

Policy Narratives in Formation of Comprehensive Support System for Parenting and Child Care in Japan

Mutsuko Takahashi, Kibi International University, Okayama, Japan

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the distinctive features of policy narratives by focusing on the formulation of the center of comprehensive support for child-rearing generations in Japan. There have been anticipated effects of the decline in the fertility rate and decreasing population, and the issues surrounding parenting and childcare have been re-discovered as a high priority public policy agenda. In this connection, multi-layered policy narratives have been analyzed with special attention paid to the Finnish system with its consistent support from pregnancy to preschool age. It will discuss how policy narratives have been selective in their focus on specific factors while skipping others when formulating a comprehensive system for parenting and childcare in Japan.

KEYWORDS

Birth Rate, Childcare, Finland, Japan, Parenting, Policy Narratives

1. INTRODUCTION

Japan is becoming an aged society with fewer children than ever. Though such a demographic change itself is not unique among industrialized countries, the decline in the total fertility rate since the 1970s has only recently been noted as an urgent policy agenda in Japan. In 1990, the story that Japan's total fertility rate had remained under 1.6 in 1989 was reported as "1.57 shock," and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) formulated the "Angels Plan" in 1994 and the "New Angels Plan" in 1999 to reduce the decrease in the number of children. These plans attempted to increase the capacity of child daycare services with emphasis on more daycare for infants and preschool children to promote the reconciliation of work and family life by increasing the use of childcare leave, recommending shortened and more flexible working hours for those with small children, and reforming the fixed gender divisions of labor at both home and work. Such attempts could be valued in the sense that each of these factors was related to a decline in the total fertility rate. However, these plans in the 1990s remained paper tigers, as they have not successfully influenced the total fertility rate. Currently, Japan is continuing to have fewer babies and experiencing a decrease in the total population. According to the National Census of 2015, published in autumn 2016, Japan's total population, including non-Japanese nationals, was 127,094,745, which was a decrease of 962,607 compared to the 2010 census. This meant that Japan's total population had started declining for the first time since 1920 when the national census began.

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Nowadays, the decline of the total fertility rate in Japan has broadly been recognized. However, the decline has not occurred promptly but instead is a consequence of long term issues since the 1970s. These have been social discourses on various reasons for the decline and of limited policy impacts on this situation. It is not a simple question of how the total fertility rate has developed as different socioeconomic and political factors have influenced factors under the surface of the statistics. The following first explores how policy narratives have impacted the formulation of policy responses to the sluggish total fertility rate. Second, the discussion will focus on what types of reforms have currently been implemented with legal amendments in June 2016 on public health services through a population approach for maternal and child health and on child protection from abuse and adverse childhood conditions.

Regarding the research method, relevant official documents and research literature will be reviewed. In analyzing policy narratives (e.g. Jones et al., 2014), attention will be drawn to both what has explicitly been addressed and to what has been excluded in telling the story of the process of policy making. Moreover, the author's participatory observation in the process of formulating centers of comprehensive support for child-rearing generations will be employed; this refers to retrospective reflections on the author's intended and unintended commitments to parts of the process in decisions and creating policy.

2. POLICY NARRATIVES FOR JAPAN'S DECLINED TOTAL FERTILITY RATE

The long-term decline in the total fertility rate is one of many policy agendas about social phenomena that most policies and decisions makers have not taken seriously in Japan for many years. The number of newborn babies has continued decreasing for decades despite some modest attempts to formulate policy responses as mentioned above. Lower priority has been given to changes in demography, mainly because the establishment of one's own family has been left in the private sphere where public policy has little influence. While a huge amount of the national budget has been directed to construction work such as motorways, only a small share has been available for care infrastructure, particularly daycare for small children. The low-profile position of childcare and parenting in Japanese public policy is reflected in the structure of public expenditure.

The national budgets for families with small children have been considerably underweighted compared to other industrialized countries. According to the OECD statistics, the family expenditure in Japan remained at about 1% of GDP in early 2010s, whereas many industrialized countries spent more than 3%. Some domestic surveys have sought to address that Japanese youth feel hesitant about establishing a family and having children because they strongly anticipate the economic burden associated with financing a school education for children. While the state has been withdrawing from financial commitments to care for and educate children and youths by putting them on individual citizens and families as private matters, the micro level seems to react to such indifference with passive resistance. The decline in the total fertility rate can be regarded as an unproductive consequence of a vicious circle of passive public policy.

Since the early 2010s, the decline in the total fertility rate has started gaining broader public attention, and the wording associated with this phenomenon in official documents has been rephrased from "a counterplan is necessary" to referring to the issue as a "problem" and then most recently to "crisis." The strong concern expressed by the Japanese Government was about the negative effects of the declining total fertility rate on Japan's economic vitality, reflecting the economy-centric framework of policy debates initiated by conservative cabinet parties such as the Liberal Democrats. In a sense, it is paradoxical that the Liberal Democrats who used to be the least active in family policy came to make strong initiatives to tackle the crisis caused by the decreasing number of children and population once the situation was identified as a crisis to the economy and society as a whole.

There are other stories concerning obstacles to the recovery of population growth surrounding the declining total fertility rate, such as the issues of reconciliation of work and family life among active

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