Enhancing autonomy in reproductive decisions? Education about family planning and fertility as a countermeasure against the low birthrate

Abstract: As Japan’s declining birthrate has been perceived as a major menace to its society since the 1990s, pronatalist policy approaches are again a source of social and political concern. This paper focuses on a number of political measures involved in ameliorating low birthrates – measures that emphasize the necessity of educating individuals about reproduction and fertility in order to enable them to make informed decisions. Investigated will be the question of how the new trend in the narrative of countermeasures focusing on education about reproduction can be evaluated, particularly regarding the question of how the notion of “autonomy” is to be understood in this context. The reference points in this deliberation are two dimensions of autonomy that have been carved out in various fields of scholarship: (i) autonomy as empowerment and (ii) autonomy as a neoliberal government technology. Furthermore, and constituting an additional level, are the issues of how gender is depicted in this narrative, and how its representation has to be evaluated in the context of autonomy. The argumentation is based on the analysis of the political narrative on pronatalist policy, concrete examples of its implementation, as well as contributions from sources critical of the policy.

Keywords: autonomy, education, family planning, low birthrate, reproduction

1 Introduction

This paper explores the broad sense of the dilemmas in “how liberal governmentalities target life through social and scientific engineering, through expert administration, and through everyday technologies of the self” (Nadesan 2008:...
2; original emphasis). It focuses on the concrete example of a political narrative emphasizing the necessity of education on reproduction and fertility in order to enable individuals to make informed choices, as well as concrete examples of policy implementation in the framework of the countermeasures against the declining birthrate in contemporary Japan.

Whether or not to have children has never been a completely private matter—at least since the birth of the modern nation-state (Ogino 2006: 3). Political intervention to either increase or decrease the number of births is one important aspect of population control. In Japan, both types can be found in its modern history. Prior to the beginning of World War II, there was a pronatalist policy with the slogan “give birth and multiply” (umeyo, fuyaseyo) for the purpose of being able to compete militarily with rival countries (Schoppa 2008: 640–643).1 After the war, in 1948, there was the implementation of the Eugenic Protection Act (Yūsei hogo-hō) (full English translation provided in Norgren 2001: 145–155) in order to fight the then current over-population, an act which—after two revisions in 1949 and 1952—not only introduced the legalization of abortion at a much earlier stage than in most Western countries, but also led to a dramatic decline in the nation’s birthrate (Norgren 2001; Schoppa 2008: 643).

In contemporary Japan, the low birthrate (shōshika) has become a “national obsession” since the 1990s, in part caused by a fear of the collapse of state social insurance programs due to a future lack of taxpayers (Schoppa 2008: 646). This has precipitated the introduction of multifarious countermeasures over the last 25 years (Cabinet Office 2015a). However, the concrete pronatalist measures that have been taken so far are very different from those imposed prior to WWII, for the social situation, legal means, and social ideologies have changed substantially (Schoppa 2008: 647). These attempts have not been fruitful in ameliorating the population decline. The reasons can be found in the fact that these policies have not led to, among other things, basic changes in gender roles, the male breadwinner concept, and the system of social protection that relies largely on firms and the care work provided by women in families (Schoppa 2006: 2). Partly due to the discrepancy between these traditional

1 The document referred to is the “Outline of the establishment of the population policy 1941” by the MHLW, which clearly stated that a population of one hundred million should be reached by 1960 for “the construction of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” This is the context of the infamous slogan “umeyo, fuyaseyo.” In June 2014, for the first time since 1941, a new numerical goal had been set. The policy paper “Basic Policies for the Economic and Fiscal Management and Restructuring” (Keizai zaisei un’ei to kaikaku no kihon hōshin) affirmed the goal of increasing the fertility rate up to a level of 2.07, in order to maintain a population of one hundred million people.
social rules and the current economic problems, Japan has been one of the OECD’s most unequal nations in terms of income distribution since at least the 1990s (Schoppa 2006: 2). Despite this, governmental expenditure for young families in contemporary Japan is still very low when looking at OECD standards (Adema et al. 2014: 52). Therefore, a society where people can raise children “without worries,” as stated in various countermeasures (Cabinet Office 2015b), is still a long way off.

