

“The Grass Looks Greener
in the Neighbors’ Garden”:
Family, Happiness and
Reproductive Disruption
in a Japanese *Dorama*

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This article presents an analysis of discourses of family and “reproductive disruption” (Inhorn 2007) in the form of involuntary infertility in a 2018 Japanese television *dorama* which revolves around the experience of a young couple going through infertility treatment. Marketed as “*Ninkatsu-dorama*,” the series initially seems to offer support to pronatalist forces in contemporary Japan’s low birth-rate society, but, though failing to provide a discursive alternative view of ideologies of family and gender in contemporary Japan, the program does bring to the table an element of subversion through its unexpected break with normative happiness, as I will argue in the following pages.

Theorizing Ninkatsu

The discourse of *ninkatsu* (妊活) which can be roughly translated as “active pursuit of pregnancy” appeared in Japanese mass media in 2011 as a guideline for young women to “have it all,” career *and* babies, in times of social change and uncertainties since the burst of the economic bubble

(Hommerich 2012). While initially introduced as a strategic marketing campaign by an international pharmaceutical company to promote fertility treatments and related products to the Japanese market, the “active pursuit of pregnancy” became not only a successful social movement and media boom but was later also adapted by government agencies in the form of life planning advice and reproductive knowledge promotion in the context of pronatalist policy efforts (Fassbender 2021). Pursuing pregnancy actively, according to this discourse, includes encompassing life planning, health management and self-maintenance, as well as being informed about biological reproductive limitations and possible technological solutions to reproductive disruptions.

With *shūkatsu* (就活), *konkatsu* (婚活) or *shūkatsu* (終活) as the most prominent examples, *katsu* discourses can generally be classified as an expression of ostensibly individual life-design, self-responsibility and “activit[ies] that [require] dedicated and prioritized effort” (Dalton & Dales 2016: 2). However, while subjective and individual experiences seem to be the focus of interest in these contexts, life-planning and self-responsibility have not only become commodities under neoliberalism (see Broeckling 2015; Denbow 2015; Meyers 2019), especially in the context of economic and demographic stagnation in Japan since the burst of the economic bubble, they have also become a form of social control (Fassbender 2021; Mladenova 2019; Makino 2012; Makino 2015; Shibuya 2003). These discourses designate activities of members of society with the goal of achieving certain normative life goals, such as finding a job or a marriage partner, often fuelled by aspirations to materialize a normative form of *happiness* (see: Ahmed 2010; Abbinnett 2013; Cabanas & Illouz 2019) and motivated by the wish to be a successful member of society. In a contemporary

Japanese context, frequently appearing terms such as *makegumi* and *kachigumi* (“winners and losers”) illustrate the two-layered social stratification between those who “made it” and those who didn’t, a phenomenon which has been dubbed “hope-stratified society” (*kibō kakusa shakai* 希望格差社会) (Yamada 2007), after the long-held belief of monoculturalism and the all-middle-class society illusion was shed in the early 90s (Chiavacci & Hommerich 2019). What the *katsus* have in common is that the individual is encouraged to purchase goods or services or to engage in activities in standardized processes by fulfilling the necessary steps of a packaged life-plan, arguably an expression of the widely discussed consumer-identity in liquid modernity (Baumann 2013). The *katsu* discourses seem to provide clear instructions on how to lead one’s life — of which an important part is making a family — and to alleviate the complexity of an individualist society with diverse life-courses. While *katsu* discourses seem to promote the meritocratic idea that individual effort is key in this project, the capitalist marketplace as the playground for these games reinforces inequalities in reality by not providing the same starting point for everyone. In addition, by clearly defining the “good life” though its prescribed way to successfully reaching happiness, the individual’s way of being is aligned with capitalist market rationales and normative lifestyles (Ahmed 2010; Cabanas & Illouz 2019).

While the pronatalist appropriation of the *ninkatsu* discourse has received critical academic and activist attention (Tsuge & Nishiyama 2017), the “active pursuit of pregnancy” has also been analyzed in the context of the politics of reproduction in contemporary Japan, with a theoretical framework revolving around biomedicalization, postfeminism and neoliberal government strategies, as a discourse that promotes self-government as a

form of subjectification (Fassbender 2019; Fassbender 2021). By utilizing/highjacking feminist or "leftist" ideas of empowerment and autonomy (see Bröckling 2005: 7f) to realize the "postfeminist fantasy of living an ideal-yet-also-normal life" (Riley, Evans, & Robson 2019: 99), the illusion of choice covers up and thus reproduces social inequalities and stratifications that in fact provide the limiting framework for individual decision-making (Denbow 2015). Failure to achieve "happiness" or success, is thus ascribed to a lack in individual effort.

