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Disrupting the Japanese marriage system by positive emotion embedded in
institutionalised space: Autoethnography at commercialised matchmaking parties in
Japan

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Abstract

This study focusses on emotions and practices in institutionalized space. In previous study positive emotions guiding institutional work that enable institutions to be built, extended and maintained. Therefore, this study focuses on autoethnography in order to grasp emotions in an institutionalised space and analyse the institutional work guided by those emotions in commercialized matchmaking parties in Japan. Through a detailed description of the emotions I experienced myself, this study reveals disrupting marriage system in Japan by practices from positive emotions in institutionalized space.

Key word

institutionalized space, emotion, institutional work, autoethnography, commercialized matchmaking party

1. Introduction

Emotions in institutions have attracted attention as a concept that affects institutional work (Friedland, 2018). In particular, positive emotions are discussed as guiding practices that enable institutions to be built, extended, and maintained (Creed et al, 2010; Gill and Burrow, 2018; Lawrence and Dover, 2015). One of the challenges of previous research has been finding a way to analyse these emotions.

In this study, I use autoethnography to approach institutional work guided by institutionalised emotions. Based on autoethnography, in which researchers describe their experiences in an institutionalised space in a self-reflective manner, this study clarifies that the Japanese marriage system is in danger of disruption based on positive emotions.

2. Emotion in institutionalised space

Friedland (2018) noted that “many opinions are hardly basic — greed, loyalty, patriotism, acquisitiveness, possessiveness, bravery, reversibility, purity, objectivity, romantic-love — but rather part of institutional formations involved complex material, coherent, practical, evaluated and affective elements” (p. 520). Embedded in institutions, people gain identity and experience conflicts of interest as joy, reassurance, anger, and anxiety (Creed et al, 2010). In other words, joy and security are the engines for expanding or maintaining institutions, while anger and anxiety are the ignition points that lead to the change or disruption of the institution (Gill and Burrow, 2018; Lawrence and Dover, 2015).

Therefore, in this study I focus on the relationship between materiality and space in the generation of emotions in institutions. Institutions are social realities as well as material beings that influence people’s practices (Levy and Scully, 2007). For example, Based on a matrix or a set of references, people can practice consensus building, negotiation, critique, legitimating, conflict and struggle, such as assessment criteria and rules rooted in legal

systems, cultural and historical backgrounds, and measurement instruments provided by experts, engineers, and scientists (Lamont, 2012).

In other words, by embedding people in an institutionalised space constructed of abstract and concrete evaluation criteria and measurement instruments, people will be able to experience institutionalised emotions and create, expand, maintain, and sometimes even change or disrupt an institution through institutionalized emotions (Creed et al , 2019). People's emotions in the institutionalised space and institutional work are analysed as follows. First, people experience feelings by adapting themselves to their abilities and values in an institutionalised space built up with metrics and measuring instruments. Second, people are induced by their emotions to create, maintain, and sometimes cause disruption in an institutionalised space as institutional work.

3. Methodology: Autoethnography in institutionalised space

This study focuses on autoethnography in order to grasp emotions in an institutionalised space and analyse the institutional work guided by those emotions. Autoethnography finds methodological breakthroughs in the emotions experienced by researchers themselves. It aims to provide an understanding of social phenomenon as mutual action of the self - other, in which the researcher themselves is considered a party who lives in the world (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). In particular, autoethnography has been employed in the production of papers based on grounded experiences and knowledge, such as feminism and sexuality (O'Shea, 2019).

However, the implications of this methodology must be taken with caution because they are based only on grounded experience and knowledge. The methodological implication of autoethnography is that the researcher doubts the implicit recognition premise from the feelings he personally experienced and reconsiders the theory and the concept from a

different viewpoint. Therefore, in this study, I clarify institutional work based on various emotions experienced by researchers themselves in an institutionalised space.

4. Case: New practice of activity for marriage in Japan

4.1 Background of field work

Japan's population has been declining since 2019; in 2011, its aging rate was 28%. The cause of this population declines and super-aging population is said to be the rise in the lifetime unmarried rate among Japanese people¹. In 1995, when an increase in the lifetime unmarried rate was confirmed, 9% of men and 5.1% of women were unmarried. In June 2019, according to the Cabinet Office, the rate had grown to 23.4% for men and 14.1% for women, increasing 2.5 to 3 times in 14 years.