Even if these structural problems are partly addressed in the March 2015 “Outline of the Countermeasures Against the Low Birthrate Society” (Shōshika shakai taisaku taikō) (from here on: “Outline”), more prominent is a narrative calling for self-governance, that is, the autonomy of the individual, at the center of family planning. Rather than placing the “welfare of the nation” at the center of focus, as was still common practice in the 1990s (Yuval-Davis 1997: 29), the individual’s wish to have children is depicted as the sole reason for pronatalist policies. This could be attributed to two reasons. The first is likely due to a fear of critical comparisons with the prewar “umeyo, fuyaseyo” policy (Schoppa 2008: 648), which was based on very different conceptions of the individual than the biopolitical government strategies in contemporary neoliberal society, something that will be further investigated in this article. The second reason may be found in data and qualitative research (e.g., Kawai 2006; Kobayashi 2013). Many Japanese seem unable to fulfill their wish to have a family, something that has not gone unnoticed by policy makers. In a nation where marriage and having children has to be analyzed in conjunction (just 2% of children are born out of wedlock and just 6% of married couples stay childless), the percentage of people who remain unmarried has risen significantly since the 1980s. For example, for the 35- to 39-year-old age group, the percentage of unmarried men is at 35.6% (1980: 8.5%), and for the same age group of women it is at 23.1% (1980: 5.5%) (MIC 2010). However, these figures apparently do not reflect men and women’s personal wishes. As poll data show, in 2010, just 6.8% of unmarried women and 9.4% of unmarried men expressed no wish to marry (NIPSSR 2010a). These data may be attributed to value shifts in gender expectations; however, a more fundamental reason can be found in the growing number of irregular and insecure terms of employment, causing


2 According to the data of the “14th Basic Survey of the Childbirth Trend” by the National Research Center for Social Security and Population Problems (NIPSSR 2010b), the fertility rate of women who had been married for between 15 and 19 years was at 4.27 in 1940, 2.2 in 1972, and 1.96 in 2010; while the percentage of the same group of women who do not have children was 6.4% in 2010, compared to 3.0% in 1977. It can therefore be said that most people who get married also have children.
difficulties in the economic situation for both men and women (Schad-Seifert 2006: 35).

The 2015 “Outline” version contains a new section featuring an emphasis on the need to educate the population on fertility by providing “medically and scientifically correct knowledge” (Cabinet Office 2015c). There had been efforts to introduce this kind of basic information to a wider public prior to that with one highly disputed and eventually discarded example being the “Life and Women’s Handbook” (Inochi to josei no techō) compiled in order to inform young women in their teens about reproductive age and so forth. Late-life marriages and births had been previously determined as major factors behind the falling birthrate, and this approach was actually supposed to contribute to a shift in marriage and reproductive behavior (Huffingtonpost 2013).

The current political strategy of education in the context of a national low birthrate is inspired by a media campaign featuring the catchphrase ninkatsu (‘pregnancy activities’), which has attracted a lot of attention since its 2011 inception. Ninkatsu, which is aimed primarily at young women, provides a vast array of information about fertility, promoting knowledge about aging, and emphasizes the importance of a personal life-planning program in order to fulfill one’s wish of having a family and children. However, its main objective is not to criticize structural problems that hinder people’s free choices concerning family planning, but to motivate the individual to make efforts to overcome these hindrances (e.g., FRaU 2011).

The political narrative that largely adopts the rhetoric of this medial discourse will be the focus of the investigation in Section 3 of this paper, with concrete examples of implementation in Sections 4 and 5. The main problem to be addressed will be about how the new strategy of fertility information and life planning in this narrative of the countermeasures can be evaluated, focusing on the analysis of both the notion of autonomy and depictions of gender roles. This narrative has already been the object of many media critiques as well as the subject of a great deal of controversy (e.g., Senda 2015: 28–29); however, it has not yet been analyzed in an academic framework. Therefore, this paper is intended to add another dimension to scholarship focusing on population issues in Japan, and as an analysis of biopolitical technologies of government, in the neoliberal context of contemporary Japan.

2 Autonomy as a tool of analysis

The concept of autonomy is treated in countless books and is an object of controversial discussion in many fields (see Rasmussen 2011; Sneddon 2013) including political studies, gender studies, philosophy, and ethics. In the latter
two, for example, philosophers and medical ethicists have been debating concerns concerning autonomy (personal self-rule) in order to obtain an insight into “the implications of how we are handled by the state or by medical institutions” (Sneddon 2013: 2). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a satisfactory disquisition on the concept and its implication; yet, a very basic overview is necessary.

Autonomy in this context means personal (Sneddon 2013) or individual (Rasmussen 2011) autonomy, which differs from territorial autonomy. Autonomy is to be contrasted with “heteronomy,” which roughly means “ruled by others” (Sneddon 2013: 2–3). However, “self-rulled” does not mean to be free of any rule; the fact that the rule over oneself is actively carried out is important to keep in mind. The capacity of autonomy or the condition of autonomy is “something like self-governance or self-determination” (Colburn 2010: 4), two terms that will be used as synonyms in this paper. Nikolas Rose, for example, defines autonomy as follows: “The capacity to realize one’s desires in one’s secular life, to fulfill one’s potential through one’s own endeavors, [and] to determine the course of one’s own existence through acts of choice” (Rose 1999: 84). This definition is perfectly acceptable in the context of this paper where the terms “life planning” and “choice” frequently appear. Nonetheless, it is important to add that “the individual must be free to act without compulsion or threat from external forces” and that he or she “must prescribe for himself or herself the law to be followed, rather than allowing his or her will to be determined by customs, practices, or the will of other individuals” (Gill 2001: 17).

