, the same thing is happening in America—a lot more contract workers.” I said it with a touch of critique in my voice, but Ito-san saw it as proof of a new individuality.

“We used to depend on the company but now we depend on our own skill,” she observed. “But I am applying for other jobs. I really don’t feel a sense of accomplishment or, what do they say, self-actualization (jibun jitsugen). I feel a feeling of fatigue.”

“I can’t live without my cable TV. I watch American movies, American sitcoms, dramas—Sex and the City, Friends, Buffy, ER, Chicago . . . I never watch Japanese TV.” She laughed. “It’s embarrassing, but I love the computer and cable TV. I like to do the internet and play games. I’m a kind of geek. But I have accepted myself.”

It seemed to me that she was doing a good job of approximating her life to these shows: she had a close group of friends and another long-term boyfriend in 1998 whom she didn’t live with but whose idea of fun fit with hers. She enjoyed driving to the beach to watch him parasail.

“My apartment is big and also has a parking place. I pay 129,000 yen [around $1,300]. It’s on the high side for a person my age. It has one big room with a loft room. I like doing the computer on the internet on vacation days. I like the give-and-take of e-mail. And my friends will drop in suddenly to visit me in my apartment even when I am sleeping in the morning. I have cable TV and they want to watch it. I say ‘I’m no coffee shop!’ ” Again, her quiet but open laugh. No hands over the mouth like many Japanese women.

Then, with sudden seriousness, she said, “I can really let my heart loose with my friends.” She paused. “May I speak in English?”

“Sure, I think you must be quite good by now.”

“It’s a secret, but I have applied for a job in the Silicon Valley with an American company as a translator coordinator. I told my brother but not my parents. I will have to convince them if I get the job.” Her most daring thoughts were too secret to be spoken in Japanese in Japan.
By 2004, it turned out that Ito-san had not gotten the job in the United States, but another plan was brewing. We ate Italian pasta Alfredo with basil and she wore the same black-and-white-striped dress of our 1998 interview.

“I’ve been in the same company for ten years now so not much has changed, but I do have some big news! I am going to New York City! An American guy, my former colleague, asked me to work together to form a translation company. ‘I’m in,’ I said. He left yesterday. He has to get a business license and then he will support my visa. It may take half a year.”

“Fantastic!” I paused with fork in midair. “Why the U.S.A.?”

Ito-san wasn’t surprised by the question. “When I’ve traveled there, I have always felt comfortable. I can be myself. In Japan, I pretend to be a person I am not. I try to fit in. Like as a daughter, I want to make my parents proud, so I act in a certain way. It’s not good for me, even though now my parents can almost accept me for being myself. I haven’t lived in the U.S.A. I wonder if I will fit in. Will people be kind? If I want something there, do I have to say it clearly? Will the business be good? It is a risk.”

“Have you told your parents yet?” I asked.

“I haven’t told them yet,” she giggled uncharacteristically. “They may worry because of 9/11. But basically they will agree and support me. Maybe they are resigned now. For them this becomes one more place to travel.”

“It sounds like they don’t pressure you about marriage much anymore.”

“It has completely stopped. My mother takes computer classes and is in a table tennis club with her noisy friends. My grandparents are all dead now, so she doesn’t have to care for them. She loves to come to Tokyo to visit my brother and his family. I see them then. I never go home.”

“Things have loosened up a lot, it seems.”

“Yeh, they’ve given up. When people ask if I am married, I just say no. It’s all the same—married or not. I can take care of myself. I am comfortable being myself. I wait for the right one. I don’t feel that I want children. I am forty. I am left behind—so what? Now I can be myself.”

“My sister-in-law in the United States is single,” I said, “and she says she feels sometimes she isn’t accepted in parts of society, especially like at church.”

“I have no experience of not being taken in as a single person. The only time I feel it is when I get together with my friends, who are almost all married.
Then I feel a bit behind. But mostly I don’t feel this. In my department, there are quite a few women my age who are single.”

I e-mailed Ito-san in 2006 only to find that she was still in Japan. The United States had not yet granted her a visa to enter the country to work. It was not until 2007 that she got permission and started her life in New York City.

Ambivalence from the beginning

Ito-san’s vulnerability to internalized norms of being a daughter, sister, and achieving student vies with her ambition to be her own jibun (self) determined to live, love, work, and have fun in her Tokyo context. Her ambivalent tension around living with a boyfriend and working in the United States is surprisingly clear, given her self-proclaimed rebellion.

Her narrative made me ask: Why is ambivalence so deeply rooted in humans? Butler (1997) claims that, in the process of emerging, the human groundwork for ambivalence between submission to another and one’s own will to power is laid down.¹

At first a child loves being in subordination to the loved one, such as a mother, and desires only that. Through this love and recognition the child becomes a human self. As the child inevitably separates from its mother, it feels both longing and anger toward her. She/he folds the mother into her-/himself in the form of a conscience, according to Butler, that both admonishes and loves the child within.

Thus, people always carry within themselves a preconscious love of subordination to another. It makes them vulnerable to entering into and enjoying subordination to external strategies of power in the world around them. We would rather be hailed by a policeman, or as was the case with one of my interviewees, hit by an abusive father, than to not be recognized at all.²

Ito-san is always vulnerable to the concern of her mother, or to the approval of teachers and bosses, for something in her is “passionately attached” to the approval of those who defined her early social world.