The increase in the lifetime unmarried rate in Japan has been analysed from social and economic perspectives (Yamada, 2017). Until the 1970s, the dominant ideology in Japan was matchmaking marriages, which were based on a mixture of hierarchy and economy, in which parents or boss at work place found and decided on marriage partners that met certain class and income conditions. However, post-World War II democratic education criticised matchmaking marriage as a repressive system; with the influx of free love via Hollywood movies since the 1980s, romantic marriage based on love between partners became mainstream. By the early 1990s, romantic marriages accounted for 70% of marriages in Japan. However, since marriage was liberated on the basis of individual feelings, the number of people who chose not to marry on their own likewise increased. It was originally thought that this was due to the prolonged economic recession and the instability of employment since the 1990s. However, even in 2019, when the economy recovered, the lifetime unmarried rate continued to rise. It was pointed out that the paradox “not marry until one meets the best partner” was born from the romantic marriage ideology.

Commercialised matchmaking parties emerged as a social business that sought to solve the serious social problem of the growing number of unmarried people in the 2000s. Commercialised matchmaking parties are now held more than 100 times a day in Tokyo. At present, 40% of all marriages in Japan are said to have used a commercialised matchmaking party. Nevertheless, in 2019, the lifetime unmarried rate hit a record high. In other words, the Japanese marriage system is on the verge of disruption.

4.2 Institutionalised space of a commercialised matchmaking party in Japan

The four evaluation indices used at commercialised matchmaking parties are age, annual income, occupation, and hobbies. Age is classified either by an age limit (people within five years of each other's age) or age difference (of five years or more, with men being older; parties for older women are rarely organised). Men's annual income is classified into the following categories by age: those in their 20s with an annual income of 6 million yen or more; those in their 30s and 40s with an annual income of 8 million yen or more; and those of any age with an annual income of 10 million yen or more. Income is required for men to participate; women seldom need to declare their incomeⁱⁱ. Occupations are classified into high-income professions such as lawyer, doctor, and enterprise manager, or stable occupations such as government employee, teacher, employees of well-known companies and others. Again, it is mainly men who are asked about their occupation as a condition to participate. Finally, both men and women are asked about hobbiesⁱⁱⁱ, as having a common hobby is thought to be a prerequisite for romantic love.

Using these four indices, the promotion company, in conjunction with a wedding hall management company, a wedding magazine, and an IT company that provides a matchmaking app, holds commercialised matchmaking parties in various settings. People imagine their ideal marriage partner and select one of the parties offered by the sponsor company.

4.3 Queue up and hope for the best!

I attended a total of 12 open matchmaking parties during the six months from June to December 2018. When I decided to participate in a commercialised matchmaking party, I was 44 years old. My motivation to marry was to have a child, so I wanted to meet a younger woman who was able to have children. In addition, since I enjoy fly fishing and bodybuilding, I thought it would be ideal if my partner enjoyed both hobbies.

However, while looking at the list of commercialised matchmaking parties, I realised that it would be difficult to meet women significantly younger than me. Commercialised matchmaking parties were mainly planned for men and women in their 20s, men in their 30s and women in their 20s within five years of each other's age, and women in their 30s and men in their 40s five years of each other's age. On the other hand, a small number of commercialised matchmaking parties were held to allow for a larger age difference between older men and young women. These were parties for women who wanted to meet men with high incomes and stable occupations. Based on the evaluation criteria provided by the host company, I was considered high-income, so I attended one such party.

At a matchmaking party, after the reception at the venue, the participants start by filling out a self-introduction card (Figure 1).

Figure 1 self-introduction card^{iv}

self-introduction card		
name	age	place of residence
hometown	occupation	annual income
Hobby	How to spend a holiday	
If there are other appeal points, please describe them.		

As soon as participants finish introducing themselves to each other, organisers gather information about the people who made a good impression on other participants. This information is fed back to each participant, enabling them to know which person made a favourable impression for participants. At the end of the party, the organisers collect information about the people participants want to associate with. Contact information will be exchanged only if hope of participants matches each other.

At the first party I attended, the matching success rate was about 10%. However, no matter how much I livened up the conversation at the second party I attended, I was never matched. I found out the reason when I attended my third party. Most of the men participating were in their 40s and were employed in occupations such as lawyer, doctor, and CEO. Among them, a young and handsome man had a long queue of women waiting to meet him. In contrast, women avoided conversation with other men by excusing themselves to get drinks and food or checking their cell phones. I wondered why the women lined up only in front of the handsome guy. When I asked one of the women why, her reason was very clear. 'I'll go talk to the youngest and most handsome person. There's no need to talk to anyone but the most handsome. Even if we don't match up today, there will be another party like this.'

