

We are not *Ikumen*, We are Self-Reliant Househusbands:

Crafting a Stay-At-Home-Father Identity in Japan

The participation of fathers in parenting and caring has become a topical issue in the public discourse in Japan. The phenomenon is often epitomized in the popular neologism *ikumen*, defining fathers actively involved in childcare (*ikuji*) as “cool” men. Based on extended ethnography, the article focuses on a group of men who reject the ostensibly carefree *ikumen* image, and who explicitly and “proactively” (*shutai-teki*) define themselves as “househusbands.” The article explores the interactive and creative process through which this marginal group of men “craft” their new identities as *self-reliant responsible* caretakers of children and the home. I suggest that these men affirm their potentially new masculine identity through relating to—and differentiating themselves from—three symbolic others: the *ikumen* as the trendy and cool, but not really committed new father; the *sarariiman*, epitome of Japanese hegemonic masculinity; and the dedicated housewife (*sengyō shufu*), the symbol of Japanese femininity. Adopting a perspective that does not hesitate in looking at the potentiality of change in gender relations, the article poses crucial questions about the potentiality of househusbands for *undoing* conventional understandings of masculinity and fathering—and, through this, “undoing gender.”

Fifty-Two year-old Shūichi¹ is a self-declared “househusband.” Given his relatively youthful appearance, his bleached-blond and spikey haircut and colorful clothing do not particularly stand out at the Starbucks branch located in a big shopping mall in downtown Tokyo. Shūichi resides in the downtown area with his wife, a full-time worker, and their six-year-old son and we meet there for what becomes a long interview. Although on a weekday at noon the popular coffee shop is occupied mainly by housewives, some men, supposedly “non-ordinary workers” can also be seen. However, as Shūichi explains during our lengthy conversation, his bleach-blond spikey hairstyle (*kinpatsu*) is an essential aspect of his public “declaration” of being a househusband. “Househusband declarations” of this nature have recently attracted attention, both locally and internationally, in the context of the Japan’s ongoing *ikumen* trend, related to the growing public interest in the re-definition of the father’s role in the family. In one of such public expositions, Shūichi is quoted as explaining that “in the public eye, men with blond hair are not allowed to work or even permitted to search for jobs as a salaryman. I became defiant that is when I basically declared myself a ‘househusband’” (Westervelt 2018).

Similarly, Jōji, 43, who details his experiences as a househusband in a comic book (*manga*) with the daring title, “New Daddy of Japan: A Working Househusband, Any Problem with that?” (Sugiyama and Abe 2014), often refers to his “long-hair, jeans and t-shirt” look, in opposition to the archetypal “man’s combat uniform suit” (*otoko no sentō-fuku sūtsu*). Jōji’s look, as repeatedly highlighted in his popular comic book, poses a “riddle” (*nazo*) for “ordinary salarymen’s wives” (Sugiyama and Abe 2014: 58-9), particularly in locations commonly the domain of mothers and kids, like daycare facilities, playgrounds and periodic check-ups at child health clinics. Shūichi

and Jōji are two of the founding members of a househusbands association bearing the provocative title “The Secret Society Househusbands’ Companion” (*himitsu kessha shufu no tomo*, hereafter referred to as *Shufu no Tomo*).

Recently, the participation of fathers in parenting and caring has become a topical issue in Japan, in both public and governmental discourse (Taga 2016). More specifically, Japan has been characterized as being at the “peak of men’s childcare boom” (Ishii-Kuntz 2013:38). This discourse, commonly encapsulated in the popular neologism *ikumen*, defines fathers actively involved in childcare (*ikuji*) as “cool” men (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016; Vassalo 2018). This discourse is the background for this article, which focuses on a group of men who explicitly—and “proactively” (*shutai-teki*)—define themselves as “househusbands.” The Japanese term used by these new househusbands to define themselves is “*shufu*” which has the same reading as “housewife,” as the Chinese character “*fu*” is replaced by the same-sound but different character denoting “husband.” As I will show in the article, the choice of terminology is culturally loaded and carries significant meanings.

This article is grounded in an extended ethnographic study (2013-2019) of the contemporary *ikumen* phenomenon. More particularly, the article draws on multi-sited fieldwork; examination and analysis of public online and offline materials; and ethnographic interviews with members of the househusbands’ association *Shufu no Tomo*. Further in-depth interviews were conducted with female members of *Shufu no Tomo*, and other related fathering and fathers’ associations, and with househusbands who did not belong to any organized group or association. Further conversations, and a few in-depth interviews, were also conducted with full-time working wives married to househusbands, either alone or jointly as couples.

Focusing on the process of identity formation for the “househusband,” this article proposes that as a marginal group, Japanese househusbands are seeking to affirm their new identity, as self-reliant and responsible caretakers of children and home. They do this by relating to—and differentiating themselves from—three symbolic others: the *ikumen* as a trendy and cool, but not really committed new father; the *sarariiman*, epitome of Japanese hegemonic masculinity; and the dedicated housewife (*sengyō shufu*), symbol of Japanese femininity. In common with Ho See Lin’s (2012, 2018) depictions of Japanese female managers, who manifested their marginal identity by differentiating themselves from several categories of gendered symbolic others, this process of “crafting selves” helps these men in legitimizing new understandings of gender relations, family formations, and the self as free from historical social roles and constructs. As eloquently expressed by Kondo (1990), “crafting” captures the non-static, creative nature of identity formation. It also captures the *agency* with which individuals “construct, work on and enact their identities, sometimes creatively challenging the limits of the cultural constraints” regarding what society expects of them (p.48).

