

Introduction

With continued declines in the total fertility rate, there has been growing policy and scholarly attention to the hardships of parenting and childcare in contemporary Japan. One recurring theme in public parenting discourse is *wan ope* (one-operator parenting), denoting a situation where one parent, typically the mother, is forced to care for their child without support from the other parent, often the father (Maeda & Ando, 2023). While evidence illustrating *wan ope* is compelling, understanding how one parent is pushed toward managing childcare alone remains unexplored, and even less is known about the processes that perpetuate and reproduce the gendered division of childcare among Japanese couples.

This study addresses this gap in knowledge by analyzing parents' online narratives of their lived experience of childcare. We conduct a qualitative thematic analysis of 481 blog posts, written by 321 individuals between May 2020 and March 2024, to identify factors contributing to a gendered, unequal division of housework. Using a unique dataset on personal narratives of childcare written by parents on an online platform, we find ample evidence of *wan ope* childcare, which we argue is linked to external circumstances (e.g., extended work hours, work location transfers) that cause the unavailability or inability of one parent to contribute. Yet we also argue that some men consciously withdraw from parenting responsibilities despite their presence in the home and/or availability to help, leaving women to shoulder the burden of childcare. We call this unique phenomenon “subtractive parenting,” highlighting how the disengagement of one parent can be a matter of choice. This study advances our understanding of how the gender division of the home is reproduced, highlights the health implications of unequal parenting, and provides valuable insights into micro-level factors behind sustained low birthrates in Japan.

Data and Methods

We collected 481 blog posts spanning the period from May 2020 to March 2024, from the Nihon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) website (<https://www.nhk.or.jp/keijiban/sukusuku/000210/001894/>). This blog, a part of the TV program called *NHK Suku Suku Kosodate* (NHK Healthy Parenting), is where individuals are invited to anonymously share their childcare experiences within a preset 200-word limit. Bloggers are required to provide pseudonyms and select an age category, while their child's information, such as sex and age, is optional.

To qualitatively analyze the data, we applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Our approach was an inductive, bottom-up process, where the themes were derived directly from the data rather than being imposed by existing theoretical constructs. This allowed for flexibility in identifying and refining the identified themes and allowed for a more nuanced analysis of the language. We began our analysis by individually reading all the posts and listing reoccurring themes we noted within the data. Several rounds of analysis led to the separate identification of *wan ope* parenting and the novel subtractive parenting construct that we propose. The entire dataset of 481 posts was then individually recoded to capture the subtractive parenting theme, and a subset of 123 posts were identified as being representative of subtractive parenting and/or *wan ope*-related themes. In the final round of coding, we identified 71 posts, with 100% agreement, that best exemplified subtractive parenting.

Preliminary Findings

There are dominant themes in the blogs that refer to one partner (all men, in our analysis) “being indifferent,” “escaping from care responsibilities,” and “prioritizing one’s time [on leisure activities].” Collectively, these themes indicate

how some men consciously neglect their parenting duties by being indifferent to children or prioritizing their own work and leisure time over family. This deliberate decision by men to withdraw from their domestic responsibilities is what we call “subtractive parenting.” Unlike *wan ope* parenting, which we argue can result from being a single parent or from the prolonged working hours of the other parent, subtractive parenting occurs within a two-parent household where, in principle, both partners could contribute to housework. In these cases, one parent, typically the father, withdraws from parenting responsibilities—often to sleep or engage in leisure activities—despite their physical presence or capability to contribute. For example, Nemutai Mama, a blogger in her 30s with a three-year-old daughter, recounts how her husband frequently goes to sleep due to fatigue, leaving her to manage childcare responsibilities on her own. Despite acknowledging his work-related stress and fatigue, she expresses frustration at bearing the majority of the childcare duties while also feeling exhausted, a pattern that has persisted since the birth of their child.

Isn't it just escaping (from child-rearing) that dad goes to sleep because he is sleepy?! Mom is also sleepy! I also want to go to sleep if I am sleepy! I want to sleep all night with my child! But if both you and I go to sleep, we will be in trouble on the next day, right?...I know you get stressed from working outside and tired from commuting...it is meaningless to say don't sleep towards the person who is sleepy...Therefore, mom (I) has been putting up with you...since I gave birth to our child...so please allow me to say this here.

Similarly, Umematsu, a blog-poster in her 40s with a two-year-old daughter, describes how subtractive parenting by her spouse started as soon as the child was born:

On the day I was discharged from the hospital, my husband said to me “I am currently busy at work, so you will do this by yourself. By the way, make three *onigiri* (rice balls) for me tomorrow.” When I was on maternity leave, he said, “I am working, but you are on vacation.” When I was back to work, he said, “You are employed, but I am self-employed and have responsibilities.” What will be the next excuse to escape from childcare? Was his always like this, or did I make him like this?

Furthermore, our findings indicate that subtractive parenting puts women at risk of various physical and mental health symptoms, such as chronic fatigue, crying spells, frustration, anger, sadness, disappointment, and self-blame. Mi, in her 40s with a two-year-old daughter, feels trapped and invalidated in her current situation:

My husband went to play golf when all of us were sick. Naturally he got sick as well. Even though I was not feeling well, I needed to take care of him. He never thanked me. My child is a treasure, but my marriage is like working for an exploitative company; I have no time or money. These days I am just tired of my life.

Conclusions

Drawing on online narratives of parenting experiences, the present study elucidated the nuanced ways through which this gendered division of domestic labor manifests. We find how both *wan ope* parenting (due to external circumstances such as long work hours) and subtractive parenting, where a partner consciously withdraws from parenting duties and prioritizes their own interests, leave many women to complete all the routine housework and childcare. Notably, the findings suggest that both forms of unequal parenting—especially subtractive parenting—negatively affect women’s well-being, as evidenced by physiological manifestations of stress, anger, and distress. Thus, our next step is to investigate precise mechanisms linking subtractive parenting to women’s physical and psychological well-being. Also, we will further examine how and why men can withdraw from childcare while women cannot, focusing special attention to the role of social and culture norms about gender in the Japanese context.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic analysis a practical guide*. Sage.
- Maeda, M., & Ando, M. (2023). *Haha no Kabe*. Iwanami Shoten.