At a commercialised matchmaking party arranged by annual income and occupation, a man without the benefit of youth and good looks is invisible through being average. Of course, at a party with participants of the same income and occupation, women will target the men of the most appealing age and appearance and ignore the others. The women understand that there are many competitors, but there will always be another commercialised matchmaking party. As long as they continue to attend parties, they will eventually get the kind of partner they seek.

4.4 I don't like it!: Pursuit of more micro-matching

After experiencing a high-income matchmaking party, I understood that a party based on income and occupation was clearly not advantageous to me. Even a university teacher, which is generally a stable occupation, cannot stand out unless he is also a supermodel. In order to make a successful match, my occupation and annual income would have to be superior and make a potential partner think, "I can't meet him at the next party." For that reason, the next matchmaking party I chose included women who like sports and outdoor activities. Few women are fishing and bodybuilding enthusiasts, and when people who share a rare hobby meet, it is a precious encounter. I would find my fly-fishing bodybuilder and have an advantage over my rivals, given my occupation and annual income.

I soon realised I had the wrong idea. I wrote about bodybuilding as a hobby on my self-introduction card, but a woman who loved tennis rejected me as soon as she saw it. 'Bodybuilding—you, too! I don't know why men like to grow their muscles so much. I feel sick when I see big muscles! Why do you try to make unnatural muscles? I don't understand.' Later, I met a woman interested in fishing. However, I love fly-fishing, and she loved lure-fishing. We could not understand each other's tastes. At a matchmaking party categorised by hobbies, participants regard the micro-matching of hobbies as more important than anything else.

4.5 Self-Revaluation and positive divorce

I realised that it was very difficult to find a match by participating in a party mainly based on hobbies. As a result, I returned to parties for high-income men, expecting to be buried yet again. I tried a matchmaking party in which women were looking for older men, specifically men more than 10 years older than themselves. I thought that there, at least, women would not concentrate on the youngest man in the room and that I would have a chance. As I hoped, I was able to match with a 32-year-old secretary.

The commercialised matchmaking party promotion company requests men to make an effort towards love and marriage after the party. In particular, the man is encouraged to buy the woman's favourite clothing and select good choices of shops and restaurants to visit on dates. My sporting hobbies and hers, art appreciation, were remarkably different. Therefore, I had to make an effort to respect her wishes first and listen to her opinion. We went to art museums, fancy cafes, or restaurants about two or three times a month. Half a year later, I asked for her hand in marriage and was confused by her answer.

This is hard to say, but I'm not going to marry you. In the past half year, I was happy and had a good time because you took care of me and took me many places. Thanks to you, I feel confident in having someone who cares about me. But then I thought I could try to marry a younger person with a higher income with whom I could have a better relationship. Because you look like a father. I just thought I didn't have to go out with you anymore.

Given that response, I could do nothing but break up with her, as she wanted. She was not unhappy or uncomfortable with me. Rather, having gained great satisfaction and confidence, she held out for the possibility of a better marriage.

5. Discussion

In this study, I have used autoethnography to describe institutionalised emotions and institutional work in an institutionalised space. The primary theoretical contribution of this study is that positive emotions in institutionalised spaces can lead to practices that disrupt institutions and social systems.

My experience with sadness and surprise has taught me that people positively avoid making matches at Japanese commercialised matchmaking parties. They seek more

handsome men, more beautiful women, younger people, richer prospects, and those who share identical hobbies, and they expect to meet their perfect romantic partner. These positive emotion-driven practices have led to an increase in the rate of unmarried couples in Japan and have gradually disrupted the marriage system.

As a way to make lemonade from lemons, I have used this experience to focus on the potential of autoethnography as a methodology to capture institutionalized emotions. Autoethnography is considered to be an effective method to capture the most micro-institutional work in an institutionalized space. It is impossible for anyone but the person concerned to know institutionalized emotions. Therefore, I used autoethnography to describe the disruption of the Japanese marriage system based on my own emotions.

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ⁱ Statistical data on population and marriage are based on Japanese government information. For comparison, the aging rate is 18.9% in France and 18.1% in the United Kingdom.

ⁱⁱ For men in their early twenties only, parties are held without the need to declare income.

ⁱⁱⁱ Outdoor activities, sports, and traveling parties are frequently organised.

^{iv} This card is used at all parties.