The term of autonomy in the context of reproduction has also been articulated in a feminist context. In the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the right to abortion and contraception, and the right to decide if and when to procreate, were central to feminist discourse about family planning as part of a crucial right to ensure autonomy and self-determination for women (Morgen 2002; Ogino 2014). In her study on autonomy in the context of reproduction in the United States, Jennifer Denbow stresses the understanding of autonomy as the promotion of “resistance to discriminatory and oppressive norms,” as well as a possibility of critique and transformation (Denbow 2015: 5). The dimension of autonomy in this sense is to be understood as a way of resistance to power (Rasmussen 2011: Ch. 1, “Self-Governance in Another Light,” last paragraph).

However, autonomy as “the definitive understanding of liberation” (Rasmussen 2011: Ch. 1, “Self-Governance in Another Light,” para. 8) has been subject to criticism. An opposite dimension of autonomy is carved out, especially in a critique of autonomy as a strategy of governance, as “proper self-gover-
nance or self-management” (Denbow 2015: 5) in the context of neoliberalism, defined as a “mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres” (Gill 2008: 442-443). In studies on governmentality, based on Foucault’s concept of governmentality, a view of self-governance, where “the norm of autonomy works [...] with rather than against power” (Rasmussen 2011: “Conclusion,” para. 3) is now prevalent and the accepted viewpoint. In the context of population politics, as Rose puts it, controlling and governing the life and death of a population has changed its strategies in the contemporary information society, which is founded on notions of autonomy and individualization (Rose 1996: 1). Used in this sense, it is a strategy of governance, which compels the individual to exercise power over itself – or in Rasmussen’s words, the “normative dimension of autonomy” (Rasmussen 2011: Ch. 2, sec. 1, para. 4).

These two dimensions of autonomy, that is, autonomy as (i) a way of resistance to power or empowerment of the individual (as I will call it), and (ii), in its normative dimension, as a strategy of governance, serve as reference points in this paper for exploring how the narrative of autonomy operates in contemporary Japan’s countermeasures against the low birthrate. The research question is formulated as follows: In the specific context of the promotion of fertility knowledge as a countermeasure against the low birthrate, could the notion of autonomy be validly interpreted as a chance for empowerment in reproductive decisions based on knowledge concerning one’s body and reproductive decision making? Or is it rather a neoliberal strategy of top-down governance? In other words, is the education provided by the government a way to help people set the course of their lives without determination by others, social customs, or rules? Or is it rather, and in reality, a call for autonomy as a governance strategy within the paradigms of state rule? In this context of reproduction and autonomy, the question of how gender is depicted in this narrative, and how it comes to be evaluated in the context of autonomy, must also be kept in mind.

3 Fertility education as countermeasure against the low birthrate

When the fertility rate in 1989 dropped below the level of that in the fire horse year of 1966 (1.58), the term “1.57 shock” was coined. Soon afterwards, when

3 Children born in the year of the fire horse, girls in particular, are notoriously believed to bring bad luck to their surroundings. Therefore, people try to avoid having children in this year.
policy makers realized that the birthrate would not soon recover, as had been predicted (see Schoppa 2006: 152), the policy machine started rolling.

The main strategies of the countermeasures have been manifold. Important keywords in the narrative have been the strengthening of family and local community ties. Also, in order to ensure the possibility of combining work and child rearing, the government has introduced day care services, financial incentives, and labor standards (Cabinet Office 2015b). Yet, even though the birthrate has increased from its lowest level of 1.26 in 2005 to a level slightly more than 1.4 since 2012, population decline is still progressing. It is clear that the measures introduced thus far have not accomplished their set objectives, an opinion that is widely shared (e.g., Masuda 2014: 3).

Thus, after years of rather unsuccessfully trying to “improve” the fertility rate, the March 2015 “Outline” announced, among many other things, a new and important focus on “education” concerning fertility and birth/pregnancy as a countermeasure against the low birthrate. In a detailed explanation, in the section “Supporting Each and Every One, in Accordance with all Steps of Marriage, Pregnancy/Birth and Child Rearing,” the term “education” is one of the five paragraph headings. It states as follows:

In order to be able to realize one's life design according to one's wish including marriage, pregnancy/birth, and child rearing in the future, it is necessary to acquire correct knowledge and information at the appropriate time. A system needs to be developed that covers school education, family, local communities, and the individual members of society, and which provides information about medically and scientifically correct knowledge concerning pregnancy, birth, etc. The effort to include this correct knowledge into teaching materials needs to be promoted especially in the context of school education. (Cabinet Office 2015c: 9)