However, Butler goes on to argue that the psyche also connects with the outside world and reflects back both experiences and mental reactions to itself. This is the “fold” in the mind turning between outside and inside (Deleuze 1993). Here inner dynamics and emotions meet the ongoing dramas of life and change in relation to them. Through social and political experiences of ourselves as separate beings, a partial reversal occurs, and we take on
and use the very power that we experienced as dominating us as children. We transform our sense of the power over us into a “willed effect” in the world, our own active ability to participate in the present and future world (Butler 1997, 17, 29). But the catch is that our power is always ambiguous, vacillating between the power that made us and the power that we enact—“between the already-there and yet-to-come” (1997, 15, 17–18).

In short, long-term resistance is ridden with psychological and social tension and ambivalence. As with Ito-san, even at forty she still experiences herself as a daughter and sister, not just as a “self” or subject who can do what she wants without worrying about others’ eyes upon her. For this reason, she feels fatigue rather than accomplishment, and she never visits her parents in her hometown. Despite her attempts to escape by going to the United States, she, like all of us, is psychologically set up to live out both sides—vulnerability to the power of others and the will to wield power on one’s own behalf in the world.

In Japanese terms, Ito-san’s worry revolves around words that imply independence and dependence. She pushes her “self” to be independent and worries that she depends too much on her brother as a go-between. The word she uses is amaeru, meaning to play up to, indulge in the goodwill of, or depend on another person, and is often used in the mother–child relationship (Doi 1971). Such actions bind a relationship in unconditional love, but make people emotionally vulnerable to each other: the mother (or brother in this case) gains the emotional power of giving indulgence, and the child, or Ito-san, basks in that indulgence—but is also submitting emotionally (Rosenberger 2001, 49; Borovoy 2005). Not surprisingly, she calls herself out on this and pushes herself toward the United States as the dream world where she hopes her independent will to power will finally emerge. I shall return to this complex of independence and dependence.

Signals of ambivalence

Ito-san presents herself in a kaleidoscopic way: as her mother sees her, as her single friends see her, as her brother and boss see her, and as she sees herself at different points in time. The process of shaping her “self” occurs as if it were being viewed through insect eyes with many different perspectives flashing on her mind and body. Her mind/body is trying to become “a focal point of organizing space,” but this is an ongoing process, and neither interior nor exterior is ever entirely stable (Grosz 1994, 39). Her lived experience pivots
between inside and outside, sometimes transgressing with new relationships that open limitless opportunities yet also reaffirming past relationships that assert limits (Oksala 2005, 128). In interviews what evidence or signposts do we find for this ambivalence?

**Signals of ambivalence: Mental orchestrations**

I used to pay scant attention to the stories or voices of other people in analyzing interviewees’ words, but Bakhtin (1981) alerted me to them as a key to understanding tension and ambivalence. Bakhtin argues that much of our inner mental life revolves around orchestrating voices speaking in various timbres and tones (heteroglossia). We hear them with emotion, take them in, replay them in conflicting cacophony, and sift through them in a kind of inner orchestration. A kind of “self-fashioning” occurs, but we are never “finished,” always subject to many points of view (Holland et al. 1998, 169, 173).

The interview is a place for this orchestration to take form, as for example with Ito-san, who plays back voices of her mother, brother, and friends. Her mother’s comments and opinions over the years tie her to internalized expectations from her youth, while the voice of her friend who has studied abroad counters her mother’s comments, and her brother mediates between her parents’ expectations and her world as a single woman in Tokyo. Self, elusive and changing, emerges out of the tension among these voices—opposition to her mother, support, envy, and some competition from her friend, and nervous alliance with her brother, on whom another voice tells her not to become too dependent!

**Signals of ambivalence: Symbolic bootstrapping**

Ito-san’s tensions are also revealed by the concept of “symbolic bootstrapping,” which turns attention to the material things that mediate struggles in people’s lives. “Symbolic bootstrapping” is a process through which children interact with an object symbolically and materially to pull them into a new level in their inner thinking (Vygotsky 1966 [1933]), but it is useful for understanding adult development in a world full of symbolic consumer items. It signifies a time of tension, but also a time of potential change toward growing a psychosocial self. Through manipulating and playing with objects externally, children achieve internal control over experiences that feel overwhelming or challenging. For example, when the mother leaves, they cling
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to a doll that symbolizes the love of the mother, then throw it away, and find it again, but after a while will not need it at all.

These ideas help us to understand the significance of the leisure and individualized consumer goods that are a playground for creating self among this generation of women (Holland et al. 1998). Ito-san’s purple coat, bought in Hong Kong against her mother’s will, and her broad-striped dress that, although still flashy, Ito-san wore again six years later, make sense. The purple jacket is a symbolic bootstrap shoring up her still-forming intent to become independent from her mother and her own self within society. Later, her clothes continue to be a bit flashier than those of her peers, but obviously of lessening importance to Ito-san, who appeared in the same dress at the last two interviews. Now, computers, TVs, cars, and going to the United States have become central in this tricky, sometimes tense, sometimes painful bootstrapping operation, as she works on her self between what she has been and what she wants to be.