The article explores the interactive and creative process through which the men who are at its focus “craft” their new identities as “househusbands.” It follows their struggle to find a place between home and work and in society in general, showing how they hesitantly present a new masculine identity which underlines the potentiality of diverse identities and responsibility. Unlike Ho (2012, 2018), I will not focus on friendship as a key theme in this process of crafting new gendered identities. However, I will reflect on how publicly distancing themselves from hegemonic masculine attributes, and joining organized househusband groups, these men find support in asserting their new identities and carving a new “place” for themselves in society.

“We are still a minority” was a phrase used repeatedly by the subjects of my study. Whilst there has been an increase in the number of stay-at-home-fathers (SAHF), broadly defined as men who are the primary caretakers of their children, they remain a “minority group among parents”, not just in Japan but also in Western countries (Ammari and Schoenebeck 2016; Lee and Lee 2018; Doucet 2006, 2016; Ranson 2010). Recent research into changing modes of fatherhood, and more particularly about men as caretakers (mainly in Western contexts) has been preoccupied, unsurprisingly, with the perspective of gender and specifically related to the study of masculinities. As manifested in research, the marginal or unique position of stay-at-home-fathers can be regarded as a situation in which “masculinity is, as it were, on the line,” and as such provides a good “strategy of studying men and masculinities” (Morgan 1992: 99). This is no doubt connected to the fact that masculinity—indeed “hegemonic masculinity”, that form of masculinity that has gained a cultural dominance and has come to be considered as normative (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005)—still largely configures men as the main family breadwinner, with women as the main caretakers (Chesely 2011). However, as also suggested by Connell (2000:13) “masculinities are not fixed”; rather, they are “often in tension, within and without.” Thus, the Japanese fathers who become primary caretakers of their children, going against the dominant understandings of fatherhood and masculinity, provide a unique prism with which to explore changes in masculine identities (Ryu 2018). A study which focuses on a group of men, who, similarly to fathers in other parts of the world, have chosen to go “*against the grain*” (Ranson 2010), can also provide a unique point of view from which to examine the potentialities created by changes in the traditional gendered divisions of work and family responsibilities (Chesely 2011). More generally, by presenting a careful examination of the processes through which men craft an alternative identity of caring and responsibility within the family, this article will shed a

new light, larger than on masculinities alone, but in fact with regard to gender constructions and gender relations. Thus, by adopting a perspective which does not hesitate in considering the potentiality of change in gender relations (Sullivan 2004, 2006), the article is well-placed to pose vital questions about the possibility that the phenomenon of the househusbands can *undo* conventional understandings of masculinity and fathering, and through this “undo gender” (Deutch 2007; Risman 2009). “Undoing gender,” as used in this article, does not claim for the unraveling of gender relations. Instead, it denotes the potentiality of individuals to “challenge boundaries by resisting conventional gendered behavior in ongoing social interactions” (Deutch 2007: 121), and thus “challenge,” or even *dare*, “the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category” (Risman 2009: 83).

Sengyō Shufu and the Salaryman as the cultural building blocks of the “Ordinary Family”

The literature concerning men who are the primary family caretaker has adopted the generic term *stay-at-home fathers* (SAHF) or *stay-at-home dads* (SAHD). The term and concept of the “househusband” seems to have virtually vanished from use in Western countries, in both popular and academic discourse. One of the last studies to use the term “househusband” was based on a 1990s study of the experiences of Australian househusbands, highlighting their “feeling of illegitimacy on one hand and social isolation on the other” (Smith 1998). However, in the Japanese case, although a popular TV drama series broadcasted in 2004 was titled “At Home Dad (*atto hōmu daddo*),” popular discourse has in recent years increasingly embraced the concept of the “househusband” (*shufu*) (Tanaka 2016: 80). As noted earlier, the term resonates with the female counterpart “*shufu*,” denoting the “head” (*shu*) wife (*fu*) (Imai 1994).

This choice of terminology—which feeds into the association’s choice of name—is anything but trivial. It reveals manifold implications, both positive (i.e., ascribing high value) and daring. Not only that the female “*shufu*” has been described as “more than a ‘housewife’” (Imai 1994), the leading Japanese feminist Ueno Chizuko has cited it as the “cardinal point with regard to which women in Japan reflect about themselves.” As Ueno explained, “we [Japanese women] measure ourselves by our distance from being a *shufu* and thus we cannot be free from the concept of ‘housewife’” (Ueno 1982; see also Goldstein-Gidoni 2012, 50). The cultural concept of the “housewife” in Japan has also gained a unique status in relation to the “housewife debate” (*shufu ronsō*), one of the longest running debates on the role of women in Japanese society.² The latter blossomed during the period of high economic growth (1950s-60s); it was during these formative years that the notion that a married woman should be a “professional housewife” (*sengyō shufu*) acquired its overwhelming cultural dominance (Gordon 2005).

In parallel with the cultural process in which “housewife” (*shufu*) became so strongly normative as to be virtually synonymous with womanhood (Ochiai 1996), the same postwar period undoubtedly construed the archetypal hardworking male-breadwinner—the *salaryman*—as the most socially and culturally desired form (Dasgupta 2013; Hidaka 2010; Taga 2005), indeed as the manifestation of ideologically ingrained *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Such a form of ideological dominance does not refer to the most statistically relevant type of masculinity; rather, it relates to the most desired form of masculinity in relation to social, cultural and institutional configurations. The middle-class salaryman, thus, became the “the archetypical citizen” (Mackie 2002), an inherent characteristic of Japanese culture.

This alliance, of the salaryman and the dedicated housewife, formed the basis of the “postwar Japanese family system,” a concept that describes the features of the Japanese family as

constituted from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s (Ochiai 2005). The standardization of this family formation was considered a central feature of the Japanese national political economy, at a period of economic growth and stability (Takeda 2005). Economic and institutional factors played significant roles in the standardization of the Japanese modern family. However, no less significant was the cultural dominance that this pattern secured (Gordon 2000).