In this context, the term "reproductive entrepreneur" was coined (Fassbender 2021) to describe the neoliberal government dynamics and specifically power workings in the reproductive realm, reflecting the element of self-government, health management and technological approaches to reproductive choice by combining "the entrepreneurial self," "postfeminist healthism" and "biomedicalization" under its umbrella. According to Ulrich Bröckling (2016), the "entrepreneurial self" as a "form of subjectification" is "the call to act as an entrepreneur of one's own life" (Bröckling 2016: 20). Hence, this "entrepreneurial self" is a discourse determining an aim that the individual is incited to achieve in order to be a successful and recognized member of society in the neoliberal context. "Postfeminist healthism" is a theoretical tool to criticize the notion of the "makeover paradigm" that constructs and forms the female body as "in need of constant transformation," demanding women continually survey, monitor and improve themselves (Riley, Evans & Robson 2019: 3) while embedded in a language of choice and empowerment (Riley, Evans & Robson 2019: 4). To reflect the reliance on technological means to control and influence reproduction and with those changing perceptions of life and death, biomedicalization represents the third element (Clarke et al. 2003).

Infertility and reproductive technology in Japan

Ninkatsu and reproduction in contemporary Japan cannot be discussed without referring to technological opportunities that have been developed in late modernity. These developments include changing understandings of life and death and, concomitantly, what constitutes reproduction, meaning that reproductive choice and freedom experienced a paradigm shift (see Tsuge 1996). The range of choice has seemed to expand constantly; however, with that, new anxieties, new uncertainties and new risks have appeared. It cannot be denied “while technology broadens the range of individual choices, it also increases domination and control of the nation state, the market and society at the same time”¹ (Ogino 2014: 230).

In Japan, the first IVF baby was born in 1983. Sub-forms of IVF, such as intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), in which a single male sperm cell is directly injected into the oocyte, were achieved more recently in the 1990s. In contemporary Japan, infertility treatment generally follows a step-up process starting with the timing method,² in which a couple’s sexual intercourse is timed according to the estimated ovulation day. The next step is artificial insemination, also referred to as IUI (intrauterine insemination), a simple procedure where sperm is inserted into the uterine cavity close to the time of ovulation. These steps are succeeded by various forms of ARTs (assisted reproductive technology) (*seishoku enjo gijutsu* 生殖援助技術), including in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), in fresh or frozen cycles (FET: frozen embryo transfer) (Asada & Kawai 2016: 118ff). Despite the absence of legal limitations, surrogacy or egg donation are not conducted in any form in contemporary Japan, based on guidelines by the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecol-

ogy (JSOG). Sperm donation is possible, though relatively uncommon. In general, methods that involve both parents'-to-be reproductive cells comprise the vast majority in Japan. Another limitation is the fact that only married couples can access the technologies, which de-facto excludes non-heterosexual couples in Japan, where same-sex marriage is still not legal. Despite these significant limitations, the multi-billion business of ARTs has become a vital commodity in Japan's low birth rate society. The number of completed ART cycles has shown a significant increase since 2010 (JSOG n.d.). In 2020, the most recent available data, 58,800 children were born with the help of assisted reproductive technology (JSOG 2022), a slight *numerical* decline compared to 2019, for the first time in years. However, with constantly declining birth numbers, the *rate* of ARTs assisted birth in total birth continues to be on the rise, with currently ca. one in 14/15 children or 7% out of the total number of births. In reference to this prevalence of conducted cycles and high numbers of fertility clinics, Japan has been called an “infertility superpower” (*funin taikoku*) (e.g. Yokota 2015–2018) in the mass media in recent years.

One of the factors that seems to increasingly draw couples to choose ARTs is the fact that the definition of “infertility” was officially changed in 2015 in Japan. The time frame after which a couple is defined as “infertile” has been lowered from two years of regular unprotected intercourse to one year (JSOG 2015), whereas international definition standards vary between one and five years (WHO 2020). The JSOG claims that “in our country, due to women marrying later and their career building aspirations, as well as other reasons, women’s age at pregnancy has been rising”, expecting “that the change in definition of infertility leads to a situation where women get appropriate infertility treatment at an earlier stage”³

(JSOG 2015). It is important to understand that in a Japanese context, “hope and faith invested in technological progress” (Franklin 1997: 205) are a central part of discussions and policies that see ARTs as a possible solution to the low birthrates in Japan. As a newly introduced measure against the low birth rate, for example, all kinds of fertility treatments, including ARTs, are now covered by health insurance since April 1 2022, with the common 30% self-pay burden (MHLW n.d.).