Signals of ambivalence: Emotions

Emotions are a last signpost of tension and ambivalence in interviews, because emotions are both inner and outer; just at the point when language arrives at its limits, they make our internal states public in laughter and tears (Lyon and Barbelet 1994, 60; Oksala 2005, 130–131). Emotions also help us to work through things, giving our bodies a way of evaluating experience as we meet it. For example, it was clear with Ito-san in 1998 that her excitement about the prospect of working abroad was linked with her sense of fear in telling her parents about it. Her voice lowered, her face tightened, and she asked to speak in English so that others in the coffee shop would not understand what she was saying. On the same subject in 2004, nervous laughter accompanied her revelations. This was an important point of ambivalence as well as change. She was going forward with her sense of long-term resistance, but her embodied experience revealed tension that could not be ignored.

Single in Tohoku, the northeast

The path to meeting Kawai-san of the northeast presents a very different picture from the stylish underground mall where I first glimpsed Ito-san in Tokyo. In 1993 I met Kawai-san at an elder-care home among the rice fields at
the edge of a farming village in Tohoku, an hour from Morioka. Although she was raised and graduated from high school in the regional city of Morioka an hour away, she had come here to work as an aide five years ago. At age twenty-six, she was living several minutes away in her own apartment.

Kawai-san is interesting because she is a single woman buoyed up by neither education nor interest in a career nor big-city consumption. She is not an urban, mobile cosmopolitan consciously building a new sense of family via friends, like Ito-san. An “inadvertent cosmopolitan” whose path has unintentionally strayed from the status quo, she ends up surprised and somewhat fearful, yet takes heart in her ambiguous position as part of this emerging generational discourse.

In 1993, the village Kawai-san worked in had a new town hall and schools built with plentiful national money given to local towns in the 1980s, but they sat among a few struggling small shops. Restaurants were out by the highway, trying to survive on tourists passing through on their way to golfing and skiing in the mountains above this agricultural area. This resort and the government provided some jobs, and many people were involved in the farming economy on part-time or full-time bases. Nothing was far from the rice fields that were just now being prepared for a new planting.

In contrast to Tokyo’s reputation of sporting the most contemporary styles in dress and living, this small village in the north of Honshu was pegged as “traditional” with multigenerational households ruled by strong patriarchs and mothers-in-law who demanded the work and allegiance of the elder son and his wife. But here we were in an elder-care home, evidence of the high number of elderly in the area and of the urban migration of youth that left family members stranded in this institution (Mock 2006). As in Tokyo, life was changing in this rural area, interwoven with global, national, and urban changes yet finding its own space and tempo (Traphagan and Thompson 2006).

Kawai-san

1993, AGE TWENTY-SIX

Kawai-san dashed in late to the impromptu meeting of aides gathered for my benefit. She was off for the day and had been called in. Dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, her long hair was flowing and mussed as she spoke in a relaxed, laid-back way. Sitting next to her was her friend dressed in informal sportswear, and as they talked about their work and boyfriends, Kawai-san laughed as her friend joked and jabbed at her side with her elbow.
“Yes,” admitted Kawai-san, “I do have a boyfriend but no plans to marry.” Her friend poked her, but she insisted. “I don’t want to marry just to have children. For now, it’s fun to live alone without bothering about others, even though sometimes it’s lonely.” She looked out of the corners of her eyes at her friend and giggled at her seriousness and at things left unsaid. For all its image of strict family-bound tradition, the village also had a historical underlay of more relaxed sexual standards than the city, and Kawai-san was living apart from her family, who resided an hour away in the regional city.

The importance of a certain form of female behavior in the northern region echoed in the voice of her mother. Kawai-san saw her often and reported her negative words: “Go quickly as a bride. At your age you should have children!” When Kawai-san argued, her mother replied, “Your attitude is not like a woman’s, you are impolite!”

Kawai-san was no self-avowed rebel like Ito-san, but she had obviously thought of alternatives. “I hope to marry before age thirty and to have two or three children. But I want to pay for my own wedding and find my own husband. Not like my brother.” She paused and looked impishly at her friend. “I have thought of having children even if I don’t marry. My brother’s children are difficult, but they are so cute.” In 1993 in the northeast, this was beyond the pale of action, but showed that the global imagination had permeated these young women.

Kawai-san had tried to better her work situation within the constraints of her high school education and workplaces in the northeast. She had left an office in the regional city where the males would not listen to her and took revenge if she disagreed with them. The improvement here was slight, but at least affirmed herself as a person at work. “I can speak my opinion, but it doesn’t go anywhere.” She liked helping the old people, but mainly she worked “for money and because it would be boring not to work.”

1998, AGE THIRTY-ONE

In 1998 Kawai-san had moved back to work at a retirement home near her home just outside Morioka. She was living in the kind of regional city where Ito-san’s mother lived and Ito-san refused to visit.

The area of the city that Kawai-san lived in was the same that I had lived in when I had come to this city to teach English over twenty years before. We had lived in a new apartment where frogs croaked in the rice paddies outside our window. The trip into town on worn buses passed by farmhouses and
fields that by 1998 were fast being replaced by car dealers, electronic stores, and supermarkets. I hardly recognized the place.

The city’s old train station with noodle booths and wooden bridges over the tracks, no less than six hours from Tokyo when we first lived here, had been rebuilt. The bullet train now put these regional people, whom Tokyoites viewed as unsophisticated at best and hickish at worst, within three hours of Tokyo. A new elevated bullet-train station shone with an underground mini-mall of local stores for tourists, restaurants, and a department store.