It is against this deeply ingrained male breadwinner “corporate gender contract” (from economic, cultural and broader social perspectives) (Goldstein-Gidoni 2019a) that we should begin to unpick the construction of the gendered identity of Japanese househusbands. More specifically, the *crafting* of househusbands’ identities, both personally and publicly, cannot be understood except in contrast to the standardization and *ordinariness* of the “Japanese family,” and the “common-sense-ness” of the salaryman hegemonic masculinity construct, in Japan’s discourse on masculinity (Dasgupta 2013: 7), even in the wake of recent economic and social changes.

Following the collapse of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, Japan has experienced several subsequent social and economic changes. These include major shifts in the lifetime employment system; changing marital patterns; a declining fertility rate; and an increase in dual-income households. The last occurred in parallel with a gradual decrease in the number of single-income households – defined in government statistics as households where the man works outside, and the woman is a full-time housewife (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2017). The economic recession of the mid-1990s, and the subsequent “Lost Decade” (Brinton 2011) were also accompanied by an increasing plurality in definitions of masculinity (Roberson and Suzuki 2003), and the unraveling of the hegemonic hold of the masculine corporate culture and the closely associated notion of salaryman masculinity. Nevertheless, and even against the backdrop of these

changing economic conditions, it has been argued that “hegemonic masculinity has been challenged less than one can think” (Hidaka 2010: 2).

Certainly, as contemporary research has shown, alongside new voices—those depicted in this article, for example—the ideological hegemonic hold of the idea of “ordinary” Japanese man, defined by work and positioned as the “pillar of the house” (*daikoku-bashira*), retains its cultural dominance as primary income provider for a dependent wife and family (Dasgupta 2013). Moreover, the tenacity of Japan’s overtly masculine corporate culture (Nemoto 2013) has in fact repeatedly created new forms of pressure and anxiety for the men who previously represented the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Ryu 2018; Tanaka 2015). In what follows, I will first outline the current discourse encouraging the active involvement of fathers in family life, as it relates to the relationship between family, work and masculinities. The article will then explore how a “minority” group of househusbands construct, or indeed *craft*, both their public and personal *selves* vis-à-vis the hegemonic hold of former ideas on the one hand, and ostensibly evolving constructs of family and gender on the other.

***Ikumen* – It’s Cool to be a Father**

In 2006, the advertising company Hakuhōdō coined the neologism *ikumen*, encapsulating the rapidly expanding public discourse about changing fathering practices, and growing public interest in re-defining the role of the father in the family. In an interview I conducted in 2016 with Takuma, the head of the advertising team at Hakuhōdō responsible for the “*ikumen*” catchphrase, he recalled how the term came about:

One of our colleagues brought us [the advertising team] the word “*ikumen*,” suggesting, “Can’t we bring change into society using *ikumen* as a keyword?” We expected to change the atmosphere of the society by spreading the word *ikumen*.

However, Takuma also remembered the somewhat carefree nature of the expression at the time it was conceived. The term sought to depict fathers actively involved in childcare (*ikuji*) as “cool” men, aligning itself with another popular term, *ikemen* (cool guy). Takuma explained: “we focused on fathers’ enjoyment of childcare.” He further clarified that “It was not related to the amount of time you spend with kids; I simply like kids and like playing with them, so that was what I wanted to spread.” A father of two and married to a full-time housewife, Takuma, who has been employed with the same company since graduation, talked about “a recent improvement” in his working hours. Once, he had habitually caught the last train home, sometimes even spending the night in a capsule hotel. But “now, [I] leave the office around 20:00.” Pursuing this notion of the joy of fatherhood, after launching the buzzword, Takuma and his team initiated the *ikumen* club, designated for fathers who sought to enjoy childcare. In the words of the accompanying website: “Childcare is fun, men who do childcare are cool. If [the number of] active papas increase, this will bring happiness to mothers, family and almost certainly to Japan.”³

This new figure, of the caring father, in fact first emerged in the late 1990s. It was in part a response to the changing economic and social conditions of the time, and largely in opposition to the engrained social acceptance of the “absence of father from home” model, which had characterized the postwar period of economic growth and stability (Isii-Kuntz 2013; Nakatani 2006). This growing unease may, at least in part, explain the popularity that the buzzword rapidly gained, winning third prize in the 2010 Buzzword-of-the-Year Contest. This may also explain why

the term has, over time, acquired a variety of meanings extending far beyond its initial lighthearted nature.

As Takama further explains, “when we thought about *ikumen*, we focused on enjoying childcare rather than on Work-Life-Balance issues. But *ikumen* got an independent life going beyond our intentions.” Indeed, the “pioneering efforts” of the *ikumen* seemed to spark the hope for the spread of new family models that will gain social traction, both at home and community and in the workplace (North 2012: 29). The *ikumen* trend received widespread media attention across television programs, newspapers, magazines and manga (Vassalo 2018). It was not only exploited commercially, such as in the promotion of father-friendly *ikumen* goods targeted at involved fathers (Ishii-Kuntz 2013:57; Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017), the Japanese government also jumped on the bandwagon and showed its support. At the peak of the trend, in 2010, Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) initiated its *Ikumen* Project.

The Japanese government had actually initiated campaigns promoting the increased participation of fathers in childcare as early as the 1990s, principally as a countermeasure to the nation’s declining birth rate (Goldstein-Gidoni 2019b). The government also increasingly incentivized employers into introducing family-friendly policies, including generous paternity childcare leave (Atsumi 2007; Mun and Brinton 2017). More recently, in August 2016, the government introduced “Work Style Reform” (*hatarakikata kaikaku*), a term which in due course became a popular catchphrase itself (Otake 2017).⁴ *Fathering Japan*, the country’s leading fathering association, was extensively involved at both the governmental and corporate levels in the design and promotion of these new ideas and policies. The association, which was founded in 2006 with the aim of promoting and activating change in “family, society and the ‘corporate mind’”

through “birthing” a new father (Fathering Japan 2014:165-166), was in fact, the “father” of *Shufu no Tomo* whose members are the main focus of this article.

