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"The Joy of Normal Living" as the Promise of Happiness for Japanese Women and their Families

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ABSTRACT

"The Joy of Normal Living" is at once the motto and the ideology of Kurihara Harumi, Japan's best-known charisma housewife and icon of domesticity. This article looks at the relationship between "normal living" and the promise of happiness, as formulated in postwar Japan. Beginning with the government's promotion, in the early postwar period, of the idea of *akarui seikatsu* (bright new life) as related to the typical suburban middle-class family of salaryman husband and full-time housewife, the article goes on to look at the cultural idea of "being happy as a woman" in contemporary Japan. Based on in-depth interviews with full-time housewives, and an analysis of popular women's magazines, this article seeks to decipher what constitutes the idea of happiness for these women and for their generation.

> Bringing back a smile to [people's faces] throughout Japan:
>
> Harumi's cheer-up recipes (Kurihara, 2011, cover).

On 11 March 2011, northern Japan was hit by a devastating earthquake, followed by an unprecedentedly large tsunami that caused a catastrophic leak at the Fukushima I Nuclear Power station. Soon afterwards it became apparent that the Japanese government had located in the disaster an opportunity to urge the Japanese people to rise and rebuild their nation from the economic and other difficulties that had beset it since the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s. This plea to the Japanese people to struggle together again, as they had after the defeat in World War II, was manifest in a nationwide campaign of what Hornung (2011) called "disaster nationalism" through signs displayed across the country reading "*Ganbarō Nippon*" (Don't give up, Japan).

Among the variety of cultural agencies offering relief to Japan as a nation the female domesticity icon Kurihara Harumi stood out. Kurihara – or rather Harumi, as her fans are encouraged to call her – dedicated the June 2011 issue of *Haru-mi*, the popular magazine carrying her name, to the task of bringing back the smile, or the smiling face (*egao*), not only to the direct victims of the disaster but to the nation as a whole (*Nihonjū ni egao ga modorimasu yōni*). The wholehearted message, dispatched from her kitchen (*kitchin kara kokoro wo komete*) was accompanied by an array of reviving and energy-saving recipes,

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bearing names such as "joyful salad plate" and "relieving potatoes". These recipes, Kurihara emphasised, were not prepared by professional chefs but are rather part of "the normal daily job done by normal housewives". Underlining her message, Kurihara ended her very special handwritten letter, addressed personally to the victims of the disaster, with the following:

> I have always held dear the words "normal living", but I have never felt their poignancy as keenly as I feel it now [after the disaster].

> I wish from the heart that the "normal living" of each and every one will return as soon as possible (Kurihara, 2011, p. 9).

"The joy of normal living" (*futsū no kurashi ga tanoshii*) has been the main slogan of *Haru-mi* magazine since its 2006 launch.[1] This article looks at the close relationship between "normal living" and the promise of happiness, as formulated in postwar modern Japan. This research is based on in-depth interviews with more than 50 full-time housewives, mainly from middle-class suburban backgrounds, conducted between 2003 and 2013 as part of a larger research study on these women and their cultural idols. It is also based on an analysis of the magazines that this group of women enjoy reading. From the interviews and the analysis, I seek to decipher what constitutes the idea of happiness, for these women and for their generation.

This article proposes a unique approach, combining the cultural-anthropological approach with the critical perspectives of cultural studies and feminism. The anthropological approach to happiness (see Johnston et al., 2012) reminds us that it is impossible to quantify "happiness" (Colson, 1962; 2012, pp. 7–8). In their introduction to a recent issue of *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* dedicated to exploring ethnographic conceptualisations of happiness, Walker and Kavedžija (2015, p. 1) suggest that "an ethnographic inquiry into happiness offers a unique window onto the ways in which people diversely situated in time and space grapple with fundamental questions about how to live, the ends of life, and what it means to be human". More specifically, the ethnographic approach to happiness that they present does not seek to compare levels of happiness. Instead, it focuses on how happiness figures as an idea or motive in day-to-day life (p. 5). The idea of happiness is often conditioned by dominant social values, and it should also be seen as providing a sense of orientation; "like a horizon it delimits a space of action and understanding, even as it recedes from view" (p. 16). "Happiness", as I propose in this article, should thus be seen as a cultural idea or a cultural construct. We ethnographers can only grasp what is regarded by the people we study as "happiness", or as that which can or is supposed to make them happy.

The cultural studies approach to happiness "can allow us to explore how happiness can make certain truths 'true' and certain goods 'good'" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 7). In a similar fashion to the ethnographic approach, this perspective underlines the idea of happiness as a promise. Happiness operates as "something that is hoped for, creating a political and personal horizon that gives us an *image* of the good life" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 12; emphasis added). The feminist perspective has offered a pronounced critical position with regard to the idea of "happiness". In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir critically suggests that "it is not too clear just what the word *happy* really means, and still less what true values it may mask". The principal mask de Beauvoir warns us of is the pretext that happiness consists of being at rest. The latter brings to the fore the question: who is the happy woman? As de Beauvoir critically suggests, "Is not the housekeeper happier than the working woman?" Finally, de Beauvoir warns against those who promise or locate happiness in certain states or situations.

She suggests that "it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place [others]" ([1949] 1989, p. xxxiv). Sara Ahmed develops this feminist perspective further when she indicates that we should always be cautious to see where "happiness" is deposited. According to this critical approach, "Happiness translates its wish into a politics, a wishful politics, a politics that demands that others live according to a wish" (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 572).