Kawai-san had grown up through this transition and she suggested McDonald’s, a symbol of what was new, as a good place for us to meet on her day off. To me, it was an antiseptic place to meet, but for her it held the status of Western things, and in the morning its second floor was entirely empty. Gradually our talk gave it some color. Kawai-san had changed jobs to escape difficult human relations, but things were bad at this job, too.

“They want people to quit as they age, but I am trapped. I have to cling to this job because economics are bad. The superiors don’t recognize that people are working hard, doing well, and devoting themselves to other people. They only scold angrily and put us down. It’s okay when I go out in the mobile truck to give baths to elders in their homes, but we have to write reports on what happens and the atmosphere in the office is bad. I avoid it.”

As we sipped our coffee out of styrofoam cups, I asked, “So do you live alone now?”

“No, I live at home with my parents. The three of us.” She laughed ruefully. “Every day they say ‘Marry fast!’ It really bothers me! I thought of getting an apartment but it would be hard to have enough money to live. Half my salary would be gone. And people might say ‘Why would a girl want to live alone?’ especially at this workplace. It’s so close to my parents.”

Many workplaces preferred single women to live with their parents to protect the reputations of both the company and the family. The female body needed to be kept safe for marriage, even when marriage might not be forthcoming.

“I’m saving up for an apartment. In the future, my older brother and his family will live with my parents. I’ll have to leave the house so there is enough room. I can’t depend on my brother and his wife. I must become independent.”

The irony of it all, I thought. She is supposed to live with her parents, but the eldest son’s position takes precedence here. Kinship structures would give her an excuse to live separately. We talked about how it felt to be single in Morioka.
“It’s not great. I’m not, like, set on being single. But after all I want to choose my partner (aite).”

Although I knew that young women often kept boyfriends secret from their parents and even their friends, I assumed that I was far enough out of her social network to be safe when I asked, “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Now I am going out with a person. He is not a friend, but not really a lover. He is in between. I get introductions from friends pushed at me, but they just don’t hit the spot (pinto konai).”

At the end of our conversation, as part of her hopes for her life, she admitted, “I hope that I can marry the person I am going out with now. He is a banker.”

2004, AGE THIRTY-SEVEN

By 2004, Kawai-san’s tastes in coffee shops had risen. We met in the second-floor café of the poshest of the three department stores in town. She was dressed in a black sweater and skirt, her long hair in a more sophisticated mid-length style. Having lived alone in an apartment for three years now, she rented rather than buying. With a touch of humor and jealousy of richer single women, she said, “I shovel my own car out of the snow. No heated parking lots for me!”

To her dismay, she had been promoted to third in line of command at the retirement home. She was “receiving [the privilege] of putting out all her effort”—a sarcastic way of saying she had to work hard whether she liked it or not. I thought maybe it would give her the chance to express her opinions at work as she had always wanted to. She agreed that it had gotten “a bit better. I can’t say and do as I want, but I talk with the person above me about things. I don’t try to solve them myself. I guess I just don’t think so much about people’s words now.”

“Are you satisfied with this work?”

She pulled on her hair and leaned back. “I don’t not like it. I chose this work because I liked it. I don’t have the courage or psychological power (yūki, kiryoku) to change work now. There’s a little resignation (akirame) creeping in. But I don’t want to go up in the world.”

Kawai-san had wanted to meet here because she was going to look for a birthday gift for her nephew, whose party she was going to the next day. Our fancy cakes were done and we were just nursing the last of our tea. About that time, the boyfriend problems emerged.
“There is no talk of marriage. There was a time when I thought, if I like you so much, why don’t you like me enough to talk of marriage? But now I am thinking, hmm, is it okay like this? We are both really busy. We e-mail a lot but meet only twice a month and eat together. But I am letting things go as they will. We are each into our own lives.”

There was a voice of a friend inside her that she wanted to tell me about.

“My close friend from junior high school was dating a guy who was the eldest son and he was supposed to inherit the house. But his parents were against his marrying my friend, so they parted. Then they just floated back together again. But then he got laid off because of economic restructuring and he didn’t tell her.” Her eyes were round and serious now. “It became a neurosis and he tried to commit suicide.”

“Is she okay? What about him?”

“She was devastated and couldn’t work for awhile. She wondered why he couldn’t talk things over with her. Even now his consciousness hasn’t returned and probably won’t. This is my close friend. She tells me: ‘You have your own relationship. Marriage is not the only form for relationships.’”

“So what does that make you think?”

“My boyfriend’s parents said to him that he is an eldest son and has to be strong (shikkari). They put a lot of pressure on him. So now I think, isn’t it okay if I have a good relationship with him . . . he has an apartment in a town about an hour south. I could live there with him if I had to. There is no manual for this.”

“Do people live together here?”

“Yes, there are people in my work who live together. Before it would have been unthinkable, but now it is okay. Anyway we are both busy and he is in a management position. Even on vacations he works sometimes . . .”

The tea was definitely gone now and the restaurant crowded, but I sipped at my cup, pretending that I still had more so the waitress wouldn’t ask us to leave.

“It’s true,” I ventured. “You don’t want to put too much pressure on him and then have something happen. But you probably get pressure from your mother to marry.”