“Hey You, Won't You Become a Househusband?”

A figure of a man in a smart business suit—but also wearing kitchen gloves and an apron—adorns *Shufu no Tomo*’s “ambition” (*yabō*) page in the association’s active website. The figure calls out: “Hey you, won’t you become a househusband?” (*tokorode kimi wa shufu ni nareru ka?*).⁵ The page opens by describing that evening when “it all begun”:

On the evening of October 10th 2014, five househusbands gathered at a certain place and deliberated on what would be the best way to introduce to the world the idea of the househusband (*shufu to iu mono o yo ni uchidasu*). As they all held their heads [pondering], suddenly the idea came to mind: “If the Japanese government is calling for 30% increase in the number of female managers by 2020, shouldn’t the number of househusbands be increased by 30%?”⁶

In my interviews and many conversations with the members of the group, they all referred to this defining moment in the association’s short history, by way of emphasizing the new voice they wished to convey.

Shūichi and Jōji, presented at the beginning of this article, were part of this founding group of five househusbands. However, it was in fact Taizō, another of the founding members, who took the initiative of convening the meeting with the four other enthusiastic househusbands, all

members of the already well-established *Fathering Japan*, to meet on that memorable evening. As Taizō explained, “at the time there was another househusbands’ association called *Lennon Papa* [referencing the late John Lennon’s involved fatherhood], that gathered a group of househusbands who were angry with the *ikumen* boom.” Taizō initially joined *Lennon Papa*, irritated too by the same fad and thinking:

What on the earth is this? No way! Because it was like “I take care of my kids and this is so fashionable!” This nonsense annoyed me. I felt that childcare is not something so easy! I believe many mamas also felt the same as they watched the [*ikumen*] trend.

However, joining *Lennon Papa* did not assuage Taizō’s frustration, as he sensed that “their voice was not reaching anyone.” In his recollection, it was *Fathering Japan*’s charismatic founder and leader Ando Tetsuya who gave him the final push to establish this required new “voice,” urging him “to launch a househusbands’ activity.”

The end result of the collaborative effort of these five househusbands was the “Secret Society Househusbands’ Companion” (*himitsu kessha shufu no tomo*). In choosing this “playful” approach (*asobi gokoro*), adopting the guise of a “secret society,” as Taizō and the others explained, they wanted to “call more people’s attention – ‘what are they doing?’” By adding “*Shufu no Tomo*” to the already provocative and supposedly hidden existence of the group, they succeeded in embedding their provocative, daring and defiant image. *Shufu no Tomo* (The Housewives’ Companion) had been the title of a well-known women’s magazine, published between 1917 and 2008. The magazine maintained its popularity through the Taishō period (1912-1926), and then through the postwar period (Ochiai 1997). In fact, it was the main conduit, so far as women’s

magazines were concerned, for spreading the ideal of the *shufu* (housewife) amongst ordinary Japanese women (Ishii and Jarkey 2002). Known for its conservative orientation, it was directed mainly at housewives and married women, providing them with the prescriptions for living their lives appropriately (Tanaka 1998).

Shufu no Tomo, which has since grown to over one hundred active members and over one thousand seven hundred (1738 in January 2020) Facebook followers, seeks to maintain a “light hearted” spirit, coupled with a “serious resolution.” Its activities include seminars, lectures and workshops for househusbands and the interested general public. Since October 2015, it has hosted an annual large-scale event, the highlight of which being the “*Shufu no Tomo Award*.”

The bold call for men to consider becoming househusbands is only one of the declarations and “missions” splashed across the group’s colorful “ambition” website page. Other headings include calls to “promote Work-Life-Balance, make husband and wife share house chores, childcare and work”; “render ‘househusband’ familiar to people”; and “increase the number of househusbands.” And finally, there are the association’s larger missions: “to strongly push for the diversification of men’s life styles,” and ultimately “to eradicate the deeply-rooted stereotype of ‘men to work, women at home.’”⁷

“Men should work outside the home for wages, and women should protect the household” has become an almost “natural reality” that serves to differentiate social roles on the basis of gender, as reflected across Japanese institutions and language (Yagi 2009:102-3). In fact, it has also become the most common survey item used to measure attitudinal changes in Japan’s normative differentiation of social roles, and the division of labor between the sexes (North 2012:17). This “reality” is certainly evident for the men who founded *Shufu no Tomo*, and who

push for societal change. When I asked Taizō, who still holds a senior position in the association, to define the group's aims, his response was resolute:

We want to crush the traditional way of thinking regarding men at work and women at home, *demolish it totally*, and we are constantly thinking about what we can do to achieve this. Three steps are needed [in order] to make people change their fixed notions (*kotei kan-nen*). When people hear about something they've never heard before, the first thing [they experience] is surprise, or simply “what's that?.” When they hear the same thing right after the first time, then they feel “I know this, I've heard of it somewhere,” which moves the person a little bit away from his [or hers] fixed notions. When they hear about it once again, that's when it starts to spread out. So, we want to take these three steps, [in order] to spread our concept among Japanese people. For this, we need to adopt a media strategy which we call “air combat” (*kūchūsen*)⁸: giving lectures and holding events so that we can see people face-to-face. Additionally, we use the [device of] word-of-mouth.