It is further noted that the public’s correct knowledge about pregnancy and birth has to be elevated from 39% to 70%. This value of 39% is based on a research paper by Bunting et al. (2013) entitled “Fertility knowledge and beliefs about fertility treatment: Findings from the international fertility decision-making study,” as stated in the footnotes of the Cabinet Office (2015c) document. Bunting’s paper, based on a 2009/2010 study executed by Merck Serono (now Merck Biopharma), biopharmaceutical division of pharmaceutical company Merck, in collaboration with Cardiff University, provided the impetus to promote ninkatsu (‘pregnancy activities’), a discourse that spread through various media, starting with FRaU by Kōdansha (source: interview with former co-editor-in-chief of FRaU in June 2015). However, this media-driven ninkatsu discourse needs to be analyzed another time in connection to the political discourse of fertility knowledge.
As the “education” paragraph comprises merely one paragraph in a long list of countermeasures, the question of its importance in the overall scheme arises, yet it seems central in the context of the countermeasures. Even current Prime Minister Abe Shinzō now emphasizes the importance of the promotion of fertility and reproduction education in order to fight the low birthrate. Before this, however, he was at the center of the so-called “sex education bashing” episode, as the chairman of a project team that severely criticized the promotion of sex education and gender-free policies at schools, considering it to be excessive and posing a threat to the Japanese family and, therefore, to society as a whole (Takamura 2006: 132). In the budgetary committee of the Upper House on 10 August 2015, however, Abe stated as follows:

The basic objective of the “Outline” [...] is to create a society where all individuals can realize their wish concerning marriage and having children [...] It has been newly decided to circulate medically and scientifically correct knowledge concerning pregnancy and birth at the level of school education and to members of society. This new policy shall be steadily implemented, and I will do my utmost to help create a society that is warm and friendly towards marriage, pregnancy, children, and child rearing. (Kokkai Gijiroku 2015: 27)

Clearly, Abe does nothing more than repeat the respective parts of the “Outline.” However, the fact that he chose to put a focus on the “education” clause has to be highlighted. Furthermore, even though the word “autonomy” (jiritsu or jishu; as opposed to jichi, which refers to political or territorial autonomy) is neither mentioned in the “Outline” nor in Abe’s brief statement, it is clear that in claiming to provide the very material needed “to be able to realize one’s life design [...] according to one’s own wish” (as described in the “Outline” narrative), the narrative aims at precisely that concept as the valid desire of individuals, projecting the idea that their ability to independently and actively design their own lives shall be promoted.

Japan’s national interests, manifested by the framework of the “Outline,” are thus transformed into the personal interests of individuals whose search for happiness lacks just the right information for it to be achieved. The state is merely the provider of this information. Even if the goal of increasing the number of children is clear, the means and the narrative promote the notion of an individual who is not the subject of heteronomous rule; rather, individuals are projected to be free to choose and take their lives into their own hands. However, with the goal and therefore the limits of choice for the individual set out like this, what is not fulfilled here – when compared to Emily Gill’s (2001: 17) definition – is the condition that “the individual must be free to act without compulsion or threat from external forces” and that it “must prescribe for him-
self or herself the law to be followed, rather than allowing his or her will to be determined by customs, practices, or the will of other individuals.” Social conceptions of the individual – free in its choice, especially concerning something as private as family planning – are the reason why this neoliberal coating is chosen. A governmental demand such as “Give Birth for the Country” would not fit in with these conceptions of the role of the subject in society, and would naturally encounter strong resistance. As Rose puts it, “within such rationalities, it appears that individuals can best fulfill their political obligation in relation to the wealth, health, and happiness of the nation not when they are bound into relations of dependency and obligation, but when they seek to fulfill themselves as free individuals” (Rose 1999: 166).

Yet, the projective rhetoric above actually burdens the individual and, at the same time, creates nothing more than an illusion of equality and free choice. It stresses the autonomy of the subject, and in so doing, distracts from structural problems, which are the real reason behind the fact that so many young people cannot realize their wish to start a family and have children – rather than people lacking knowledge about reproductive age, fertility, pregnancy, and so forth. It is clear that having children is not merely a question of autonomous will, but very much one of social and economic factors, including the high costs of child rearing and education (Adema et al. 2014), the difficulties of combining career and family, and the connection between the ability to find a partner and having the financial means to attract one and to build a family. To merely speak of autonomy and life planning seems to deny these pressing realities, especially when considering Japan’s low spending on family benefits and the high percentage of children living in poverty, in particular those of single parents (“working”: 50.9%; “not working”: 50.4%) (Adema et al. 2014). Moreover, emphasizing the low fertility knowledge of the individual gives the impression that people are having less children because they lack information about the process of “making” them and that, therefore, they are partly to blame for their ignorance.