"Happiness", or the conception of what can make someone happy, is always deeply embedded within a particular sociocultural context, as well as specific historical and political circumstances. This article suggests casting a critical anthropological eye on the mechanisms that have not only deposited happiness in a specific normative social context, but have also placed the cultural burden of producing the "right" or normative happiness upon a specific social group of women – middle-class Japanese housewives.

I begin by exploring the context of the "bright new life" as the promised horizon of happiness, as it was constructed in conjunction with the evolution of the Japanese new middle class in the postwar period of progress. It is in this context, I argue, that the idea of normality – or what constitutes a normative family, a normative woman and the consequent normative happiness – is to be found. The article then goes on to explore the significance of marriage and adherence to an "ordinary" and orderly middle-class life course for Japanese women, and their perspectives about what would make them "happy as women".

Since the early 1990s, Japan has experienced several notable changes, including the collapse of the economic bubble, with the attendant consequences for the lifetime employment system (Kingston, 2004, p. 29; Matanle, 2006); shifting marital patterns; a declining fertility rate; and the increase in dual-income households. Mainly through a comprehensive analysis of the role and impact of cultural and commercial agents and agencies in reproducing the idea of happiness, I will show that although these changes have had some effect on the ideals and images of being "happy as a woman", the hegemonic ideological position of happiness that resides in "normal living" seems to have survived them.

The Bright New Life: Family Happiness as the Promised Horizon of Japan's New Middle Class

In his seminal work on the emergence of Japan's new middle class in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ezra Vogel observed that "for the rest of Japan the people who have been able to become salary men are symbols of the *akarui seikatsu* (bright new life)" (Vogel, [1963] 1991, p. 71). At the centre of this cultural idea of a new happy life stood the salaryman, the white-collar worker, and his family. The idea of *akarui seikatsu* was promoted from the mid-1950s until the late 1960s with strong government support. The term, which had a widespread impact on Japanese cultural life, was propagated as a symbol and promise of Japan's future (Cwiertka, 2006, p. 159). This "bright life" actually implied a "modern" home with a middle-class standard of living. It also implied "a nuclear family with a housewife at its centre" (Partner, 1999, p. 137).

This "postwar Japanese family system" is embodied in a nuclear family consisting of a salaryman husband, a full-time housewife and their children (Ochiai, 1996). By the 1960s, the extent of the ideological force of this family pattern was so striking that it "overwhelmed" all other co-existing lifestyles and older social forms in social discourse (Gordon, 2000, p. 287). The figure of the heterosexual, suited urban middle-class white-collar worker totally

devoted to the company, which in return offered him a binding "total care" (Borovoy, 2005), was described as symbolising the ubiquitous "everyman" (Dasgupta, 2000; Miller, 1995), and as embodying "the archetypical citizen" (Mackie, 2002, p. 203).

Undoubtedly, there have been changes in the numbers of households consisting of a full-time housewife and a salaryman husband. The most evident decline was at the end of the 1970s, after which the number stabilised (Osawa, 2002, p. 259). Recent figures show another more recent decline, in parallel with the increase in the number of dual income families,[2] but as Osawa (2002, p. 260) suggests, the Japanese establishment still considers the nuclear family of a salaryman with a full-time housewife the "standard" Japanese household.

Recent studies have sought to problematise the hegemonic hold of these normative gender concepts and ideals. Taking on R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinities and emphasised femininities (see Connell, 1995; 2000), they propose the exploration of new options of "masculinities" (McLelland & Dasgupta, 2005), as well as "femininities" (Charlebois, 2014). Nevertheless, these studies show that despite the increased visibility in recent years of alternative lifestyles for both men and women, the ideology of regulated heterosexuality, one that depicts the full-time housewife as the epitome of emphasised femininity (Charlebois, 2014, p. 5) and the man as the "pillar of the house", is still firmly entrenched and continues to have an impact on the lives of men, women and families (Dasgupta, 2005, p. 168).

The process of the "standardisation" of the Japanese family pattern has been widely observed as related to the rapid postwar economic growth (Allison, 1996; Garon, 1997; White, 2002). The latter was largely associated with the idea of the growing hegemony of "middle-class-ness", as both social experience and self-understanding (Gordon, 2002, p. 116). This middle-class-ness and the related promise of a brighter future was conceived as characteristically located in urban neighbourhoods, such as that described by Ezra Vogel, "selected by social scientists as typically middle-class" (Vogel, [1963] 1991, p. 10).

The quality of suburbs as holding "the promise of living a version of the good life" was also identified in other contexts (see Berlant, 2006, p. 24). In her critical view of this suburban promise, Lauren Berlant regards "the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking will secure one's happiness" as "stupid" or even "cruel" forms of optimism (Berlant, 2002, p. 75; Berlant, 2011). I suggest that in the case of post-war Japan, this optimism was embedded in the standard, or normal, life lived by the two main protagonists of this middle-class suburban cultural identity: the salaryman and the full-time housewife. These two have become the symbols of the promise of progress, and consequently the promise of happiness.

Being Happy as a Woman: (Right) Marriage as the Promise of Happiness

> A woman can be beautiful, smart, fashionable, rich, and have a respectable career but nevertheless be considered *"unhappy as a woman"* (*onna toshite shiawase dewa nai*) if she is not married and does not have children (Sakai, 2003; emphasis added).