Househusband as the “Next Stage”: Re-Defining “Shufu”

Our aim in *Shufu no Tomo* is to have double *shufu* (*daburu shufu*) at home. We are not aiming to become at-home-dads. We want to re-define the word “*shufu*.” So, according to our definition, “*shufu*” means a husband that carries out house chores and childcare *proactively* (*shutai teki ni kaji ikuji o suru otto*).

In my first long interview with Taizō, in 2016, he emphasized the *proactive* approach of the Japanese stay-at-home father. Taizō insisted on the strong meaning that “*shufu*” (female or male) has in Japan, suggesting that it may not have any equivalent in other cultures. “We define *shufu* as ‘a husband who does housekeeping and childcare proactively’” (*watashi tachi ga teigi suru shufu*

wa 'shutai tekini kaji ya ikuji o suru otto'), the association declares.⁹ “*Shutaiteki*,” which translates as “independent, responsible, proactive,” was the choice of all the househusbands I spoke with, as the main adjective to describe their identity. *Shu (tai)* is in fact also the first character in the word *shu[-]fu*, and thus adds another dimension to the association’s choice of terminology, against the background of the *ikumen* boom which preceded its initiation.

During our interview, with Taizō extemporizing on the supposed distinction between “at home dads” and “househusbands” (*shufu*), the conversation turned to the popular 2004 television series *At Home Dad* (*atto hōmu daddo*). While Taizō personally had found the series entertaining, he rejected the full reversal of gender roles which it proposed. As we continued to discuss the terminology, as Taizō insisted on the unique Japanese characteristics of the word “*shufu*,” he also tried to grasp the conception of stay-at-home-dads in the Western world. Finally, he succumbed, conceding that “if it is a man who chooses to undertake [stay-at-home] by himself (*jibun de erande yatteiru hito*), so I guess [*shufu*] is close to at-home-dad.”

In a festive event held in October 2015 to launch the “*Shufu no Tomo Award*,” a leading member of the househusbands’ association declared that the year was the start of a new and significant era. By using the term *gannen*, normally used to denote the first year of a new imperial era, or the year of an auspicious occurrence, he announced the “first year of househusband as the “*ikumen* NEXT STAGE.” The new generation of househusbands, he explained, had made a step forward by demonstrating that men could do much more than merely helping or participating childcare and housekeeping chores, as epitomized in *ikumen*. Househusbands have proved, he concluded, that “[other than] giving birth and breast feeding, men can do anything.”¹⁰

Ikumen is someone who “helps” with childcare; *shufu*, by way of contrast, is about taking responsibility (the word *sekinin* is also used in a similar sense) for childcare and housework. Many

of the househusbands whom I spoke with expressed some suspicion of the men “who like to be seen pushing a baby stroller,” or who are “arrogantly” calling themselves *ikumen*, instead of having the title bestowed upon them by their wives. Some even were more scornful; they used dismissive terms like *ese* (false)-*ikumen*, *ikumen-modoki* (pseudo *ikumen*) or *kyūjitsu* (day off) *ikumen* to describe men who claim to be *ikumen*, “when all they do is to wipe the table after dinner.” In 2013, when the catchword was still hip and before the formation of the househusbands’ association, I interviewed Hisao. Hisao (born 1974) is a senior member of *Fathering Japan*, and one of the first men to define themselves as “professional househusbands” (*sengyō shufu*). Married to a nurse who wished to continue in full-time work, and dissatisfied with his own work, Hisao described himself as someone who became a househusband almost “naturally,” as it suited his wife, and aligned with his likes and dislikes. He described in detail how he, and other men like him, view the trendy *ikumen*:

...Obviously I don’t think it is bad but they [*ikumen*] should know that this is only the starting point. They only take the good part of childcare, where they don’t need to struggle with kids. Moms feel that it isn’t fair...In the beginning, I was happy that people were focused on us. But now, I feel that time has passed and *ikumen* is not something new anymore.

The members of *Shufu no Tomo* were clear that while they recognized the significance of *ikumen* as a catchword which opened the path for change, they saw themselves the true forerunners of the succeeding and necessary stage once *iku-men* became old news. Another common distinction which househusbands have adopted to distinguish themselves from ordinary *ikumen* is, interestingly, related to the world of work. The post-bubble “precarious work” conditions have highlighted the differences between regular and “non-regular workers” (Osawa, Kim, and

Kingston 2013). As a dedicated member of the househusbands association elaborated in a conversation with me:

We define *ikumen* as [doing] *arubaito* (part-time, side-job). They do only jobs that they are told to do in certain hours. When it is over, they “go home” even if they have some work left. That’s how *arubaito* works...Househusbands (*shufu*) manage the house...Husbands who perform house chores and child care self-reliantly are *shufu*: meaning, they are not only a male version of female *shufu*, but [also] focus on being self-reliant... *Ikumen* have no self-reliance, and therefore they complain when their wives are not satisfied, even if they have done so much. But if they possessed self-reliance, then they wouldn’t care even if they didn’t get any words of appreciation from their partners. [We] don’t need any appreciation. When they complain, it is because they aren’t self-reliant. I think that’s the difference.

Responsibility, which is a core term for Doucet’s (2006, 2015) exploration of the phenomenon of men who “mother,” is, as discussed so far in this article, a core idea in the vision of the househusbands’ association. In the Japanese case, “responsibility” relates not only to childcare and the home, but also largely to bringing change to society. As stated by Sugiyama Jōji, the manga author we met earlier, in another short printed text: “In our household we are not sharing chores, we are sharing responsibility (*sekinin o buntan*)” (FJ 2014: 92).