In contrast to the high prevalence of ARTs, the adoption of children who are not related is relatively rare, and many couples who experience involuntary childlessness do not consider it an option (Shirai 2004: 186). This situation is, in addition to institutional, ideological, and economic hurdles to formal adoption based on “the understanding that ‘blood ties’ are absolutely relevant in the construction of a ‘normal’ family” (Castro-Vázquez 2017: 183). In 1988, a change in the civil law introduced “special adoption” (*tokubetsu yōshi engumi*), where rather than in the persistently common practice of adult adoption, the welfare of the child is the motivator, not the continuation of the male family line (Shirai 2019: 65). However, case numbers have constantly been low compared to other industrialized countries, where incidents of national and international adoptions are also decreasing, arguably due to the generally increasing reliance on reproductive technologies in the case of involuntary childlessness. In Japan, the five years with the highest numbers of special adoptions were 1989 (1, 223 cases), 1988 (758 cases), 1990 (758 cases), 2019 (711 cases), and 2020 with 693 cases (Supreme Court Japan 1988–2020).

Despite this lack in popularity of “special adoption,” there is an abundance of children in state care, currently ca. 42,500 (MHLW 2022: 4). The poor and over-crowded conditions of orphanages and the general over-

institutionalization of children in care in Japan, who are often not raised in family-like settings, have been harshly criticized (Japan Children Support Association n.d.; Human Rights Watch 2014). A recent legal amendment in the Civil Code makes the process easier and allows the adoption of children until the age of 15 as a general rule since April 2020 (MOJ 2019). While a slight increase in adoption cases can be seen, constant necessary ideological and institutional change might be hard to achieve with no powerful lobby at work.

Surveys have shown that most couples who face involuntary childlessness place great importance on being genetically related to their children and have thus not considered adoption as an option (Shirai 2004: 186; Castro-Vázquez 2017: 183), a situation which is reinforced through and reproduced in JSOG guidelines concerning donation of reproductive cells, which claims that “in our country, a way of thinking that emphasizes blood relations is strongly present”⁴ (MHLW 2003).⁵ While blood ties are often cited as the underlying ideological factor behind a very common rejection of adoption (Castro-Vázquez 2015; Bryant 1990: 302, 307), it is nevertheless vital, as Goldfarb argues, to understand the constructedness of the idea of blood ties as the constituting factor behind the low prevalence of child adoption in Japan. The constant emphasis and thus reconstruction of “blood ties” as crucial in building parent-child relationships might be less deep-rooted, but rather convenient in the project of preserving the “national body” (Sandberg 2018) and for the profit-seeking of the biomedical business (see Goldfarb 2018).

Family, happiness and reproductive disruption
in “The grass looks greener in the neighbors’ garden”

After the above outline of the social frameworks providing the context for this analysis, attention will now be shifted to the “*ninkatsu* drama” “The grass looks greener in the neighbors’ garden” (隣の家族は青く見える *Tonari no kazoku wa aoku mieru*) which follows a young couple in their endeavours to conceive with the help of assisted reproductive technology.

In general, *dorama* in Japan have been shown to be “a barometer of the emotional impact of historical change” and a location for negotiating social norms (Freedmann 2018: 48). The producer of the *ninkatsu* drama, Nakano Toshiyuki 中野利幸, became a sort of spokesperson for *ninkatsu*, e.g. when he appears in interviews with fertility experts (*News PCRM* 2018). Nakano has commonly addressed social issues such as bullying in schools, discrimination and consequent mental health issues experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community, and domestic violence in earlier works such as “Life” (ライフ) (2007) or “Last Friends” (ラスト・フレンズ) (2008). Based on the impression that fertility treatment has become such a central part of life for many couples, he dedicated his 2019 work to this issue (Minato 2018).

The *dorama* provides insight into how changes and constants regarding the family in Japan are represented in popular culture. Muramatsu Yasuko (1979) and Sakamoto Kazue (1997) have discussed how representations of family in a Japanese context have not only mirrored but also helped to construct the ideology of the “modern family.” After common depictions of nuclear families and the “my home” ideology in the 60s and 70s in the category of “home dramas” (*hōmu dorama*), the 80s and early 90s saw a de-

construction of this ideology with more representations of single and other more diverse lifestyles especially of working women in so-called “trendy dramas” (*torendi dorama*) (Murohashi 2002: 62f; Freedman 2017: 49f).

