



Effects of sex preference and social pressure on fertility in changing Japanese families



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ABSTRACT

A preference in parents for a son is thought to affect their fertility. However, even if parents do not have a preference for a son, the people who surround them possibly have a preference for a son. In this case, social pressure can influence parents' behavior and fertility. This study explored how social pressure related to the sex of children affects fertility. Effects of social pressure were compared between the pre- and post-World War II generations in Japan. The dependent variable was the number of children in the regression equation. A dummy variable for the first child, which was set to 1 when the first child was a boy, and a dummy variable for the preference for a son were included as independent variables. Social pressure was considered to exist when the dummy variable for the first child had a significant negative sign. The key findings are as follows: in the pre-war generation, if the first child was a daughter, the total number of children tended to increase not only when the mother preferred a son, but also when the mother did not have a preference for either gender. This tendency was not observed for the post-war generation.

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1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that there exist parental preferences for the sex of their children (e.g., Ben-Porath and Welch, 1976, 1980; Behrman, 1988; Behrman et al., 1986; Leung, 1988). This topic has triggered a significant amount of research regarding the underlying reasons for these preferences and their effects on family structure (e.g., Arnold and Liu, 1986; Dahl and Moretti, 2008; Das, 1987; Leung, 1991, 1994; Lundberg, 2005).¹ The relationship between the preference for a son and fertility is considered to be a major issue. From the viewpoint of traditional economics, fertility is dependent on the female's decision (e.g., Becker, 1965; Cigno, 1991; Galor and Weil, 1996). For example, because of a substitution effect, an increase in female wages results in an increase in female labor supply and a reduction in demand for children (Becker, 1965). Within the framework of traditional economic theory, Ahn and Mira (2002) have posited that income effects prevail over substitution effects in the process of economic growth. If this is true,

the stage of economic development in a country is important when investigating fertility.²

In the field of economics, researchers have focused not only on individual decision making but also on the attitudes of others when analyzing human behavior (Becker and Murphy, 2000). In pre-World War II Japan, family members were expected to subordinate their individual interests to those of the family as a whole (Hendry, 1981). "Women were taught from an early age that their prime duty should be obedience: first to their father, then to their husband and husband's parents, and finally when widowed, to their son" (Hendry, 1981, p. 21). If a female did not obey the males in a family, she would be informally sanctioned by family members. This was an informal rule within a family and thus the social norm. More broadly stated, if members of a tightly knit group went against the social norm formed through long-term interpersonal relationships, they suffered social ostracism.³ The costs of social ostracism were significant in the family or community, which were both characterized by continuous and intense personal interaction (Hayami, 2001). In this paper, this cost is evaluated by examining social pressure. Social pressure depends to a great extent on the sociocultural and anthropological background of society. Hence, fertility is

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¹ The one-child policy instituted by the Chinese government resulted in sex-selective abortions (Ebenstein, 2010). Especially in the countryside of China, sex-selective abortion was commonly observed (Zeng et al., 1993; Chu, 2001).

² According to Qian (2008), an increase in female income mitigated the distortion of the sex ratio at birth in China.

³ The social norm remains, to a certain extent, in effect in Japan, although formal rule plays an important role (Yamamura, 2008a,b).

influenced not only by individual preferences but also by social pressure, which varies according to sociocultural conditions.

Sociocultural conditions play a critical role in determining economic behavior, but the importance of this role has gradually decreased over time as an outcome of economic development (e.g., Greif, 1994, 2002; Hayami, 1998). Social pressure seems to lessen as a result of the diffusion of market-based transactions. If this is the case, economic development decreases the effects of social pressure on fertility. Kureishi and Wakabayashi (2011) provided evidence that parents of the pre-war generation preferred a son. However, the preference for a son disappeared in the post-war generation, indicating that preference for a son had weakened in Japan. Dynamic processes involving the effects of social pressure on fertility have not been sufficiently investigated. It is widely acknowledged that Japan has experienced rapid economic growth during the post-World War II years. Income level, family structure, and interpersonal relations within communities in Japan have changed significantly in this period (Hendry, 1981). Therefore, it is appropriate to explore changes in income and social pressure as related to fertility in modern Japan. This study used data at the level of the individual to examine how both a mother's preference and social pressure influence fertility, after controlling for a mother's job status and education.⁴ Furthermore, changes in these effects were explored by comparing pre- and post-World War II generations.