The book *The Howl of the Loser Dogs* (*Makeinu no tōboe*), written by Sakai Junko and published in 2003, swiftly became a best seller in Japan. Its publication prompted heated debate in a Japanese society eager to adopt the rigid division proposed by the popular columnist, between single women as "losers" and married women with children as society's "winners". According to Sakai, what makes a person a "loser" is very clear: it is a person

who is unsuccessful in building "a so-called normal family" (*iwayuru futsū no katei*) (Sakai, 2003, p. 7).

Makeinu is not the only term coined to label the growing phenomenon of singlehood in Japan. The steadily expanding lexicon, which generally relates to consumption and materialism, includes labels such as *dokushinkizoku* (single aristocracy) and "parasite singles" (Yamada, 1999). *Ohitorisama*, a label coined by the journalist Iwashita Kumiko (Iwashita, 2001), seems less pejorative, focusing on the single woman's new forms of independence (Dales, 2015, p. 23), and thus may be regarded as presenting an alternative to versions of femininity categorised by adherence to ideals of nurturing, family and care (Long, 1996; Borovoy, 2005). Nevertheless, as Dales (2015, p. 23) admits, even this relatively independent model of singlehood is "a category bounded implicitly by marriage".

Marriage remains a resilient marker of becoming a full adult member of society (*shakai-jin*) (Edwards, 1989, pp. 116–127; Tokuhiro, 2010), as well as the only legitimate site for childbearing (Hertog, 2009). Recent studies show that most Japanese women want to marry and have a family.[3] Moreover, the image of the *sengyō shufu* (full-time housewife) seems to have regained respect, compared to the early 1990s, when it was easier for young women to attain financial independence and many were less enthusiastic about becoming full-time housewives after marriage (Yamaguchi, 2014, pp. 38–39).

The women interviewed for this study were all married with families, and resided in the suburban embodiment of the normative promise of optimism and happiness. The great majority of the interviewees were born between 1966 and 1970. They were in their 20s during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the last days of Japan's bubble economy. This generation was commonly described as a generation that celebrated the consumer lifestyle. Cultivating so-called individualistic and hedonistic ideas unknown to former generations of women in Japan, they were dubbed the "*Hanako* tribe" (*Hanako-zoku*), after the women's magazine *Hanako*, whose advice on fashion, dining and travel was almost religiously followed by its readership, in the main young women (Pollak, 1993). The *Hanako*s were expected to make a change both in women's lives and in the nature of the Japanese family, but as the family sociologist Ochiai Emiko (2005, p. 161) has lamented, they broke this promise of social change, as on reaching their 30s, "one after the other [they] married, had children and became housewives".

Whenever the women I interviewed are asked to define their identity or status – whether for formal purposes such as in surveys or questionnaires, or on any other occasion when self-introduction (*jiko shōkai*) is required – they mostly use the label "*shufu*". For most of them, becoming a housewife was the ordinary thing to do when they got married. As suggested by Robin LeBlanc (1999, p. 28), for the women of suburban Japan, "'housewife' is a label for *public* identity" (emphasis in original). A recent ethnographical study detects some usually neglected "thin" class differentiations, certain generational gaps, and other structural and personal characteristics among the housewives of a suburban neighbourhood (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012, pp. 68–69). Nevertheless, the same study shows that the idea of becoming what LeBlanc labelled "regular housewives" still has a strong hold on the lives of suburban middle-class married women and their families.

Inoue-san[4] is married to a university professor and was a mother of two girls, aged eight and nine, at the time of interview. She had worked as an Office Lady (OL) at an insurance company after graduating from junior college. Like most of her fellow OLs, she quit her

job upon marriage. During the interview, Inoue-san talked about her life-long yearning to become a wife and subsequently a housewife:

> From a very young age, my dream was to become a cute wife (*kawaii oyomesan*). It wasn't as though my mother [clearly] told me so, but I was raised in such a family. My mother never worked after graduation. She did her bridal training (*hanayome shugyō*), without working, and then got married. I was often told this story, so I thought I should follow her. Since I was a child, I was always told "women should be women, men should be men", so I just thought this is how things should be.

A similar strong yearning to become a bride and a housewife seemed to characterise other women I interviewed. In an in-depth interview I conducted with Suzuki-san in 2003, she spoke at length about her life-long yearning (*akogare*) to marry and become a full-time housewife. She told me how she admired her mother's impeccable domestic skills and how she had always hoped to become like her. Suzuki-san was raised in a "typically middle-class" family; her father was a highly dedicated and successful corporate worker, and her mother had always been the perfect wife who followed her husband dutifully in all of his numerous job transfers.

In 2013, I conducted another interview with Suzuki-san. One main focus of this lengthy conversation was to decipher the idea of happiness (*shiawase*). Suzuki-san was very clear about the close link between marriage, a socially and economically stable family lifestyle, and happiness.

> ...I think that if we have a job and a house we already have everything. It depends on each person how much he or she enjoys life. We got married because we wanted to become happy but besides, we wanted to make our parents content. We also were surrounded by an atmosphere that "it is better to get married".