4 Okayama Prefecture: “Choices for the Future”

The proposals in the 2015 “Outline” were immediately followed, though they had actually already been preceded, by actions. Back in 2013, so-called “Grants for the Enhancement of Regional Countermeasures Against the Low Birthrate” had been decided upon and 3 billion yen (about 22 million euros as of the October 2015 exchange rate) were provided under the supplementary budget of
2013 for, among other things, the compilation of teaching material and lectures about pregnancy/birth and consultation services (Kawai 2015: 501). In prefectures like Akita, Ibaraki, Shizuoka, Fukui, and Ōita, these grants were used to finance the compilation of pamphlets distributed at coming-of-age ceremonies or university festivals, lectures on the connection of fertility and age, and consultation desks (Cabinet Office 2015d).

The concrete example in Figure 1 had been devised at the Okayama University Graduate School of Health Science Institute after a request by Okayama Prefecture. The publication of three pamphlets of the “I Wanna Know” series and a comic book with the title “Choices for the Future” was announced in March 2015.

The motivation to create such teaching materials, not just for children at school but also for adults, is explained in a press release by Okayama Universi-
ty as follows: “Sex education at school mostly provides content on ‘how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies,’ but necessary education about the establishment of a pregnancy, the birth of a child, the appropriate age for pregnancy, the realities of reproductive medicine, and fertility (the ability to reach a pregnancy) is lacking.”

The cover of the comic book, “Choices for the Future,” printed in vivid colors with the subtitle “For You, Thinking About Your Life Plan,” shows a teenage girl dressed in a school uniform surrounded by smaller scenes of her possible future choices (Okayama Prefecture 2015). The three scenes on the Contents page depict three choices of a life plan, namely “Giving Birth in one’s 20s – Housewife,” “Giving Birth in one’s 30s – Working Mother,” and “Career Woman – Giving Birth at 40?” The choices correspond to the book’s middle chapters between the first and last chapters entitled “Let’s Think About the Future” and “Infertility Can be Prevented from Adolescence.” The choice of cover and the content clearly suggest a specified target group, even if the press release points to a broader readership.

The first pages of the comic book invite readers to imagine three life plans together with the protagonist Momo, a high school girl in her third year. The first scenario shows her getting married at 22, cooking and making lunchboxes for her working husband every day, and pregnant after 3 months of marriage. At this point, the little alien figure, who leads Momo through her time travel, explains to her “how babies are made,” though exclusively by showing the process happening inside the female body after the sperm cells have reached their destination. In the pictures that follow, the alien shows Momo that child rearing, in this scenario, can be quite exhausting for the mother, as she is obviously the one taking care of the child while the father is out at work. Momo’s comment that she might have preferred to enjoy her freedom a bit longer, is answered by the little alien who points to the advantages of reproducing at a young age, that is while still having lots of energy and then eventually being able to enjoy seeing the children and grandchildren grow up.

In the second scenario, Momo is 35 and working in a high-ranking position in an apparel company. She has been married for three years and is still struggling to get pregnant. When she learns that the chances of getting pregnant decrease in her 30s, she is shocked that her egg cells may not be as “shiny and

4 Yet it has to be mentioned that, since the “sex education bashing” episode had occurred in Japan in the early 2000s, even sex education that covers how to avoid unwanted pregnancies and STIs cannot be provided without getting into conflict with official recommendations by the Ministry of Education, such as not to “carelessly teach contraceptive methods” or include the process that leads to conception in the curriculum before high school (MEXT 2005).
new” (pichi pichi) as when she was 20. Added is an explanation stating that the reproductive peak for women is in their early 20s, after which the ability to become pregnant declines. After undergoing fertility treatment for half a year, the couple succeeds and Momo is doing a good job combining her career with child rearing, supported by her helpful husband.

In the third scenario, Momo is depicted as a career woman – with a question mark behind the having-children part. She is now 45 and working overseas where she falls in love with a French man. They immediately get married, and despite her age, she decides to undergo reproductive treatment to fulfill her wish of giving birth to his child. At this stage, her doctor explains to Momo the different types of fertility treatments (directed timing method, artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, the possibility of egg-freezing, using donor sperm, a donor egg, or a surrogate mother), as well as the costs and the details of their processes. The outcome of Momo’s effort is not revealed, yet the comment by the little alien (i.e., “Momo-nēsan always worked hard in her job. Marriage and having children just took second place”) may imply that Momo, now desperately trying to conceive, should have planned better. In the end, high school-Momo expresses doubt whether she would be able to raise a child, so the little alien tries to convince her to think positively by saying: “There are many ways to live one’s life, but making a family is also nice! Isn’t life wonderful in which, apart from one’s own life, that of someone else is also important?” The last chapter of the comic book consists of explanations about how to prevent infertility while in one’s teenage years, with checklists concerning STIs, gynecological diseases, and other factors that could cause infertility.