Setting on the Road to Becoming a Househusband: The Decision

Ryu (2018), who analyzed the life stories of eight Japanese househusbands, described their decision to dedicate themselves to housework and childcare in terms of “conversion” (*tenkō*), or ideological reversal. Bleached-hair Shūichi’s narrative of his so-called conversion into a dedicated

househusband is indubitably one of the most dramatic stories which I encountered during this study, or at least one of the stories which became most “famous,” as he suggests. At the age of thirty, newly married, Shūichi got ill with an autoimmune disease. After a few months of sick leave, he decided to leave his demanding full-time job. At the time, leaving his employment was (for him) tantamount to “resigning” from marriage, given that he would no longer be able to provide for his wife. However, as “the famous story that [I] always talk about in [my] lectures goes,” his wife reacted aggressively to his proposal that they get divorced, and resolutely told him that she would “maintain” him while he could stay at home without feeling guilty. “So, I succumbed and became a househusband (*shufu*), even though I didn’t want to.”

In her study of US couples consisting of stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning mothers, Chesley (2011: 650) identified “a common thread across interviews”: without “some sort of shock to a man’s job (e.g., job loss) or men’s job dissatisfaction,” they would not have taken on an at-home father arrangement. Ryu (2018)’s study showed that in the case of Japanese househusbands, a major trigger leading to their premature retirement from work was a “physical/mental illness,” invariably caused by Japan’s harsh corporate culture. Indeed, for the majority of my interlocutors in the present study, the decision to become a househusband was closely related to severe work fatigue, or to some kind of dissatisfaction at or from work.

Keita, 47, decided to quit working life and become the main caretaker of children and home when his elder daughter was born. As he related during a “househusbands’ laid-back lunch” which I had convened with a few members of the association, in order to encourage them to talk freely about their experience as househusbands:

Well, I had been changing my job constantly and at that time, I was a contracted worker. It wasn't that flexible and I couldn't expect that my salary would rise in the future. After my elder daughter was born, when I saw my future, I felt nothing better could possibly happen there.

Like Shūichi and others, Keita consulted his wife, telling her that because he “liked kids so much,” he wished “to stay with the kids while they were growing up.” He asked his wife to give her consent for him to quit his job and to search for other ways to earn a living whilst at home, promising her that “after a one-year trial, if I don't find anything, I will go back to work outside.”

Studies in the US, Canada and Europe have found that the female spouse's career choices invariably play a major role in a man's decision to become SAHF (Chesley 2011; Doucet 2016; Lee and Lee 2018: 48). The Japanese case seems to make no exception, the wife's employment conditions, together with her cooperation, prove crucial in the decision to become a househusband, as well as in the process of crafting the househusband identity. Shūichi described his wife as a “workaholic,” a career-oriented person (*shigoto ningen*). “I call her *showa no otōsan* (Showa-era father), [coming back from work] she only says ‘*meshi, furo, neru* (meal, bath, sleep),’” likening her to a typical father from the Showa period (1926-1989). These men were typically described as “corporate warriors,” totally dedicated to work and the company. Unlike Shūichi's wife, Keita's wife is “not a career woman.” He described her as “an ordinary (*futsū*) company worker.” However, “she likes her job, mainly because she has many friends there. Moreover, the company is large with a very good welfare system, thus, she has had no reason to leave her job.”

The recent rise in the number of dual-income households (Miura and Higashi 2017), combined with the diversification of men's working patterns and growing employment insecurity

of the “lost decade(s)” (Brinton 2011), has made it possible for more Japanese men rely on their wives’ careers or employment in making the decision to stay at home as the main caretaker. However, research suggests that practical reasons or “circumstances” alone have not been enough for men to do a major change in their position between work and home (Ranson 2012), or to become stay-at-home dads (Doucet 2016). The “desire to be at-home-father” (Chesely 2011), described by Funabashi (2006) as the “inner voice,” is another factor that should not be ignored.

Based on a major European study exploring how men reconcile the demands of work and family life, Holter (2007) theorized two models of change from breadwinning masculinities to caring masculinities: the “new man,” which is mainly ideological, and the more practical “new circumstances.” Thirty-two-year-old Hajime, who joined *Shufu no Tomo* not very long after his son was born as he “was interested to know how a minority like [me] lives,” seems to perfectly align with “the new-man model.” He had always been “interested in childcare and house chores.” In fact, as he and his wife, also 32, revealed in a joint interview, they had determined very early in their relationship, while they were still in college, that he would be the one to “take care of children and home, while [she] will pursue work.” Hisao (41), on the other hand, described a very different path leading from a job that he disliked to home:

I my case, I did not vigorously decide to become a househusband. It wasn’t like: “Yes! I’ll become a househusband!” It simply happened that my wife wanted to keep on working, while I wanted to quit work and wanted to take care of our baby.

Hajime and Hisao’s differing decision-making processes can be explained as representing two “edge cases” of what might better be described as a continuum of mixed cases incorporating the two models: “new men” and “new circumstances.” As Holter (2007:436) acknowledges, the two

models tend to be “not mutually exclusive and probably have shifting relevance in men’s long-term change patterns.”

Doucet (2016), who conducted a longitudinal study of SAHD, similarly rejects the all-too-often accepted distinction, between SAHDs who *choose* to be at home and those who are at home through *forced choice*. Instead, she chooses to adopt the “weaving” metaphor, as used by Garrey (1999), to describe the actions and intentions of employed women with children. In this way, she describes the process of men deciding or *choosing* to be at home not as a singular product, but as “a process of multiple, constantly intra-acting threads” (Doucet 2016:10). Even Taizō, who doggedly clung to notions of responsibility and “independent choice” as overtly characterizing Japanese househusbands, acknowledged that (like him), most of the men who had joined the househusbands association had left full-time work “due to circumstances.”¹¹ Furthermore, as suggested by Doucet (2016:11), fathers face different choices in different countries. In other words, fathers in different cultural and social contexts face different “circumstances.”