In earlier research, I have positioned the *ninkatsu* discourse as a neo-liberal form of subjectification and pressure point for young women to self-govern themselves in the name of autonomy, however within strict social rules surrounding family and gender norms (Fassbender 2021). Here, I will now ask if the discourse surrounding the “active pursuit of pregnancy” in certain interpretations can provide room for genuine empowerment and agency by presenting a discussion platform for those experiencing reproductive disruption. The analysis is further interested in how norms concerning family and partnership are interpreted in the context of *ninkatsu* in *dorama* form.

The *dorama* was aired every week on Thursday at 10pm in 2018 and targeted the working population in their 30s and 40s. The proclaimed goal of the program was to reduce stigma through education about infertility treatment (Fuji TV 2018). It was not an immense commercial success (Kimura 2018) with an audience share between 5% and 8% per episode. According to commentators, the educational character alongside the complexity of the storyline with its many subtopics might have been factors that contributed to its limited success (Kimura 2018). However, as the only *dorama* (so far) that brought fertility treatments in the so-called “Infertility Superpower” Japan to the TV screen, it did initiate a stir and discussions. It was appraised by medical experts as showing the reality of infertility treatment and what it means to go through it, for example by Taguchi Sagiri (Taguchi 2018), gynecologist and expert in reproductive medicine, as well as author of *7 rules for positive Ninkatsu*⁶ (Taguchi 2016).

The series revolves around four families living in a community housing project, with the Igarashis as the "Ninkatsu-couple," unmarried couple Kawamura Ryōji and Sugisaki Chihiro, the "couple that does not want children," gay couple Hirose Wataru and his younger partner Aoki Saku, and the "family that pretends happiness," the Komiyamas (Fuji TV 2018).

The four parties involved in the housing project and their views on family and childbearing are introduced to the audience when they meet to discuss the design of the common space with their real estate agent. Several times throughout the program, Chihiro makes it clear that she does not wish to become a mother, when she, for example, says in the second episode "having children or not is a right; not a duty."⁷ She is confronted with the intrusive and — in this program, clearly unacceptable — "antiquated" world views of Komiyama Miyuki, who represents the worn-out housewife model with her "breadwinner husband" and two daughters, whom she is drilling to get into prestigious schools. With her high-pitched voice, nagging way of talking to her counterparts, desperate attempts to prove the superiority of her family model to everyone and her way of obviously intruding on their privacy, her "conservative" position is ridiculed. It is made clear throughout the program that her life-model and her world views are remnants of times past and do not go hand in hand with a modern Japan, supposed to be embracing individual freedom and diverse family models. This is obvious from the very beginning, when she asks the other families "you will have kids at some point, right?,"⁸ and claims that "all women want children. A woman is only a full-fledged person when she has given birth to a child."⁹ These statements are immediately peacefully and levelheadedly countered by the heroine Igarashi Nana, who presents the voice of reason throughout the program. She says, "there are diverse

points of view, and I don't think that giving birth to a child is everything for a woman, but I want [children]."¹⁰ When Mrs. Komiyama utters "we need to work at least a little bit against the low birth rate,"¹¹ the intrusion of the national rationale in individual reproductive decisions is framed as unacceptable; and the individual's reproductive freedom is clearly situated as the highest priority. This trope is further elaborated through the character of Hirose Wataru, a gay man in the closet, who painfully experiences his surroundings' patronizing heteronormative understandings of family. He is in a relationship with notably younger and slightly childish Saku, who seems to embody "progressive" views on family. These are, however, several times clearly dismissed as "too much" for current Japanese society, when he, for example, tells Wataru about his idea to have a big family with him by adopting many children. The positioning of Wataru as an unsuspecting "normal guy" as opposed to representations of flamboyant transgender and gay persona on Television goes hand in hand with recent efforts in Japanese popular culture to align sexual minorities with normative family values.¹²

The series marks its educational contents as a "weapon" to fight prejudice and stigma due to ignorance not only concerning infertility treatment, but also non-normative family models in contemporary Japan. Several successful transformations are depicted, for example when Komiyama Miyuki reflects on her own worldviews after she finds out about Wataru and Saku's relationship: "By excluding everything that is different from me, I tried to protect myself. But lately, I came to doubt what these things mean anyway. I was trapped in my small world and now I regret that."¹³ Saku praises her efforts by saying, "It needs guts to deconstruct one's values. (...) It would be nice if there would be more understanding for each

other one day.”¹⁴ This conversation reflects the inspirational, educational, and transformational character of “inclusion” and “acceptance” (see Gill & Kanai 2019: 141) of the program.