Suzuki-san's strong conviction that happiness lies in marriage seems to be closely related to her life-long "yearning" to become a housewife. From her narration, it is clear that this *akogare* was surely not an individual whim, but rather a life plan firmly supported by her mother as much as by other social institutions. As she recalls, the thought of taking maternity leave had crossed her mind; however, "no one [in her workplace] ha[d] taken it before". Moreover, her mother strongly opposed the idea, advising her to follow her own example and become a full-time housewife. Suzuki-san summarises, "Then again, I had always longed (*akogare*) to become a housewife, so I retired".

Marriage is widely construed as one of the principal social institutions offering the promise of happiness (see Argyle, 1987, p. 31; Heather, 2007, p. 53). In the social context of the Japanese middle class, it is impossible to ignore the centrality of marriage as the marker of normativity or normative maturity (Tokuhiro, 2010). As reiterated by Laura Dales (2015, pp. 27–28), the persistence of marriage as an underlying theme, even in a discourse that focuses on individuality, implies that singlehood (or non-marriage) is ultimately too transgressive to gendered ideals to be recognised as a legitimate mainstream lifestyle choice. As we will shortly further see in the women's narratives, marriage or getting married was presented to them as the "horizon" of their aspiration.

The goal of marriage as the normative aspiration for happiness can be better understood when considering what Iza Kavedžija (2015) describes as "happiness" in the Japanese context. Happiness, she argues, can be understood as a form of practical moral judgment. This moral choice is closely related to Kavedžija's observation that for her elderly respondents – whose social and economic background is similar to that of the housewives studied here – being happy also meant maintaining a good balance between the individual and society.

Following the Orderly Normative Life Script as an Indicator of Happiness

Happiness is expected to reside in certain places, those that approximate the taken-for-granted features of normality (Ahmed, 2007, p. 9). In her critical work about the strong hold of heteronormative institutions, Heather (2007, p. 53) suggests that the promise that lies in marriage is in fact the assurance of "normal family life", which is depicted as the essence of the promise of happiness.

The power of normality or "taken-for-granted-ness" was very apparent in the interviews I conducted. The way the women narrated the transitions in their lives so far – from a student to an office lady (OL), and then from a company employee to a wife and mother – seemed to deeply reflect a tendency to follow what can be described as the carefully prepared script of a strictly ordered life plan, in which each life stage is firmly fixed.

This tendency has been described in statistically revealing terms, showing that the entry of Japanese women into positions both in the educational system and in marriage is carefully timed, and typically occurs once in a lifetime (Brinton, 1992). Brinton highlights the influence of "stakeholders" – key adults such as parents and employers – in shaping Japanese women's crucial life-course transitions. She describes this pattern as "socially embedded", compared to the more "self-directed" lives of American women.

In their stories, the women I studied vested a very significant role in such stakeholders. The latter included parents (especially mothers), employers and teachers, who repeatedly reminded them of the true keys to being "happy as a woman". Yamaguchi-san is a very dedicated wife and mother who declared that she saw her role as a housewife as "number one and anything else is number two". She was raised in the private and sheltered single-sex schooling system that only upper-middle-class families can afford. When narrating her life story, Yamaguchi-san gave a significant role to the unforgettable words of her schoolmaster, who from junior high school through university consistently taught his female students that they *should* become good mothers (*ii okāsan ni nannasai, ii okāsan ni*). Yamaguchi-san's determination to become a faultless wife and mother, indeed her conviction that achieving this would surely bring happiness, was accentuated by her mother's advice and guidance:

> "Becoming a good wife and a good mother will bring [you] happiness" ("*ii oyomesan ni natte, ii okasan ni naru no wa shiawase*"). All my life, since I was very small, I was [thus] told by my mother, so I accept the idea as *atarimae*, very naturally.

The extent of this "natural-ness" (*atarimae*) as a major feature in the lives of the women manifested itself further as I listened to those women who expressed some kind of negation or resentment toward the *shufu* role but nevertheless abided by it. Murakami-san was one of the few women who openly acknowledged disliking the role of housewife. "I'm not a good housewife," she said. "I cannot stay still, I feel frustrated staying always in the same place; others [other housewives] don't understand me".

Nevertheless, during the interview, when she talked about becoming a housewife at marriage, she said:

> I have never asked myself if it's okay to be always inside the house as a housewife only. My mother was there to guard the house (*ie o mamoru*). I thought it was so natural (*atarimae*) to resign when you get married.

"I have never thought about these things until now," Murakami-san observed at one point in our lengthy conversation. For many of the women, our conversations about their lives and ideas often provided a rare perspective from which to observe the "natural" way in which

they had made their role transitions in life. This tendency can be understood as what Pierre Bourdieu described as "the power of normality", in the way our social world shapes us to see its structures and the parallel structures of our minds as "natural" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 166).

As became clear from the life path and life decisions made by the women, what they saw as the normative path for happiness comprised not merely marriage but also marrying right, which naturally means forming a "normal family". It seems then that the hegemonic hold of the happy suburban middle-class standard family is still firm. Suzuki-san, who spoke about her life-long yearning to become a housewife, explained how she could hardly even imagine any different kind of life:

> As my father was a salaryman, I could never imagine myself getting married to an owner of a small company or a store, nor with a craftsman. I can hardly imagine how they live.

Scientific studies of happiness seem to concur that some conditions favour happiness; marriage and normative lifestyle are surely among them (Veenhoven, 1991, p. 16). The science of happiness tends to offer scales of happiness and to locate "happy persons" (Veenhoven, 1984; 1988). The perspective of cultural studies critically questions the identification of "happy persons". This critique is eloquently put by Ahmed (2007, p. 10) when she suggests that instead of assuming that happiness is simply found in "happy persons", we should see how claims to happiness make certain forms of happiness more valuable than others.