From my analysis, I would argue that this “Choices for the Future” comic book tries to promote autonomy, or at least uses the disguise of autonomy, by providing “correct knowledge.” Notwithstanding the obvious idealization of a certain lifestyle in the booklet, the rhetoric tries to imply that the autonomy of the individual shall be promoted through the help of this material. The introduction makes this clear:

I don’t want to have regrets because I didn’t know or because no one taught me. I wanted to decide on my own ... Many people seem to have thoughts like that. Moreover, it is not possible to make adequate decisions based on wrong information and knowledge. Don’t you want to have a fantastic way of living, learning about many things and based on your own judgment? (Okayama Prefecture 2015: 1)

The conclusion adds to this: “Making the experience to think by yourself about new information and judging adequately and habitually at an early stage is important. This book was created with the aim of creating such an opportunity for you” (Okayama Prefecture 2015: 38). Moreover, the title itself, “Choices for
the Future,” obviously implies that rather than forcing a certain life model on
the reader, the comic is designed to assist young people in making informed
life choices.

However, can this material contribute to empowerment for a self-deter-
dmined life planning? As the information about fertility and reproduction, as
well as the life choices provided, are rather selective, the means to obtain self-
determination are very limited. For example, a very “desexualized” and “disem-
bodied” version of reproduction is offered in this comic, covering fertility treat-
ment, but neglecting coital timing and frequency as crucial factors in conceiv-
ing. It appears that the publishers are content to teach about pregnancy, birth,
and infertility treatment without mentioning the acts that lead to conception.
Obviously not provided – in addition to scientific and medical knowledge – is
a balanced view of sexuality including notions of identity, pleasure, communi-
cation, etc. The sole objective of this information seems to be to motivate young
people to reproduce, yet only after getting married of course. In other words,
autonomy here is a means to be “governed through choice” (Denbow 2015: 4) –
not emancipated by it. Or, in coming back to Emily Gill’s (2001: 17) definition
of autonomy, the laws that individuals follow in their choices are clearly deter-
mained by others. Also, it is the idea of “judging adequately,” mentioned in the
booklet’s conclusion, that leads to Denbow’s “proper self-government,” and
with it to the problem of a limited and normative choice of “life design” and
the notion of “correct knowledge.”

5 Controversy about the “healthy life” guide
for high schools

The government did not solely put efforts into education about pregnancy and
birth by giving out money to prefectures and municipalities. The central author-
ities also intended to contribute directly to the spread of knowledge to a wider
public. On 21 August 2015, complementary teaching materials compiled by the
Ministry of Education for high school students under the title “How to Lead a
Healthy Life” (Kenkōteki na seikatsu o okuru tame ni) were introduced by Aria-
mura Haruko, Minister for Countermeasures Against the Low Birthrate. Of the
forty-five pages dealing with various subjects such as general health, traffic
safety, drugs, etc., two chapters on four pages are dedicated to family planning
(MEXT 2015: 38–41). The first section of the chapter “For a Society Where Peo-
ple Can Have Children Without Worries” consists of advice stating that it is
important for men and women to “consider their life plan together.” However,
the table of the life plan model shown is only that of a woman, called A-ko-san. This model is very similar to the standard life choices discussed above. The next section, “What It Means to Have Children,” presents a graph from a 2005 survey by the Ministry for Health, Labor and Welfare. Just to mention the top three, 78% of the participants of the survey answered that they see having children as “the purpose of life, happiness, and hope,” 56.4% see children as “an object of unconditional love,” and 39.3% as “something that deepens the ties of a husband and wife.” The subsequent page contains information about the growing number of people undergoing fertility treatment, work-life balance, and fathers putting more energy into housekeeping and child rearing. The next chapter deals with “healthy pregnancy and birth,” including a graph showing the connection between age and fertility (the object of harsh criticism, investigated below) as well as the negative influence of factors such as underweight, obesity, and age on the ability to conceive. The last page contains a list of public services concerning maternal and child health, advice on how to care for one’s health during pregnancy, and two short sentences each about contraception and abortion (MEXT 2015: 38–41).

This teaching material shows the same tendency of stressing the autonomy of the individual as in the examples analyzed above. One of many representative statements that leads to this impression is the following: “It is very important for men and women to think about their life plan based on their own will in order to lead a happy life” (MEXT 2015: 38). Furthermore, the provision of “neutral” knowledge (implied by the term “scientifically correct knowledge”) is intended as a foundation for the individual to be able to create their life plan autonomously with the help of this teaching material, much like it is emphasized in the education clause of the “Outline.”