Facing the “Public Eye”: Crafting the “Househusband” Identity as a Process

I opened the article with Shūichi’s bleached-blond spikey hairstyle “declaration” (*sengen*). Shūichi connects strongly between his decision to go blond and his commitment to crafting his new identity as a househusband. However, there was in fact a gap of a few years between Shūichi’s wife’s firm resolution that he should stay at home while she would become the family breadwinner and Shūichi’s “househusband declaration.” As he painfully recalled:

For two years or so I was not sure. Once, an older man from our neighborhood, seeing me at home during the daytime asked me what I was doing, so I told him that I was a kind of

househusband. “Oh, so you are only a good-for-nothing parasite (*gokutsubushi*),” he said... Many times, I have heard “*gokutsubushi*” or “*himo*” (a man who is financially dependent on a woman), it was really painful to hear such comments. After living like that for two or three years, and as my wife’s earnings reached more than what I used to earn when I was working really hard...and while deliberating if I should try to go back to society, go back to work, I suddenly realized that even considering the house budget, we might in fact be better-off if I dedicated myself to backing her up. I decided thus, and the next day I made a statement (*sengen*) to my wife: “I’m going to dye my hair blond.”

Shūichi’s new look did not allay his neighbors’ suspicions, he explains. However, making this firm decision, to cut himself from the world of work that would not accept a blond-hair guy, removed his doubts and made him feel “light,” as “an evidence of making up my decision.”

Kondo (1990) described the process of “crafting selves” in Japan as closely linked to gender (see also Ho 2012:87-8). “Crafting selves and lives,” according to Kondo, should also be understood in terms of a dynamic process occurring “within shifting fields of power and meaning” and as “dynamically engaging, everyday contests” over meanings (Kondo 1990:10). The narratives of the househusbands I studied in relation to the process of *becoming a househusband* were replete with such kind of everyday contests, not just about the actual meaning of being a “(male) *shufu*,” but also with regard to being supported by their spouses and certainly over what it means to be a proper man, a proper husband, a good father. As it came up very clearly, it was not enough to reach a personal or even a marital decision about staying at home. Others outside of the family, and more specifically the cultural presumptions of the wider social environment with regards to gender, masculinity, family and work, could not be ignored.

Shūichi's dyed-hair-househusband declaration made him feel "lighter," because it removed the expectation that he could—or should—"go back to society," or to the corporate male world of work. However, even as he shaped this new identity, even making "one or two" househusbands friends, he begun to feel a sense of inferiority or even "discrimination" (*sabetsu*) keenly connected to being a "childless househusband," as he had been for more than a decade due to his bad health and to his wife's strong career ambitions. As Shūichi's health improved, he was eager to have "as many babies as possible." However, no matter how much he pleaded with his wife that they should consider starting a family, she strongly held to the idea that "it [was] just impossible." However, Shūichi "could not give up":

I really looked into it, starting with the process of pregnancy and childbirth that women [go through] and things like company system. Also, into financial matters. Because she is a freelancer, she would not be able to work. Taking this into consideration, how much money [would we need to] save? Regarding childcare after the child is born, since the plan was to place the child in kindergarten, I studied caring for a baby before the age of three, when children go to kindergarten, what is necessary, how much money we would need for diapers and infant formula. I thought that breastfeeding would be out of the question, so I checked every detail, wrote it down, and made a *presentation* to my wife.

Although almost eight years have elapsed since Shūichi's second "declaration" (*sengen*)—and more than six since the birth of their son—his memory of that evening, waiting with his presentation for her coming back from work, was very vivid. As he emotionally elaborates, "I

declared (*sengen shimashita*) to her that I might not be able to get pregnant, give birth or breastfeed, but otherwise I can do everything.”

Unlike the case of Shūichi, who needed to build a strong case and prepare a convincing written presentation that he would take upon himself all childcare responsibilities, Hajime—described above as aligning with the “new-man model”—and his wife Emiko had decided on the domestic division of labor long before they even had a child. Nevertheless, when the time came for Hajime to ask for long childcare leave, it was his wife who hesitated, as he recalled during their joint interview:

I was asked [by my wife] if it was really okay; [she said] that we need to take public eye (*seken no me*) into consideration. In Japan, men doing “professional housewifery/househusbandry” (*senkyō shufu*), even only during childcare leave, is still quite rare, so she asked me if I was really okay about this. I said that I wanted to take the challenge and that I was yearning (*akogareta*) to live like this. So we did.

Isolation and lack of social support, especially outside the nuclear family, has been widely reported in research about SAHF in Western countries (Lee and Lee 2018:55). In his illustrated narration, Sugiyama Jōji beautifully captures this experience of isolation, which other househusbands shared in this study: “Cold wintry wind blew through my heart at the speed of 50 kilometers per hour” (Sugiyama and Abe 2014:15). This harsh cold wind of loneliness is how he describes his feelings following a visit to the pediatrician’s clinic for the infant’s checkup. He was the only father in attendance, prompting harsh gazes from the mothers in the waiting room, and the pitiful and scornful manner (directed mainly towards his absent wife) of the (female) doctor.