2. Change of conditions in Japan

Before World War II, each member of a Japanese family was expected to subordinate any individual interests to those of the family. Until the mid-19th century, property was regarded as belonging to the family as a whole (Hendry, 1981). The affairs of the family were managed ultimately by its head. "The principals were expected to agree with the choice of their elders, and it was not considered quite proper for a son, and particularly for a daughter, to express too strong an opinion on the selection of the parents" (Hendry, 1981, p. 17). That is, parents influenced their child's decision making in general. Primogeniture became predominant during the 18–19th century and was institutionalized in the Meiji Civil Code (article 970). The law of inheritance stipulated that all household property and authority should pass to the eldest son. The successor, the eldest son, was accorded deferential treatment next only to that of the head of the house. Under such conditions, parents were thought to prefer sons because they provide heirs in the succeeding generation.

In the post-war period, legislation gave all sons and daughters equal rights to inherit. Opportunities for higher education and prestigious and lucrative employment for women increased. As stated in the Constitution, women have been given the legal status of full and equal partners in marriage. Given these changes, "it seems that there is less emphasis on this successor's being the eldest son than there used to be, and other siblings usually receive a share of the inheritance in the form of education, financial help with a house or business, or a bridal trousseau" (Hendry, 1981, pp. 28–29).

The greatest single factor to influence the Japanese way of life was defeat in World War II, with the introduction of democracy and other Western ideals into the legal and educational systems (Hendry, 1981). Apart from changes in law, unprecedented economic growth started after World War II. Hence, economic conditions such as income levels were different between the pre-war and post-war generations, which appeared to change

⁴ The social position and role of women have also changed remarkably in this period. In this regard, Spain is similar to Japan. For example, Gutierrez-Domenech (2008) has focused on the labor market when exploring marriage and fertility.

Table 1
Construction of research sample.

Description	Number in sample
Original sample	3475
Respondent has been married ^a	3351
Respondent has offspring	3189
Characteristics about self and spouse supplied by respondent. Furthermore, women of childbearing age, who were born after 1955, are omitted (variables appear in Table 2)	2079 ^b

^a The three samples for unmarried mothers were omitted.

^b (1) Sample was used for estimations reported in Tables 3–6.

the structure of the family and thus relationships between family members. These drastic changes may have had an impact on determinants of fertility.

3. Methods

3.1. Data

This paper used data at the level of the individual, including age, years of education, marital status, and number of children.⁵ In addition, age and spouses' years of education were included. These data were compiled from the National Survey: "Trails of Families in Post-War Japan" (TFPWJ hereafter) conducted in all parts of Japan in 2002. Five thousand adult females (born between 1920 and 1969, aged 32–81 years) were invited to participate in a survey with stratified two-stage random sampling. The survey collected data on 3475 adults, with a response rate of 69.5%.

The construction of the samples used in this research is shown in Table 1. The original sample contained 3475 respondents. Among these respondents, 3351 had experienced marriage. The sample size became 3189 when limited to those who had offspring; observations of infertile females were discarded. In addition, I omitted the respondents that did not provide valid answers for their characteristics of their spouse's characteristics.⁶ Furthermore, the respondents of child-bearing age⁷ were omitted, reducing the sample size to 2079. The sample was therefore restricted to females who were fertile before their mid-40s, but could not bear a child in 2002. This sample was used for estimation, and the results are reported in Tables 3–6.

Comparisons of variables used for estimation between the pre-war and post-war generations are shown in Table 2. The dependent variable was the total number of children. Total number of children for the post-war generation was smaller than for the pre-war generation, reflecting a birth rate decline. The independent variables are also shown in Table 2. To measure preferences for a son, I used the following question: "For your first child, which did you want to have, a boy or girl?" Respondents could choose from a numbered list, which included "boy," "girl," "either," and "I did not want a child." According to Dahl and Moretti (2008), a first-born son is more likely to be living with a father compared with a first-born daughter, leading fathers to prefer sons. Thus, the likelihood of

⁵ Data for this secondary analysis are from the National Survey: "Trails of Families in Post-War Japan." These data were designed by the Japan Society of Family Sociology. The research was subcontracted to Shin Joho Center Inc. and carried out in 2002. The data were provided by the Social Science Japan Data Archive, Information Center for Social Science Research on Japan, Institute of Social Science, The University of Tokyo.

⁶ The number of respondents that were not included because the respondents did not provide valid answers was 115. Among them, 112 respondents were excluded because they did not provide valid answers for preferences about their children. It should be noted that random sampling failed.

⁷ Furthermore, women of child-bearing age were defined as those who were born after 1955. That is, in 2002, they were younger than 47 years of age.

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