“I can’t talk about it with my parents. I say it is ‘a friend that I can’t talk about’ to my mother. I don’t say I have a person I like. It’s hard to talk about to my parents. I do talk with my older brother and younger sister. So when proposals come to meet a man . . . well, I don’t want to go out with anyone but him. If I can’t marry, I don’t have to. Marrying or not, either way is fine.”
“What if you said that to your mother?”
“She would start to cry. Once we argued really loudly. She shouted, ‘So will you never marry for your whole life? Won’t you be lonely? What will you do in old age?’ I told her, ‘I’ll go to an old folks’ home or I’ll die by myself.’ ‘You’ll be a bother to your older brother,’ she yelled. When she cries, I really get a heavy feeling. My mother always obeyed. But now there are various lives. Now it is one’s own life for oneself.”

No manual to follow

Kawai-san seems almost startled to be in the scriptless position she finds herself in, with no manual to follow in her life of long-term resistance. She is a relaxed sort of person who just wanted to graduate from high school, work, enjoy herself for a while, and then have a family. Yet from the first interview, she was open to the generational discourse swirling around her in magazines and in the stories of girls who returned to the village from the city to extend work and enjoyment, even playfully suggesting the idea of having children outside of marriage. She doesn’t delay marriage for any particular reason except to wait for the man that she wants to marry, and having found him, she becomes more steadfast in her decision to hold out for him and no other. Although she often referees tension between her mother and her sister-in-law, who live together, she is even willing to live with his parents if necessary.

The motto of her generation—to marry the man you want to marry—pushes her into a corner of having to seriously recognize that she might not marry and might be called upon to live life according to a script that is just being written, particularly around Morioka and the northeast. Because Kawai-san values the closeness of family but is not highly educated and does not value work for her self-development as many in her generation do, she strongly feels the tension of the double bind, having to change her sense of the world and to relearn how to ‘be’ in it (Charlesworth 2000, 62). On the one hand, the emotional warmth of the family has inscribed itself on her emotions and body and she desires to re-create it. On the other hand, new habits learned as she came of age as part of her generation—sexual freedom, her own claim on her emotions, and the reproductive use of her body, even a will to power in the workplace—have gradually become part of her. Her double bind gathers force with her devotion to the Japanese late-modern insistence on holding
out for the one she loves and her boyfriend’s late-modern uncertainty about his responsibility to the institution of family.

Her boyfriend’s attitude points to the pressures that men began to express more openly through the 1990s and 2000s. Pressures that men of her father’s generation have been willing to put up with in order to live up to their social positions in postwar families and companies feel like too much for men her age, who have grown up in a generation that expects enjoyment and latitude to express themselves (Mathews 2003). Indeed, like women, they increasingly want some semblance of a life for self. If she puts pressure on her boyfriend on top of those exerted by his parents and his workplace, he might crack.

Kawai-san’s sense of living without a manual to guide her raises the specter of how hard it is for her to reorganize her inner being to accommodate an outer experience that is so unpredictable. The orderly postwar middle-class woman’s life stages of school to work to motherhood to part-time work to old age under family care is not likely to be her life course now. We can almost see the orchestration of voices in her head—the voice of her close friend strengthening her resolve against the disappointed voice of her mother, toward whom Kawai-san’s own voice remains silent. As with Ito-san, siblings’ voices mediate the differences with mother. The boyfriend’s voice is muted, reflective of his own confusion among his obligations to job, family, self, and girlfriend. Much evidently goes unsaid between Kawai-san and her boyfriend, but she risks a break with her mother to conserve the stress piling on her boyfriend. Still, she cannot be sure of his future actions even as she continues to hope for at least a declared, long-term relationship and a chance to live together or marry someday. Traversing various ways of belonging in this unpredictable world (Gunewardena 2007), she stays close to her family, enjoying her nieces and nephews and visiting her younger married sister.

Kawai-san listens and reacts in a space of risk: in the interior geography of herself that wants to marry and enjoy family; in her present actions that risk life without marriage; and in the exterior geography of Morioka, where people pressure her to marry at home and on the job. Furthermore, she must cope with the relative poverty of single women in Japan. Whereas Ito-san in Tokyo receives encouragement from other single men and women and their choices of lifestyles enabling them to remain single, Kawai-san in Morioka mainly feels the pull to marry and normalize. But she follows this uncharted course because over the long years of her resistance she has been forever changed—cut, fractured, and reshaped as an individual and in her relationships with others (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The small slippages in
her normative actions are dangerous and may leave her outside forever, but she is careful, splitting with some friends but drawing closer to others, disagreeing with bosses but tolerating new ones, and turning a silent face to her mother on the subject of men while maintaining her relationship with family.

Indeed, uncertain as she appears, Kawai-san’s life expands and shapes the performance of these ideas in the local area. She claims the space of her private life from her mother and her family, as well as from the local and central governments that urge young women to marry and have children, insisting in our conversation, “Having children is a private decision. Nothing the government is doing will change it.” It is people like Kawai-san, an ordinary high school graduate, whose uncertain actions make people around her see that a new version of modernity is upon them. Like their fellow urban nationals, they have to accept that, as Kawai-san says, “Now it is one’s own life for oneself.”