Several additional characters are introduced in their role to either provide the audience with examples of desirable, or undesirable social behavior that goes hand with perceived or real social and ideological transformations in contemporary Japan. The latter is, for example, the case, when Igarashi Nana’s mother opposes her daughter undergoing infertility treatment, when Hirose Wataru’s mother rejects her son’s sexual orientation, or when Igarashi Daiki’s energetic mother objects to her daughter’s choice to enroll her young child in a childcare institution to go back to work. Nevertheless, they are all instructed or provided with information that finally leads them to understand and accept the other party’s position, identity, or lifestyle. Other characters though, such as Nana’s boss, who supports her after she comes clean about going through infertility treatment or Igarashi Daiki’s younger co-worker, are introduced as role models in a society that accepts diversity. The latter, the surprisingly well-informed and well-prepared co-worker, embodies the incarnation of the “self-determined neoliberal portrait of the ideal citizen” (Cabanas & Illouz 2019: 180), a perfect life-planner and “reproductive entrepreneur” (see p. 3f) par excellence. He reports about an infertility screening he underwent despite him not being in a relationship, explaining that there are — contrary to popular belief — often problems in the male partner when a couple faces reproductive challenges. With his question “Did you actually think that infertility is a female problem?” he seems to expose the ignorance of not only Mr. Igarashi, but also of the audience; accompanied by flashy graphs and data popping up on the screen to proof his statement. He is framed as an

ambassador for fighting stigma against infertility, when he utters “If you make a baby, you need knowledge. There is still deeply rooted stigma against infertility treatment. I think that comes from ignorance. Ignorance produces unnecessary bias and discrimination.”¹⁵ In this program, parallel to what has been argued in my analysis of the *ninkatsu* discourse (Fassbender 2021), scientific data and advice are provided by experts for individuals to “properly” and “successfully” govern themselves (Bröckling 2016: 5). In this sense “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 expert as advisor or coach often uses (mass) media or is used by the media to spread the message (Meyers 2019). This message, the popular representation of science and technology, the “means (...) by which scientific representations are produced and made intelligible in diverse communities of practice” (Jasanoff 2004: 41) and which actors have interests and are involved in that construction, are obvious in this program.

Opposed to the informed role models, the energetic and powerful mother of Daiki Igarashi holds rather “traditional” views. She, for example, obviously crosses the line telling her son and his wife to hurry up and “make babies.” Her younger daughter is quick to point out her inadequate behavior by saying (again, the targeted audience of this statement clearly includes the audience in front of the TV set): “Sexual harassment and mother harassment have become social problems. This is an era where people think that you lack delicacy if you ask a woman, ‘Are you married? Do you have children?’ You should be careful.”¹⁶ Together with the partner she is not married to, she announces her pregnancy shortly after, which causes a short and intensive uproar in the family, but finally the joy

about the prospective birth of a grandchild wins. In Japan, where still only about 2% of children are born out of wedlock (NIPSSR 2015: 18), this is a rather rare case.

This announcement is followed by Nana Igarashi's suggestion to her husband to undergo an infertility screening, after having tried to conceive unsuccessfully for over a year. The visit to the infertility clinic depicts yet another lecture, this time by the doctor, targeting the couple and the audience, again supported by graphic explanations popping up on the screen. The doctor reveals to the shocked couple, "If you have had sexual intercourse for one year or more without using contraception, we call that infertility, no matter the outcome of the examination. (...) With the check-up, we don't want to find out if you are infertile or not, we want to find out the reason."¹⁷ After the visit to the hospital, Daiki Igarashi, asked if he wanted to go for treatment, answers: "Don't you think we are still fine? They didn't find a problem in either of us. If we keep trying, we will conceive naturally soon." His wife answers: "If I was younger, I would be saying the same. But I am already 35. I was told that the probability of becoming pregnant decreases with age. I have started to panic a bit."¹⁸ With that, she seems to be the voice of reason in this conversation again. In consequence, the couple decides to undergo treatment. The next episodes follow the couple and their steps in the process of treatment, while no definitive cause for their difficulties in conception can be found, a common source of distress for couples undergoing infertility treatment (Tsuge 2012). The series continues to be defined by an educational tone, frequently using graphic explanations of infertility treatment methods or explanations of subsidy systems, often complimented by messages of encouragement, for example when Saku, Wataru's boyfriend says to Igarashi

Nana: “This flower looks very delicate, but it is extremely strong. It will not give in to snow or bad weather. Humans are just the same, right? (...) If we know that joy and *happiness* (emphasis by author) await us at the end of the road, we can move forward.”