In the following, I will elaborate upon the deep involvement and impact of social and cultural agents and agencies in determining which forms of happiness are more valuable than others for women, and for their families, with special focus on the cultural idols and magazines that play a significant role in the lives of Japanese women.

"Normal Living" as the Recipe for Happiness

I began this paper with the message of relief sent by Kurihara Harumi to the Japanese nation following the devastating triple disaster of March 2011. Kurihara is undoubtedly the most renowned of Japan's "charisma housewives" (*karisuma shufu*), a rather recent media invention of the female idols who are the leading figures of the housekeeping world. Not only has she built a business empire in the fields of cooking and lifestyle, Kurihara also insists on delivering the message of the joy of domesticity that lies in the fulfilling role of the housewife. It has been noted that unlike other culinary experts who tend to reject the image of a housewife, Kurihara uses her "simple life as a housewife" as her main source of appeal (Ako, 2015; Ueyama, 2013). Kurihara thus keeps on endowing Japanese housewives with "positive meaning" (*kōteitekina imi*), which may be ever more important when taken against the background of the increasing number of working women (Hashimoto, 2016).

Beyond the comforting recipes that Kurihara bestowed on the victims of the disaster from the "heart of her kitchen", the main lesson from the loss of happiness that she sought to share with her followers was the reappraisal of the value of "normal living". As the main guest on a popular TV show on Japanese national television (NHK) in October 2011, Kurihara reiterated this lesson as she thoroughly explained her personal motto, the "joy of normal living": "normal living" is happiness in itself; think how to make your life enjoyable.

> It is great when each day is full of good things, but the good things don't always happen. "Normal living" – good relationship in the family, tasty everyday food – is the greatest happiness of all.[5]

Surely, responsibility for producing this normal happiness lies in the hands of no other than "normal housewives". One of the secrets of Kurihara's success among housewives is no doubt related to the fact that "she always thinks and acts as a housewife, and she offers the type of encouragement that they [housewives] don't hear elsewhere" (Newcomb, 1997, p. 1). Despite her immense success, and even though she is usually dubbed Japan's Martha Stewart, Kurihara resists any suggestion of being a career woman. Katoh-san, a great admirer of Kurihara – like many of the housewives I interviewed – explained that her easy-going manner and simple recipes were what was needed to make a housewife "self-confident". Others also related to her extremely simple and down-to-earth behaviour, noting that "she is always smiling and has an air of happiness around her", and that "she is respectful to her own aging parents and to [Japanese] tradition".

In the lengthy interview I conducted with the idol of the women I interviewed, Kurihara recapped the housewife's role of holding the precious deposit of happiness:

> If I'm not happy enough, I cannot share the happiness with others. If you feel you are happy, you can share it with your family, and the housewife is the one who should put forward this lifestyle for her own family. That is my belief; that's why I'm able to work so hard… The word "*shufu*" (housewife) means all these things… I like my home, I love my family. I believe that the housewife should firmly be on guard (*shikkari to suru*) to bring happiness to her family.

The "happy housewife" figure as promoted by domesticity idols such as Kurihara is certainly not a unique Japanese invention. In *The Feminine Mystique,* Betty Friedan exposed this public fantasy of happiness as presented to American women of the 1950s, when the healthy, beautiful and educated suburban housewife who was only concerned about her family's happiness became the dream image of American women ([1963] 2001, p. 18). It seems that one of the secrets behind the popularity of the happy housewife fantasy, beyond time and place, is that it "erases the signs of labor under the signs of happiness" (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 51). Take, for example, the idea of the joy derived from polishing living room windows while feeling the "warmth of the sunshine filling the room" (Kurihara, 1999, p. 34), seemingly one of Kurihara's reiterated messages to women in Japan today:

> I have always done my housekeeping job fully, polishing each and every window, but we [housewives] shouldn't perform such duties feeling it is an obligation. When you have your window polished, you can enjoy the sunlight, or even on rainy days, you feel like looking outside through a well-polished window. [On the contrary,] if you leave the window dirty, you never feel like looking outside. I believe that if you live that way [neglecting cleaning], you cannot fully enjoy your life. You are wasting your life (Kurihara, interview, November 2007).

"Female domesticity is fun" is one of Kurihara's principal messages to women of the twenty-first century. *One More Gift: In the House Too There Are Plenty of Fun Things [To Do]* is the title of one of Kurihara's successful books – or, as she describes it, one of her "gifts" to Japanese women (Kurihara, 1999). Like her numerous other books, it is a blend of supposedly intimate scenes from her private family life, like the quasi-poetic description of her family's house cats (title: "Just being with them makes us happy, our house cats"), household management tips and the like, all interwoven with Kurihara's truths about the joy of female domesticity.

As is the case with her fellow charisma housewives – who usually excel in a particular domestic artistry, like dessert queen Fujino Makiko, or Arimoto Yoko, who has expertise in Italian cooking – Kurihara's ideology does not stop at the confines of her kitchen. In fact, a well-lubricated production machine works alongside her, creating not just fantasies but also real products (see Mori, 2004; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012).