Dilemma of choice

We have met Kawai-san at three different points of her life and seen her gradually become more resigned to leading her life according to unknown rules that will earn her neither full acceptance in regional society nor full contentment according to the desires and dispositions she grew up with. She is caught in a “dilemma of choice”: choose one way and she loses the positions, power, and emotional rewards that Japanese women obtain through marriage and motherhood; choose the other way and she loses her ability to shape her life as she wants. Melucci (1989, 1996) writes about women like Kawai-san around the world who are dissatisfied with the modern cultural code they have inherited, with its rigid cultural categories. They are “nomads,” uncomfortable in the “home” that they grew up in yet unable to find a home that fits them as they emerge into adulthood (1989, 109). Dilemmas of choice weave webs through their adulthoods, because if they become wives and mothers, they may lose the ability to escape the cultural code for women to which they object.

Women like Kawai-san find themselves in “blind spots” unable to know how their own story of self will play itself out. Should they step through “the gauntlet of choice” and marry no matter what, or will they end up with “post-decisional regret” for all they have given up (Melucci 1989; Japp and Kuschke 2008)? The words of a Japanese woman, long a single working woman who married late and has not been able to have children, characterizes these
dilemmas: “I had lots of chances but it was hard to make decisions. I wonder now, ‘Is it okay?’ . . . and what about in the future?”

In Japan, Nobuta, a psychologist, indicates that for women of this generation who have experienced the feeling of dissatisfaction with the cultural code for women that they grew up with and have imagined another way of being, the dilemma of choice never quite leaves them alone. Both single and married women experience uncertainty about whether they have made the right choices and experience some post-decisional regret. (See also Goldstein-Gidoni 2012, 206.)

Single women come to counseling wondering if they have been right to hold out for the right man or value their work above marriage. They have chosen what seems to be the more “interesting” (omoshiroi) choice compared with marriage, as claimed in Makeinu no Toboe (The howl of the losing dog), a popular book that compares single and married women in Japan (Sakai 2004). Yet single people are still seen as abnormal in a society where heterosexual marriage has been mandatory and government statistics label them as “not yet married” (Maree 2004). Even dieting and exercise for single women can be seen as selfish because it may ultimately hinder their getting pregnant (Spielvogel 2003). Ueno and Nobuta note that it is very difficult for women raised in this society to reject the feeling that the preferred woman is the woman who has been chosen and is protected by a man. Neither do single women escape the authority of bosses and elder parents, who often overwork them because they are single (Ueno and Nobuta 2004).

Married women also struggle in a peer society that is newly split between single and married people far into adulthood. Nobuta sees more married than single women in her counseling practice, and the married women are also uncertain: Is it okay to have married? Is it okay to have married this man? Ueno argues that these women feel relatively deprived, because around thirty-five, the marriage they committed themselves to as a step up in status now seems like a step behind their single friends who have careers and freedom. Single women might be characterized as “howling dogs” forever in search of a man, but married women are jealous when they compare their boring, narrow lives with the imagined interesting lives of singles (Ueno and Nobuta 2004).

**A social movement of ambiguous resistance over life**

Melucci proposes that women participate in a new kind of social movement that features the ambiguous, uncertain resistance that I have found here. It is not an active, organized rebellion, but one that “breaks the limits of
compatibility” of a system’s shared rules and behavior, pushing the system beyond the range of variations it can tolerate without altering its structure” (1989, 12). Furthermore, as we see here, people dip in and out of this social movement over the course of their lives.

These single women, like Ito-san and Kawai-san and married women whom we will meet later in the book, are engaged in just such a quiet social movement that challenges the cultural code in informal, personal ways and unevenly over the life course. The social movement is common to their generation, but it has spread by desires shared and deeds explored rather than by noisy protests. These women feel a risk in committing themselves to the cultural expectations of self-sacrifice a woman must fulfill in entering her husband’s household and making a family, yet they also feel the risk in not accepting the very societal role that assures women an image of maturity as well as emotional and economic security in postwar Japanese society.

Kawai-san, who continues to work and secretly consort with her chosen man in a regional city, risks never escaping from the category of “emerging adult,” a category created to cover the exploratory time between high school and full adulthood. Emerging adults reach toward taking responsibility for themselves, making independent decisions, and achieving financial independence, but are not yet accepted by society and elders as full adults (Arnett 2004, 209). Of course, Kawai-san has achieved these goals and should be well past this stage, but in Japan, especially in Tohoku where pressures to marry are stronger, single women appear ambiguous and are judged as never quite having reached the maturity of wives and mothers.5

Given Kawai-san’s dilemma with her boyfriend and her strong feeling that “there is no manual for this,” she is gingerly emerging into a new field that has few models in her regional environment. She may never “emerge” as her elders expect or she had thought she would, remaining in this state of unstable liminality in relation to the society around her. Nonetheless, over the years her demeanor communicates that she sees herself as an evolving adult of a different kind, perhaps ultimately stronger than others because of the challenges she faces.

Melucci, who writes of this new kind of social movement, would agree with Kawai-san’s positive evaluation. He thinks that, through dissatisfaction with the cultural code they have been raised in, young people and women develop a “growth in individual and social capacity for self-reflection” (1989, 12). Comparing themselves with media images and people throughout the world, they gain self-awareness and the ability to think about themselves and their worlds. Indeed, in a society based on
information and individual risk like Japan, self-responsibility is a require-
ment (Hook and Takeda 2007).