Nevertheless, the pages on pregnancy/birth of the “How to Lead a Healthy Life” teaching material drew a lot of criticism (e.g., Mainichi Shinbun 2015), mainly from an organized countermovement group called “Society Demand- ing the Withdrawal and Call-Back of the Complementary Health Teaching Material for High School Students” (from here on: “Society”). The group was formed shortly after the announcement of the booklet, with Tsuge Azumi, professor of medical anthropology, and Nishiyama Chieko, lecturer for women’s studies, as representatives. They organized a public meeting at the Women’s Plaza in Tokyo called “Don’t Tell Lies to High School Students” (Chūshikai 2015). The entire “teaching material” document was opposed by the group, but the part about pregnancy and birth came in for the harshest criticism. In a letter to the Minister of Education and the Minister for Countermeasures Against the Low Birth-rate, the group pointed out the many problems concerning the contents both in detail and in general. The details include falsification of data (i.e., concern-
ing the decline in female fertility with age), inappropriate usage of data (e.g., leaving out data on childless couples and unmarried people), misleading captions, and insufficient explanations. The general critique was aimed at the inappropriate depiction of boys and girls and their roles in society based on biased gender perspectives. The detailed documents provided thorough verification and data for each point of critique. At the center, however, was the critique of a graph concerning changes in a woman’s ability to conceive (see Figure 2), featuring in the teaching material in the section titled “The Possibility of Pregnancy and Age” (Ninshin shiyasusa to nenrei). The graph shows “age” on the x-axis and the “ability to become pregnant” on the y-axis, peaking at the age of 22 (set to 1.0). After this point, there is a clear decline, with the value of the graph dropping to 0.6 by the age of 30, and after that gradually declining until it reaches 0 at around 47. According to the material, this graph is based on O’Connor et al. (1998). When inquiring into this respective research paper, it becomes clear that this graph was originally titled “Composite Age Pattern of Fecundity Compiled from Birth Interval Data from Several Natural Fertility Populations” and that it was not original data but redrawn from another research paper by J. W. Wood published in 1989 (see O’Connor et al. 1998: 131). Hence, these data are more than twenty-five years old, making it virtually obsolete today in terms of the study of reproductive biology. Worse still, and here is the main point of the critique, the data are obviously manipulated. For example, in the original, at the age of 30, the value is between 0.8 and 0.9, not 0.6 as shown in the graph published in the “How to Lead a Healthy Life” teaching material. Moreover, as Wood states in his original paper, the reason behind declining fecundity and fertility with age is not just the aging of egg cells, which is implied in the teaching material, but also partly due to a decline in coital frequency (Wood 1989). In summary, in addition to the graph not only being a falsification of the original, the original source is not stated correctly, and the title has been manipulated beyond recognition. The “Society” claimed that these proceedings are completely unethical from an academic point of view and – based on wrong information – would pressure young girls aged 16 to 18 into decisions that could have negative effects on their future (Chūshikai 2015). The incorrect graph was later revised (see Figure 2) in the form of an attachment that could be inserted into the original teaching material by the distributing teacher or institution, and which is available for download online (MEXT 2015).

So far, the outcome of the opposition by the “Society” to the teaching materials and the effect of the movement itself are not yet clear (Chūshikai 2015).

It may be necessary at this point to make a few comments about those aspects of criticism concerning the teaching materials where they touch upon
Figure 2: Detail of the revision attachment. Top shows falsified version of the graph in teaching material, bottom shows original graph as published in O’Connor et al. (1998). Source: MEXT (2015).

the concept of “correct knowledge” in connection to autonomy. Silja Samerski’s argument in her paper on prenatal genetic counseling, namely that “in the twenty-first century [...] freedom, choice, and autonomy are being redefined in a way that requires scientific input and guidance services in order for them to be appropriately exercised” (Samerski 2009: 755), fits this case very well. Moreover, the government’s constant demand for “medically and scientifically correct information” is shown to be theater and, at that, even turned into a farce by its obvious falsifications. Last but not least, the information provided in the material offers only a limited choice of options, all of which happen to serve
the national interest – that of increasing the number of childbirths. Views on sexuality and sexual relationships, which could offer a broader understanding of fertility, are completely lacking; and information on pregnancy prevention is given only a very brief mention. Therefore, as Rose states, “expertise comes to be accorded a particular role in the formulation of programs of government and in the technologies that seek to give them effect” (Rose 1996: 156). The scientific knowledge, which presents itself in the teaching material as independent and based on an absolute truth, is obviously used for the specific purpose of influencing reproductive behavior, and not providing a tool of empowerment to the individual.

6 Conclusion

The analysis in the previous sections of this paper are not exhaustive; and important aspects related to the point of view of class or race in connection to the notion of “free choice” could not be addressed. However, by analyzing the government-sponsored public discourse on the low birth rate in only one of its latest efforts in fertility education, strategies of population control – that is, control through the provision of information and depictions of idealized life choices in contemporary Japan – have been shown to be quite revealing. The dimension of autonomy as a neoliberal government strategy, not as an opportunity to self-empowerment, seems to be preeminent in these cases. The argumentation that leads to this conclusion consists of three parts and can be summarized as follows.