At this point, I would like to address the common appearance of happiness in the *dorama* as the motivation for the couple to undergo the straining hardships that come with fertility treatment. According to Ross Abbinnett (2013), the “experience of happiness (...) is essentially related to ideas of the good society and to the forms of individual life that are appropriate to it” (p. 1). He argues that happiness is an individual experience framed within particular contingencies of character, upbringing and physiological and psychological dispositions, but equally a product of social ideologies and institutions that surround and shape our very being. The premise here is the understanding that emotions that are ostensibly individual experiences “have a cultural context and life into which we fit, consciously or unconsciously” (Nayar 2011: 13). The “pursuit of politics has become the question of how best to manipulate the fears and desires of ‘the masses’” (Abbinnett 2013: 4) and, as some argue, “happiness [...] as a concept, as a business, as an industry, and as a consumerist lifestyle” (Cabanas & Illouz 2019: 177) plays a central role in this pursuit. Sara Ahmed argues in her work that the specific desire for happiness has become the motivational grease in this political project of manipulation and scrutinizes how happiness as the ultimate goal of human existence is controlling our psyche, forcing us to improve and control ourselves within the neoliberal ideology. Ahmed argues that “ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy [...] in the right way” (Ahmed 2010: 13). In the

context here, the "right people" are those who have the means and ostensible freedom to choose, to plan their lives "according to their own wish" within the system of "normality". The Igarashis are clearly positioned as exactly the people who "deserve" happiness, married, well-mannered, hard-working, in a financially stable situation, recently turned house-owners and having shown resilience, patience and endurance, a commonly praised virtue in Japanese society, to fulfill that dream, which is emphasized several times throughout the program.

In their efforts to conceive, the Igarashis, especially Nana, go bravely through all kinds of treatments, and never seem to lose hope, even in face of many failed trials. Until the very end, the program seems to promise the "happy end" for the struggling couple, and at times even gives a strong impression of being not only an education but also an advertisement program for infertility treatment. Finally, after the first IVF cycle, Nana is being informed about her pregnancy. It seems that the couple's efforts have been rewarded. Yet, the program takes an unexpected turn with Nana miscarrying, followed by a dramatic, but rather unconvincing break-up, and her leaving the city.¹⁹ Finally, the couple finds their way back together, but decides to settle for a life without children. Daiki's utterance "I can bare a life without children, but not a life without you"²⁰ seems symbolic in that context and gives a glimpse at the changed understanding of partnership in Japanese society.

The Igarashis are represented as a loving couple whose relationship is marked by equality and communication, which follows this ideal. However, the program does not break with normative gender roles, for example when Igarashi Nana is the one who is responsible for cooking and household chores, regularly to be seen in an apron, waiting for her husband with

dinner, preparing her “breadwinner” husband’s lunch box every day and thus applying food as “metaphor for love” (Freedman & Weickgenannt 2011: 305). However, this reproduction of stereotypes needs to be understood within the organizational framework in which the production and proliferation of *dorama* is positioned. Freedman argued that, while they often pick up social issues, generally “dorama cannot take controversial stances as easily as novels, fine arts, and other media due to the need for mass audiences, advertisers, and state support of commercial networks” (Freedman 2018: 5). This *dorama*, however, seems to try its utmost best to root for diversity within these limitations. In several conversations between the housing project inhabitants, norms in family and reproduction are negotiated and questioned. Nana often takes the position of a mediator in the face of clashing values, for example when she says in one scene: “Isn’t it ok if everyone is different?.”²¹ This is the underlying message of the program, continuously repeated in all kinds of shapes. Yet, it is necessary to ask how different the characters and their forms of companionship really are. With their economic ability to buy a house in the housing project, they are all clearly framed within the ideological middle class, all of them Japanese (although this is not explicitly exhibited in the program), without disabilities, attractive and well-dressed, and in the final episode all of them married or linked by partnership contracts. While we see a diversification of the life models, they all embody the “good citizen” and are presented as making enough effort to fit into the norm and thus deserving their *happiness*.

The main aspect where the protagonists are *not the norm* are their reproductive choices, lifestyles, or limitations. This could be paralleled to what Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai (2019) have framed as “hollow diversi-