Ito-san and Kawai-san both illustrate this as they participate in modern
institutions with skeptical self-awareness and space for individual pursuits
and talk with like-minded friends (Touraine 1995). This generation of Japan
is thinking, critiquing, seeing possibilities, imagining themselves in them,
and experimenting. Although they claim to be only “going at my own pace,”
a phrase that echoes throughout my interviews, and although many of their
acts are ambiguous choices to not choose (gestures of tacit refusal), this slow-
ing of mandated life stages gives time for thought and evaluation, and in
aggregate makes a difference in national statistics.

Looking in two directions, Kawai-san and Ito-san are both bigger as
people. Acts that would have been unthinkable and unacceptable before,
such as living with one’s boyfriend and choosing love or work over children,
have become possible. As victims and perpetrators in this unstable field of
love and life (Padilla et al. 2007) their way forward may be painful and risky,
but living in a state of alert tension and ambivalent compliance is an engaged
way to interact with the kaleidoscopic changes of the contemporary world.
In fact, there may be no other way.

Urban-rural differences, class, and “tradition”

Ito-san and Kawai-san brave the tensions of their ambiguous, long-term resis-
tance in different contexts of urban and rural Japan. In order to be even par-
tially successful, their efforts have had to occur in what Lovell (2003) calls
meaningful fields of debate. The debate over women’s roles and the question
of how to develop self are more clearly stated in Tokyo than up in Tohoku,
but if the debate over women’s lives had not already reached Morioka to some
extent, Kawai-san’s acts would have been unactable and unutterable. Even Rosa
Parks’ act of sitting in the front of the bus would not have been recognized
as legitimate and worthy of widespread demonstrations had it not happened
within a larger framework of national debate (Lovell 2003). Likewise, Kawai-
san could not write her new manual of love, sexuality, and individual choice
outside of the maelstrom of discourses and practices emanating from Japanese
cities and media and passed from friend to friend in Morioka and the village.

Both geographical location and class make Kawai-san’s dilemma of choice
more difficult to traverse than Ito-san’s. The changes that have pervaded both
of them are part of a gendered generational discourse, but their gendered responses intersect with other social identities, in this case, urban-rural differences and class differences.

Although both of these women were raised in the regions, their class origins are quite different. Kawai-san is working-class—a high school graduate with high school–educated parents who always lived in the Morioka area, her father working in the building trades and her mother helping in the business when necessary. In contrast, Ito-san is middle-class—herself a four-year university graduate, her father a salaryman and university graduate, and her mother a stay-at-home junior college graduate; they moved to the regions from Tokyo for her father’s job. Ito-san’s father exhibits more tolerance of her single lifestyle than Kawai-san’s father. While both mothers have urged their daughters to marry, Kawai-san’s mother remains more family-centered on a daily basis, while Ito-san’s mother follows her own middle-class hobbies with friends and allows herself to be distracted from her daughter’s future.

The ambivalence and tension of this generation are less painful in Tokyo, which as a large city affords more anonymity and tolerance of various lifestyles, more spaces to walk in unwatched, more cracks to slip through—especially for women like Ito-san whose parents live in the regions (deCerteau 1984). As a single woman who moved to Tokyo from Morioka said in comparing the two: “In Tokyo, individuals are not used by others. People don’t think about how others are looking at them.” The easier path for women in Tokyo gains credence through women’s words in this book, although it too can be overdrawn, because elder family members and bosses in Tokyo also make unfair demands of women. Nonetheless, almost across the board, whether women are single or married, with or without children, the double binds experienced by women in this study are consistently harsher in the northeast than in Tokyo.

What about the regional city of Morioka, which is in-between Tokyo and the rural village—a backwater for Tokyo-bred interviewees, but a mecca of shopping for interviewees from the village? As the Morioka woman said, people are under the eyes of others and “used by others”: in family, school, and work, people are expected to watch out for each other, employ their mental alertness for each other (ki o tsukau), and depend on each other for favors, often with hierarchical dynamics. But the same woman pinpointed good aspects about Morioka. “Things aren’t so trendy and strange there. You don’t have to be fashionable. Relations with people are good. I relax when I am there and hear the accent.”
I knew what she meant. I am always struck by the darker colors and plainer clothes on the streets when I come from Tokyo. Shopping cannot even be compared, although Morioka has several up-to-date department stores. People live in a narrower mold, as if the furry green mountains surrounding Morioka and Mount Iwate (6,686 ft.) to the north guard the city’s inhabitants from too much change. Winters are cold and snowy, though less so here than on the side toward the Korean peninsula. The Tohoku accent known as *zuzuben* has grown on me over the years, for it is here that I learned Japanese as a young English teacher. Its lilt, pronunciation, and endings on sentences make Tohoku people stand out in Tokyo, but the accent conveys the intimate human relations of the region—warm when they enclose you, suffocating for those who are different, and cold when they ostracize you.

People are more wary of me as a foreigner than in Tokyo, but once accepted, I am embraced, with friends going out of their way to take care of me and pretension neither needed nor desired. My actions, however, reflect on the people who take care of me, and thus I hear that I have been spotted on my long walks around the city or while interviewing a woman in a downtown bar. Because I remain a guest, I do not experience “being used by others,” except that people do further their contacts through me.

Another Morioka woman describes typical people from the area, including her husband: “They have patience and endurance, allow themselves little luxury, and even expect misfortune (*fukō*).” In the face of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami these traits may help, but for young women entertaining new desires and dreaming of opportunities for self, they create serious double binds. However, Morioka has variety just like Tokyo. The woman quoted here grew up in an old Morioka family, the daughter of musicians, but she does not include herself or her family in her own definition.