"I like creating things that make women smile" (Kurihara, interview, November 2007). Admitting that the life of the *shufu* has a tendency to become "boring and full of routine", Kurihara went on to relate how she had always tried carefully to design products that will make the life of housewives enjoyable and thus meaningful. Aprons are regarded as one of the leading designer wares in her line of products. A whole section of her chain of shops is dedicated to aprons, as is a section of her official website, which uses a quote from the priestess herself to explain the significance of aprons:

> [Kurihara] Harumi says "When I tighten an apron, I feel that I am ready to work. I would like to enjoy cooking and housework, dressed fashionably. A nice apron does something to create an opportunity to enjoy daily life" ("Products", n.d.).

Through her commercial empire of feminine domesticity, Kurihara Harumi sells both material and non-material products, beautifully adorned in the latest fashionable attire but in fact producing – or rather reproducing – old patriarchal family values and conservative divisions of gender roles. Using the power of "traditional Japanese" values, Kurihara's unique promise of the joy of domesticity seems to carry with it deeper meanings and in fact involves a larger promise of happiness and "Japanese-style" harmony (*wa*):

> The expression *sengyō shufu* (full-time housewife) might give foreigners the impression that we [Japanese women] are bound by our obligations, but I believe it is in fact the opposite. The housewife holds the power to make the family stick together. Some housewives may complain that they are working so hard with no one really appreciating their great contribution. However, I keep on working hard, believing that one day they [my husband and children] will understand the value of my existence. I believe that it is the mother, and not the father, who actually creates the family's peace and harmony (*wa*) (Kurihara, interview, November 2007).

The style of encouraging messages bestowed by Kurihara on hard-working housewives may be regarded simply as a genuine attempt to empower the homemaker. Nevertheless, some Japanese feminist critics have suggested otherwise. In a sharply critical essay, Ohno Sakiko (2005), an artist and freelance writer, dubbed the age of female models such as Kurihara Harumi "the era of Harumi", cynically alluding to the "era of women" (*onna no jidai*). The latter is a catchphrase describing the progress women in Japan achieved during the 1970s and 1980s. Ohno argues that that period was perhaps the first and last age during which women were praised for being strong, independent and progressive. She asserts that the direction of the tailwind (*oikaze*) that moved women into a truly active and independent position has completely changed. Ohno throws sharp critical arrows at the media image of Kurihara Harumi, concluding that the image of the protected and passive housewife – who only achieved her alleged "charisma" due to a push by her husband, who urged her to use her domestic skills also outside her "natural" domain in the kitchen – is a clear, gloomy manifestation of this sad fate of Japanese women. Now, Ohno laments, the strong and independent Harumis have been replaced by the domestic Harumi.

The Japanese Women's Magazine Industry and the Birth of the "Happy Housewife"

The market and the mass media, especially women's magazines, have been described as playing a significant role in carving out the "right" female image and role (Friedan, [1963] 2001, p. 34). Women's magazines form a large part of the Japanese print media. From the early part of the twentieth century, the massive Japanese publishing industry found

women of all ages to be an excellent target. Studies of these magazines have revealed their vast and varied impact on women's lives. They influence women's consumption habits and play a significant role in the formation of women's identities and the cultivation of ideas of self-fulfilment (Assmann, 2003; Sato, 2003; Skov & Moeran, 1995).

Women's magazines – especially *Very* and *Story*, aimed at the specific demographic of women in their 30s and 40s, respectively – seemed to be very popular among the women I interviewed. Some of the most enthusiastic readers went as far as to embrace the promise offered by these magazines as something to cherish and follow. One of my interviewees, a fashionable 40-year-old woman, carried in her purse the embodiment of her idea of a perfect and happy housewife – a cutting from an article that had appeared in *Very* a few years earlier. The woman portrayed in the magazine piece, she said, was a "normal housewife"; however, she never neglected to do her makeup and nails. Not only was the woman in the magazine "stunning" (*suteki*); she also "looked so *totally happy* preparing good food for her husband".

The first postwar generation of proper housewives were not expected to paint their nails (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012, p. 123). Instead, they were supposed to be hard working and to improve their inner beauty. This kind of beauty, which conservative social critics still esteem and seek to restore (Hayashi, 1998), was often related to the notion of a proper Japanese spirit, characterised by internal strength and stamina. Accordingly, until the 1990s, magazines for housewives were described as promoting "Japanese femininity", or the old-fashioned image of the "good wife, wise mother" (Moeran, 1995, p. 118), and as consciously de-emphasising sexual attractiveness and international sophistication (Rosenberger, 1996, pp. 22–23).

This is no longer the case; from the mid-1990s onwards and especially since 2000, magazines have been replete with images of fashionable and attractive housewives. This new kind of femininity is not restricted to the improvement of looks and style, but is increasingly connected to the pursuit of happiness for women and their families. The changing cultural concept of the happiness of Japanese housewives seems to be largely related to the emergence of a new type of "happy housewife", as depicted in popular women's magazines.

This new genre of magazines demolished the widely accepted and fixed image of everyday-life, practical information magazines aimed at housewives. As Yūko Ishizaki (2004) clearly demonstrates, the magazine industry made this clever shift by using the format of young women's fashion magazines to target housewives. Ishizaki focuses on *Very*, a women's magazine that from its first issue in 1995 addressed itself to housewives using the format of *JJ*, a popular fashion magazine for young women. Unlike the disappearing practical housewives' magazines, *Very* targeted mainly women in their 30s by offering its housewife readership the image of a "maiden" (*shōjo*) and a fashionable housewife through imagery and vocabulary hitherto associated with young unmarried women, including "cute" (*kawaii*) or "sweet" (*amai*) clothes.[6] The magazine also began to apply the language of self-fulfilment and the pursuit of happiness through fashion and hobbies to housewives.