ty" (p. 140), as all of the characters are positioned "as having primarily one difference" (p. 141) compared to what is considered the norm: Nana and Daiki experience involuntary childlessness in their otherwise "normal" life, Wataru, who is a successful architect and comes from a wealthy family is gay, Chihiro does not want children, and Mr. Kogayama quits his stable job to concentrate on finding meaning in life. This representation constitutes a form of "postmodern pedagogy," where difference is understood as an "aesthetic category" that, however, actually "empties differences of their cultural, historical and political significance" (Giroux 1994: 189). The initial life-plan of all characters needs adjustment (respectively in one aspect): The Igarashis start to imagine a life *without* children, Chihiro gets used to her life *with* a child, Wataru comes out of the closet, and Mrs. Kojiyama gives up her role as a helicopter mum/housewife and supports her husband, who has found his *raison d'être* in his new profession as a cram school instructor. Nevertheless, even though the initial life plan crumbles, the "neoliberalism's fantasy (...) that we are all authors of our own destiny" (Gill & Kanai 2019: 133), which ignores that the resources necessary for this project are "unevenly distributed" (Gill & Kanai 2019: 135), does not. The ideas of marriage as a natural unit, and reproduction necessarily taking place within this environment, are equally perpetuated in the program. Further, the link to the "romantic love" ideology, as opposed to marriage as an economic support system, is clear; for example, when Saku, Wataru's boyfriend, tells Nana: "For love relationships to continue, despite all the differences, is close to a miracle. When you have to overcome hardships, the only person you can climb the mountain with and make the miracle come true, is the person you want to be together with, even despite all these things" and implies that married couples ideally continue a relationship as

lovers. This is also the case when Daiki asks: “Are married couples just partners to make children?,”²² or when the Kojiyamas re-discover their affection for each other after experiencing a crisis.

Family and fertility treatment on the screen:

Is the grass greener on the other side?

While earlier post-war generation couples’ relationships revolved primarily around their children, and love or affection were not regarded as necessary ingredients to a functioning relationship between the parents, this norm has become the reason for separation and divorce for an increasing number of middle-aged couples in recent years (Alexy 2020). The former ideal of “disconnected dependence,” a term which refers to this specific idea of marital bonds in in the 60s, 70s and 80s, was updated with a new one that is build on an intimate couple relationship (Alexy 2020; Kottmann 2016). In this *dorama* this can be seen in all four presented couples; in the Komiyamas, however, only after going through a transformation. A break away from blueprints of the hegemonic “patriarchal family” with its “ideologically normative” and “prescriptive” salaryman/housewife model of the economic growth years (Dasgupta 2014: 9), the ideal of what Ochiai Emiko has called “new family” with a friendship-like and loving relationship and less rigid gender roles (Ochiai 1997: 144ff) is provided as the ideal to strive for, however clearly within the system of marriage, the husband still as the main breadwinner and the wife as the main responsible part for the work inside the house. This can even be positioned as a sort of re-traditionalization when compared to more progressive representations in the 80s or 90s; for example, in another TV series picking up the issues of fertility treatments in the 1990s titled “Singles” (1997), in which the three female

protagonists in their 30s decide to give birth as single mothers, one of them after conceiving through the use of donor sperm. This representation of reproduction seems to be unthinkable in the “*ninkatsu* drama,” where reproduction heavily relies on technology, yet cannot be imagined out of wedlock or out of genetic ties. Thus, even if Wataru asks his mother, “What is normal anyway?” and thus provides space for questioning social norms, the idea of reproduction and family as limited within (heteronormative) marriage and blood ties remains unchallenged throughout the program.

On a different note, it cannot be denied that the program normalizes infertility treatment and desexualizes and disembodies reproduction parallel to representations of *ninkatsu* in the media (Fassbender 2021), which is for example clear in the use of the term “take timing” (*taimingu wo toru*) for sexual intercourse, or the frequent use of the term “reset” (*rissetto*), the medical term used for the occurrence of menstrual bleeding and thus, in this context, the sign for a failed treatment cycle. In consequence, also in this program, “conception tends to become a biomedical project that ‘inadvertently’ helps desexualize reproduction and makes the female body an object of biomedical scrutiny” (Castro-Vázquez 2017: 146). The fact that the Igarashis do not consider other ways to face their desperate wish to become parents but choose between either infertility treatment or childlessness, shows how “assisted reproduction tends to endorse two biologist viewpoints that militate against child adoption, and by extension suggest the idea that it is better to have your *own* children” (Castro-Vázquez 2017: 183; emphasis in original). In the run of the program, “the willing-to-get-pregnant woman conjures a new techno-scientific identity, opening a profitable niche market supported by the understanding that endurance and

adherence to biomedical treatments sooner or later will result in successful pregnancy” (Castro-Vázquez 2017: 145). The happy end seems to be promised in emotional scenes, for example when Nana tells her mother “It was always my dream since I was a child. To become a mother, just like my mother. Kind and caring. Cooking tasty meals for the family every day. Preparing a clean room and clothes. Someday, when I have children of my own”, or when Daiki continuously reassures his wife that “the day will come” over emotional music. Yet, with the shattering of this promise, the character of the program, which at times seems to be an extensive advertisement for reproductive technologies or a cheering message for those undergoing treatment, changes abruptly. This provides a moment of subversion and makes the audience question the character of the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011; see also Riley, Evans & Robson 2019: 103) that is underlying the idealized and perfect lives shown in the program. This un-ideal ending makes room for a moment of empowerment. The program, while, without a doubt, also a medium for knowledge-production and diffusion in the age of biomedicalization (see Clarke et al. 2003), and clearly moving within very strict social and cultural limitations as argued in this paper, provides a “way out” in the end; it deconstructs the carefully painted image of the expected “perfect” ending by not providing the desired outcome to the audience.