Women from the rural village put all of this in perspective, however. For them Morioka represents a place for a divorcee to go and drink, to meet someone anonymously. It is a place to escape village eyes and sit idly in a coffee shop or buy clothes. Moving to this regional city represents a loosening of rural family and community relations.

In contrast, the village is a conservative place of rice farmers, multigenerational households, dominant men, long-suffering women, and mothers-in-law who lord it over their daughters-in-law. Everyone knows everything about each other, which seems to make some people quite open and others quite protective of their own privacy. A place of great natural beauty, with rice fields waving below Mount Iwate’s soaring slopes, the road through it leads to
a national park. However, scratch the surface and this amalgamation of several hamlets has changed considerably in recent decades, with modern town halls, schools, hospitals, homes for the elderly, tourist spots, and private homes that are warm and comfortable. Although household continuity remains vital, elders far outnumber young people, and thus flexibility on how to keep households going—adult children living separately, or foreign wives for men who cannot find Japanese wives—has changed the atmosphere. If nothing else, younger people and many older people are aware of the problematic traditions they face and are often able to negotiate on how to cope with them.

For the purposes of this study, “regional” is the opposite of large urban (Tokyo or Osaka) and includes both rural villages and larger regional cities. Yet considerable differences exist within “regional,” so I sometimes use the word “rural” to refer to the village and “regional” to refer to Morioka. Just what composes urban and rural/regional can be ambiguous, but in Japan the main split is between the Tokyo-Osaka corridor and the rest of Japan.

The opposition between urban and rural/regional has both symbolic and material meanings in Japan as elsewhere (Williams 1981; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). The difference between the “modernity” of Tokyo and the “tradition” of regional/rural Japan forms a widely accepted model for explaining rapid postwar change. The modernity of Tokyo gives play to the imagination of this generation of young women, while Morioka has a dark image of lagging behind. As one Morioka woman says, “All the information you read about in magazines in Morioka is about Tokyo. It gives [you] the desire to go.”

The contrast between the experiences of Kawai-san and Ito-san rides on both class and urban-rural differences that intersect with their gendered experiences. Kelly (2002) claims that the perceived modern–traditional opposition between urban and rural/regional in Japan is a symbolic disguise for material class differences. What is fondly labeled and sought after by urbanites as traditional rural Japan, close to nature and relationships, is, materially speaking, a place that has been left behind in postwar economic growth. This relationship is borne out in this book; women from the regions have fewer employment chances and lower incomes, and thus their economic ability to act on their new desires suffers.6

Should we discount tradition and concentrate on class differences between urban and regional? The answer is complex. If I think of “tradition” as the ideological nostalgia for what urbanites feel they have lost in modernity and they wish to dabble in from time to time, it is easy to discount it and concentrate on class differences, for this is tradition selectively imagined for
urban consumption. Yet even these images have real consequences in people’s lives. We shall see that this imagined idea of traditional values has led a few women to turn to rural areas for answers in their lives.

If I understand “tradition” as meaning what is thought of as a conservative emphasis on hierarchical relationships, multigenerational families, and values of cooperation, such values do make a difference for young women in the northeast and make me realize that class is not the only difference here. Their reported experiences indicate more struggle with conservative values than Tokyotes experience, more willingness to accommodate to them, and more suffering if they do not. They live intimately with the discourse of their conservative elders as well as with the discourse of their generation (Rosenberger 2006). However, these conservative values may not have lasted because of cultural devotion to tradition so much as because of the economic necessity to survive.

Urban and rural/regional in Japan are not qualitatively different in cultural terms. Regional people experience the landscape of change in Japan through television, magazines, and travel. Their sons and daughters, students and workers in Tokyo, bring big-city ideas of global modernity home, and their goals and life courses are standardized to the urban middle class (Kelly 1990). They are thoroughly modern in their sense of the world, as the women in this book show (Traphagan and Thompson 2006).

This question of the intersection of these women’s gendered experiences with urban-regional differences will continue throughout the book. The indication from the experiences of Ito-san and Kawai-san is that over time negotiation of double binds and tacit refusal to run the gauntlet of choice in regards to marriage, work, and enjoyment is easier in Tokyo than it is in Morioka or the village, but not impossible in either one.

Conclusion

This chapter leaves us with nuances of long-term, ambiguous resistance to look out for: waffling between dependence and independence; signals of ambivalence such as a mental cacophony of voices, symbolic bootstraping, and emotional expressions. Being caught in dilemmas, unable to choose with knowledge because the future is unpredictable, the past unacceptable, and the present full of double binds also characterizes this experience of the world. Kawai-san captured the feeling with her words, expressed with a certain sad
determination: “There is no manual for this. . . . Now it is one’s own life for oneself.”

If the thoughts and actions of these women are part of a new kind of social movement by dissatisfied cultural nomads whose personal actions gradually break through the limits of compatibility of a social system’s shared rules (Melucci 1989), the question of long-term resistance is: How are these women experiencing and negotiating the contradictions and double binds in which they find themselves? How do they choose or not choose within the dilemmas of choice that define their dissatisfactions with the postwar world they were born into? What are the effects of their low-level, long-term resistance on their lives, and what nature of adults emerge from these dilemmas of adulthood?