By ascribing youth, cuteness, fashion-consciousness, and self-enjoyment to housewives, *Very* seemed to be doing something previously atypical of women's magazines – blurring age and social-role differentiations. This shift in the image of the housewife is also related to the observed tendency of the media and advertising industry that developed during the hyper-consumption "bubble years", to invent demographic categories. *Very* has thus created yet another new "tribe", the tribe of happy and fashionable housewives. This tendency of the industry enabled the easier targeting of fairly discrete groups, whose members consequently

could be induced to think of themselves in a certain way (Clammer, 1997, pp. 10–11). This same spirit of the new happy housewife was subsequently carried over to other new magazines – *Story*, a magazine for women in their 40s, launched in 2002, and *Hers*, a "lifestyle magazine" targeting women in their 40s and 50s, launched in 2008. Both were produced by the same publishing house, Kobunsha. As observed by Ishizaki (2004), the new-type magazines created not only a new type of housewife but also new ways of being a "happy (*kōfuku-na*) full-time housewife".

The Trap of the New Promise of Feminine Happiness

The industry of the flashy new-type women's magazines that has flourished since the mid-1990s makes extensive use of "reader models" – ordinary women who act as models, and with whom zealous readers of the magazines can identify more easily (Marx, 2007). The tendency of Japanese women's magazines, not merely to impart information but in fact to tell their readers what to do and what not to do (Tanaka, 1998), has been improved by this practice. The new-type magazines present to their readers a seductive promise of happiness; the kind of promise that works best if you are given the advice "that if you do this or if you have that, happiness will follow" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 12).

Take, for example, Yamamoto Rikako, one of those women who "cannot stop being cool mothers", presented by *Very* in winter 2007 (*Kakkoii okāsan*, 2007, pp. 36–47). Rikako, 34, is – typically – a former flight attendant. Being a full-time housewife she "struggles" to raise four children, but nevertheless declares: "As a woman [I] always want to be pretty". Rikako, who never neglects her hair and makeup even on busy mornings, is lucky to have three daughters whom she feels obliged to teach about girls' femininity (*onnanoko rashisa*). She shares with the readers her unique precious moments of pure happiness. These moments occur especially in the morning, when she braids her daughters' hair nicely. Rikako sometimes dresses up neatly when engaged in activities with her kids, and she even enjoys coordinating colours and sharing smart dressing (*oshare*) with her eldest daughter when they go to a hula dance class together. Nevertheless, she reserves her special hairstyle and wearing a dress exclusively for the special happy occasions when she and her husband – "just the two of us" – go out to dine (Yamamoto, 2007, pp. 42–43).

The idea that a wife and mother should be attractive for her husband is one of the most striking recent ideas promoted by the new women's magazines. Until at least the mid-1990s, sexuality seemed "not to be an issue" for readers of the former style of popular housewives' magazines, either in terms of their own self-image or in the way they related to their husbands (Moeran, 1995, pp. 117–118). Conversely, the new magazines encourage housewives to smarten up before collecting their husbands at the train station on rainy days, and to dress fashionably when they go out to dine. Their and their daughters' new fashionable femininity and smiling faces are not only said to raise their own prospects of becoming happy as women, but are also encouraged as the ultimate cure, indeed as a prescription for happiness, for their hard-working and exhausted husbands:

> A sudden rain shower; it's the same train station as always, but today I will go to greet [my husband] dressed more fashionably and beautifully than usual… What could make him [my husband] happier than getting off the crowded and exhausting train and seeing the smiling face of his daughter, fashionably dressed waiting for him? And the truth is, I also wanted [to come and] show off my newly bought fashionable high boots ("Sō da, papa", 2007, p. 27).

So says the chic reader model, photographed with her cutely dressed daughter. The *Very* generation of women in their 30s is captured by pictorial "storyboards", such as that of a stylish young woman pushing a baby stroller while heading for lunch with her husband with the caption: "Stepping up from the cool OL [Office Lady] style to a graceful and refined 'madam style'". The *Story* generation, women in their 40s, are entitled even more to "thoroughly enjoy being a woman", as was the main theme of its August 2009 issue. Apparently, the way to enjoy this new kind of womanhood is directly related to consumption. The August 2009 issue focused on "dates" with husbands in luxurious locations, as can be divined from the caption, "Means to thoroughly enjoy being a woman: Ginza date with the husband". Another "romantic" spot was described as "a date at the new Armani shop in Ginza". In another storyboard, the smiling woman has the pleasure of reminding her husband that a particular upmarket jewellers' shop is the same one where he had bought her a present 20 years ago, while teasing him by saying: "Don't I look nice? As I'm an adult now won't you buy me something with diamonds this time?". Needless to say, all the "storyboards" are accompanied by full-page pictures of the women posing with a range of fashionable items, naturally with price and purchase details.