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Notes

- 1 「テクノロジーそのものがつねに悪いわけではないが、個人の選択肢を増やしてくれるはずのテクノロジーが同時に国家／市場／社会による支配や管理を増大させもするという側面にもっと注意を向けるべき」.
- 2 This method is not included in what is called “infertility treatment” in an English-speaking context, where it is usually referred to as the “rhythm meth-

- od,” a strategy to track ovulation for the purpose of contraception or conception.
- 3 「わが国において、女性の晩婚化やキャリア形成指向、その他の理由により女性の妊娠する年齢が上昇する中、不妊（症）の定義の変更により、女性がより早期に適切な不妊治療を受けることにつながると期待されます」。
- 4 「わが国においては、血のつながりを重視する考え方が強く存在している」。
- 5 In the case of “special adoption”, any legal connections to the biological parents are severed and the involved parties need to fulfil specific conditions. The adopting parents have to be married (which automatically excludes same-sex couples in Japan) with one of the partners over the age of 25 (MOJ 2019). The consent of the biological parents, excluding cases of hardship, e.g. ill-treatment or abuse, or where parents are dead or missing (Civil Code 民法, article 817-6), is a prerequisite. While most adoption cases are mediated by private agencies, they only become legally valid with the family court’s decision. There is no financial support for adoptive parents as in the case of foster parents or family homes, unlike, for example, in the USA (Shirai 2019: 64f). With the enactment of the new “Law for the protection of children in mediated adoptions by private mediation institutions” in April 2018, financial support for organizations mediating adoption procedures might be strengthened by the state (E-gov 2017).
- 6 『ポジティブ妊活7つのルール』
- 7 「子供をもつもたない権利です。義務ではないです」
- 8 「皆さんも何れ子供を作れるでしょう」
- 9 「子供欲しいって女性の共通の願いよ。やっぱり女性は子供を産んでこそ一人前だもん」
- 10 「いろんな価値観はあるので、子供を産むって女性のすべてだと思いませんけど、私は欲しいです」
- 11 「少しでも少子化に歯止めをかけなくや」
- 12 A very successful example is the recent Manga-adaption and prize-winning television dorama “What did you eat yesterday?” (きのう何食べた？ *Kinō nani tabeta?*) (Nikkei Asia 2019; see also Thelen 2021).
- 13 「私は、自分と違うものを排除することで、自分を守っていた。でも最近、私が守ってきたものって何だったんだろうって思うようになって。狭い世界に閉じこもって生きてきたことを、今さらながら後悔しているところです」「自分が信じて来た価値観をさち崩すのは勇気が要ります。(…)いつか分かりあえる時がく

るといいですね」

- 14 「自分が信じて来た価値観をぶち壊すのは勇気が要ります。(…) いつか分かりあえる時がくるといいですね」
- 15 「子づくりするなら、一人ひとりの知識を入れておかないと。不妊治療なんて今でも根強い偏見とかありますから。ぼくはそれは無知から来てますと思っている。いらん偏見や差別を産むんですよ」
- 16 「セクハラ、マタハラ、今社会問題になっている。女の人に『結婚しているの?』『子供は?』と聞くすらデリカシーがないって思われる時代だ。気をつけた方がいい」
- 17 「一年以上避妊なしの性交を続けると妊娠に至らなかった場合、検査するまでもなく、不妊症と言えます。(…) 検査で不妊症かどうかではなく、その原因を探るということです」
- 18 「若かったら、私もそう思えたと思う。でも私はもう35歳だよ。年齢と共に妊娠率は確実に低下すると言われちゃったし。ちょっと焦り始めているんだね」
- 19 The act of leaving the city, in most cases Tokyo, has been identified as a common reappearance in Japanese *doramas*, symbolizing a “key turning point” in a couple’s relationship (Freedman & Weickgenannt 2011: 302).
- 20 「子供のいない人生は耐えられるけど、奈々のいない人生は耐えられない」
- 21 「皆違っていいんじゃないですか?」
- 22 「夫婦って単なる子づくりの相手?」