6.1 The concept of autonomy

It certainly cannot be denied that knowledge and information are indispensable for the individual to make informed decisions and to be empowered toward decision making in reproduction and in family planning. Yet, as the analysis here has shown, the narrative emphasizing the necessity for education about fertility and reproduction, as well as the concrete examples utilized in its implementation, do not have the capacity to provide the means to obtain personal autonomy concerning reproduction and family planning. Autonomy as empowerment cannot be obtained if the limits within which autonomy can be exercised are as restrictively defined as in the above examples, for the rules governing choice are already predetermined so that the individual has – at least in terms of the narrative – no say in making the “laws.” The individual has to
exercise “proper self-governance.” The life choices provided in the narrative seem to leave no space for choices that stray from the “right order”: getting a good education, getting married, and having children – and all that within the realm of a heterosexual nuclear family with defined gender roles. The propagated autonomy is thus granted only within the boundaries of a highly gender-specific and “traditional” idea of family and within a limited framework of lifestyle. In other words, “the paternalism invoked here is presented as a way to promote autonomy by encouraging or mandating a certain decision” (Dembow 2015: 3).

This type of autonomy promotion ignores structural, economic, and social problems, which in reality create obstacles that limit the choices of the individual, turning them into minor issues that become the responsibility of the individual to deal with. The danger underlying this narrative is that “notions of autonomy, choice, and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline, and the vilification of those who make the ‘wrong’ ‘choices’” (Gill 2008: 442).

6.2 The notion of “correct knowledge”

The information provided is very limited in scope and confined to themes that are advantageous toward the goal of raising the fertility rate. Furthermore, the information about how to limit one’s fertility, which is an important if not vital issue for many high school students, is kept to an absolute minimum. In contrast, complex and expensive infertility treatments are given considerable attention and presented as essential and highly normalized choices involved in reproduction. Such information cannot be “neutral” as it is defined through capitalist market rationalities and linked to a conceptualized and desexualized representation of reproduction. This specific point, as well as notions of gender in this context, requires further investigation.

The analysis of the narrative and the given examples has revealed that the scientific and medical knowledge in the “education” materials was provided to assist the individual in making informed reproductive decisions, which is to say “professionally taught self-determination” (Samerski 2009: 755). Besides the proven fact that falsified data were published, the educational material is limited to a certain social logic and moral concept of the family. Furthermore, the professionals providing that information cannot be categorized as independent authorities, as the goal of the narrative is determined by the framework of the countermeasures against the low birthrate itself.
6.3 Problems concerning gender in the narrative

It is clear that most of the information is explicitly directed at young women and places multiple burdens on them. The information provided gives the impression of free choice, but actually reinforces the image of the woman as being solely responsible for reproductive matters and childcare. This was very obvious in the analysis of the comic book “Choices For the Future.” Even if the husband is depicted as a helpful assistant, the one who needs to make wise choices and life planning in advance in order to manage both family and career is the wife-to-be. This notion of life planning can be understood in connection with a growing demand for the female population to play a more central role in economic activities – that is, in the context of “womenomics” – and the demand to deal self-responsively with the multiple roles that society imposes upon them.

The analysis above has shown that the narrative clearly passes the burden over to young women – rather than confronting core problematic structures in society (structures that are often based on gender stereotypes) and tackling problems in the work environment responsible for the fact that many people have little chance to realize their wish to have a family. Self-determination for young girls thus entails a very limited set of choices, and girls’ bodies have to be policed for the greater good of society. Women are expected to take care of, monitor, discipline, and control their bodies and life choices in order to guarantee social reproduction. Obviously, “the norm of self-governance is used as an exclusionary discourse that reinforces power relationships defining appropriate gender and sexuality” (Rasmussen 2011: Ch. 2, “The Difficult Subject of Girls,” para. 10–11).

For these reasons, we are led to the conclusion that the narrative’s notion of autonomy based on “correct knowledge” is clearly grounded in national interests and bounded by the rules of capitalist neoliberal society with its commercialization of life planning – and not at all in individual empowerment or, much less, as a means of resistance to existing power structures. Yet it must be said that this strategy could, and in a sense already does, provide a chance of personal self-empowerment, even if it is clearly intended as a pronatalist strategy to influence people’s reproductive behavior in a neoliberal context. A supposedly unintended effect of empowerment providing the possibility for transformation (Denbow 2015: 5) was, for example, ironically triggered by the “How to Lead a Healthy Life” teaching material’s all too obvious limitations and falsifications. In this way, the clear instrumentalization of so-called “correct knowledge” could potentially lead to empowerment in the sense that individuals who oppose these control strategies may increase their ability to see through certain power structures.
Ultimately, this paper should make obvious that the concept of autonomy in the context of biopolitics, governmentality, and neoliberalism provides a powerful tool in deepening our examination of population control in contemporary society. In order to broaden the discussion, it is necessary to extend the investigations to actors beyond the politic sector, and in a more specific sense into the media, the health care and pharmaceutical industries, and so forth, along with their agendas that profoundly influence the discourse of family planning. These have yet to be analyzed thoroughly based on our theoretical concepts in order to get a deeper understanding of the technologies and strategies of biopower in contemporary Japan.

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