The new-style magazines for housewives in their 30s and 40s urge them to stay "cute" (*kawaii*), a quality previously related only to young, not-yet-married women. "It doesn't matter how old you are. For women, the best compliment is being 'cute'. That is why when [a woman] enters her 40s, more than her 20s or 30s, [she] likes cute clothing, so that the romance will not end" ("We need romantic", 2006, p. 77). One of the main aims of being a "cute adult", however, is the discovery of new means for happiness – nourished by self-love. As was declared in *Story*: "We announce a plan for 'In Five Years I Will Still Love Myself'" ("Happyō shimasu", 2007, cover page).

The Japanese feminist Ogura Chikako describes *Story*'s concept as a "trap". The "*Story* generation" of readers, women who have been living as cooperative wives and mothers, are now made to believe that the time has come for them to start living independently, looking for "their own selves (*jibun*)". These women, who actually depend totally on their husbands' salaries, naively believe that they really can begin to pursue an independent and joyful lifestyle (Ogura, 2003, p. 83). The trap that the new housewives fall into has an additional face, one that is certainly not a peculiar invention of the women's magazine industry in Japan. They are, in fact, trapped in the same global mantra of "consumption equals happiness" (Johnston, 2012, p. 15), or more specifically, in the trap of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2002; 2006; 2011) as suburbanites in other parts of the world.

Conclusion

This article presents a critical perspective on "happiness", specifically the social and cultural meanings of "being happy as a woman" in contemporary Japan. Based on interviews with Japanese housewives and an analysis of the cultural texts popular among these women and their generation, I have shown how happiness – or, even more so, the promise of happiness – is culturally perceived as being closely related to leading a normative lifestyle. The "happy script" followed by these women, the former allegedly hedonistic and spoiled *Hanako* tribe of affluent Japan, was described as a normative life plan with the right marriage one of its pinnacles.

The diversity of lifestyles and options open for Japanese women in post-bubble Japan has become unprecedentedly large. Nevertheless, the hegemonic ideological hold of the "standard" middle-class family, comprising a breadwinning husband and a supportive homebound housewife, which evolved during the postwar years of the economic growth and progress and became the epitome of a bright and happy life, seems to have survived recent changes in the Japanese economy and society.

The paper has highlighted the "taken-for-granted-ness" with which the interviewees for this study have made their way into the suburban context in which happiness that lies in "normal living" is expected to reside. The paper addresses the role of social agents, such as school teachers, employers, and above all mothers, in supporting the fixed and carefully-timed life plan that – allegedly – will lead to the women becoming proper wives and mothers. Cultural agents and agencies, including feminine charismatic idols, and the media and market producers of novel and reproduced images of proper womanhood and forms of happiness for women, are another focus of this article.

Women's magazines and cultural heroines such as Kurihara Harumi, whose ideology that feminine happiness resides in domesticity was explored in this article, provide the alleged necessary tools for being happy as a woman. Contemporary housewives are advised to wear fashionable aprons when preparing impeccable home-cooked dinners for their families, and even to wear designer and pricy clothing when dining out with their husbands. Adhering to the perspective that sees happiness mainly in terms of horizon or promise, as has been suggested by cultural anthropologists as well as by cultural critics, the newly fabricated high-price-tag appearances and expensive dinners with fashionably-suited husbands that fill women's magazines can in fact be regarded as happy objects, providing the means for making women happy, if only by proximity to these objects (Ahmed, 2008).

The fact that "ordinary" women cannot really expect to achieve the same "happy objects" that are presented to them by the media does not diminish the promise of happiness that lies in these objects. As Janice Winship (2002) suggested, women who read magazines do not have to see the images they offer as "reality". Women are clever enough to understand that the visual and verbal representations are first and foremost fantasies for providing pleasure rather than for practical action. Nevertheless, magazines, and other forms of media, seem to play another role in their readers' lives. They reaffirm what constitutes a "woman" (Winship, 2002, p. 38).

The images and fantasies that contemporary housewives are exposed to seem very far from the hard-working lifestyle that was expected of their mothers, the paragons of Japan's economic recovery. Nevertheless, like their mothers, they are still expected to find the joy of life in following "normal living", albeit while wearing a fashionable apron and by (fantasising about) setting an impeccable dinner table for their beloved family.

Notes

1. "The Joy of Normal Living" appears on the left side of the magazine's cover, except in the case of a special issue, in which case another title is used. This was the case with *Haru-mi* Vol. 20, in which the motto was replaced by "Bringing back a smile to [people's faces] throughout Japan: Harumi's cheer-up recipes".
2. According to a recent survey published by The Japan Institute of Labor, Policy and Training (2014), the number of houses with an employed husband and full-time housewife was 7.2 million, compared to 10 million dual income homes; in 1985, the numbers were 9.5 million

and 7.2 million respectively. See http://www.jil.go.jp/kokunai/statistics/timeseries/html/g0212.html

3. According to a 2005 survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS), 90 per cent of single women aged 18–34 say they wish to marry at some point in their life. National surveys show that the most common reason for women's wish to marry is to have a family (see Nakano, 2011, p. 132). For similar results, see also Yamaguchi (2014, p. 38).

4. All names are pseudonyms. The suffix "san" (Ms) is used for the interviewees, as is customary in Japan.

5. On 24 October 2011, Kurihara's cooking career was covered in a NHK program (*Purofesshonaru shigoto*, 2011).

6. *Kawaii* (cute) style dominated Japanese popular culture in the 1980s and into the 1990s. It was largely related to childlike behaviour; it celebrated the "sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced" (Kinsella, 1995, p. 220).

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Disclosure statement

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