Certainly, one of the main groups who seem to pose a “threat” to the househusbands are fellow mothers, whom the former usually refer as “*mamatomo*,” which can be loosely translated

as “mothers’ circle.” As Lee and Lee (2018:55) suggest, social isolation resulting from exclusion from mothers’ play groups is recurrent among SAHF (see also Latshaw 2011). In Japan, the playground is normatively considered a prime spot for establishing contacts for housewives while at the same time a particularly traumatic arena for those who fail to do so (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012:20-21). Many of the fathers in my study described their experience of the playground as very stressful and often traumatic. Shō, who changed his working habits after falling very ill from overwork, recalled how devastating his experience was going with his child to the park in his first childcare leave in 2009:

It was terrible, everyone [i.e. mothers] in the park just faded away when we entered the park. It was like that at that time [in 2009]. They wondered who I was. Everyone thought I must have some special reason for having to take care of a kid during daytime. They may have thought that I had been fired as a result of the Lehman Shock because it was the year¹²...People imagined only negative things, such as that my wife might have died or something. Even now [2015], I think women living nearby are wondering whether I am working at all. I might be seen as “*himo*” (a man who is financially dependent on a woman), since it is obvious that my wife works daily, because she drives the car and leaves home every morning.

The isolation, criticism and even contempt—via derogative labelling such as “*himo*”—were qualified by the men I studied as a motivation for joining fathers’, or more preferably househusbands’, associations. Others related to the search for a support group. When I asked Keita at the househusbands’ laid-back lunch about the circumstances behind him joining *Shufu no Tomo*, he explained, “Since there weren’t any househusbands around me, I wanted to talk with others who

were ‘doing househusbandry’.” Keita went on to explain that although he had also been a member of *Fathering Japan*, he had discovered that the activities and events of the househusbands’ association “suit him better...because (involved) fathers or *ikumen* are different from househusbands (*shufu*).” Keita then made his point by drawing a clear distinction between “those [men] who perform house chores and childcare [while] holding work (*shigoto*) as their main [role]” and “those [men] who perform house chores and childcare as their main [role], and work in addition (to that).”

“Work” and the Crafting of the (male) *shufu* Identity

Not all of the househusbands in this study were “full-time househusbands” (*sengyō shufu*). In fact, although they considered performing house chores and childcare as labor, most were also eager to be involved in some form of “work” outside the home, whether paid activities in fathering associations, or other kinds of paid work. Similarly to other “creative processes” of *crafting selves*, such as that of the male artisans and part-time Japanese female workers studied by Kondo (1990), or the Japanese professional women studied by Ho (2012, 2018), the narratives of becoming a “responsible male *shufu*” were suffused with, and inseparable from, “work.” As the men studied here were excluded from the world of work, whether by choice or by “circumstances,” or by the way they were regarded by others, the alternative identity that they crafted could not but relate also to work. The term “*kengyō shufu*,” formerly used for “working housewives” or housewives with a “side job” (Imai 1994: 61), captures the complexities of this new male identity. As expressed in Keita’s distinction mentioned above, what *makes* the men presented in this article “househusbands” and not simply *ikumen*, and certainly what distinguishes them from “ordinary” fathers, is indeed

their relationship with work; the way they have sought to weave together home, fatherhood, and work. Sugiyama, one of the lead advocates of this alternative identity of male *shufu*, provokes hegemonic masculinity in his manga by declaring:

I, with the long hair, t-shirt and jeans...not a *himo*, nor a full-time househusband, [I am] Sugiyama Jōji whose principal work (*omona shigoto*) is househusbandry (*shufu*) and broadcast writing. I am doing working househusband(ry)” (p. 3).

Domestic labor is thus given the same value as work outside the home, be it performed by a woman or a man. However, while work has secured a central position in the work of crafting the self in Japan, men who take upon themselves full or equally balanced responsibility for childcare and the home cannot evade confronting the type of *work*— and in fact work and home relationship—expected of them, as men. Sugiyama opens his book:

“Father” (*tōchan*): men who hold to this word mostly leave the house in the morning on their way to the company wearing a suit and holding a business briefcase. In the evening, they come back late from work when kids are already asleep. This is the image of the male-parent isn’t it? However, our family is quite different (*chotto chigau*). (Sugiyama and Abe 2014:2).

“Our family is different,” is one of the main threads of Sugiyama’s illustrated narration of becoming a “new daddy of Japan.” Presenting himself as the antithesis for the “ordinary” fathers of Japan, and his “non-ordinary” wife as a “full-time working mother,” he elaborates on their inner

struggle as a family to become a “different” family with a different division of labor between wife and husband. Nevertheless, Sugiyama also expounds on his struggle to get accepted by the mothers’ circles, who could not figure out this man who is not clad in “man’s combat uniform” (p.58). The “father” Sugiyama begins his narration with is obviously no other than the “grey-suited, briefcase-carrying white-collar office worker,” the “corporate warrior” who has become the “everyman of Japan” and the epitome of hegemonic masculinity (Dasgupta 2003:118). In his struggle to suggest another masculine option, the long-haired, t-shirt and jeans-wearing Sugiyama was finally accepted only after he proved to the worried women that he was certainly not a *himo*: he was, in fact, a “working househusband.”

Discussion: Crafting Househusbands’ identities and the Undoing of Gender

In October 2019, I attended the 9th National Fathering Forum held in Niigata, a large city on the coast of the Sea of Japan, to participate in the “*Shufu no Tomo Award 2019*.” At the entrance to the gathering, members of *Shufu no Tomo*, mainly men, but also one or two female members, all dressed in *papa-no tsunagi*, (daddy’s jumpsuit), welcomed attendees. The idea of designing daddy’s jumpsuit made of denim was conceived at one of the association’s “secret meetings...and started from an idea of making ‘housework and childcare items for dads’.” As further explained, “Some members said ‘aprons aren’t good anymore. Let’s stop arranging for men what women have had in the first place. If you think about the dirty clothes that men wear during work, so they are work clothes, so called *tsunagi*’.”¹³

What are the implications of replacing the *apron*—so closely and symbolically linked with feminine housewifery in Japan, even in its late elegant “happy housewife” version (Goldstein-Gidoni 2017)—with the so called masculine *tsunagi* ? Lee and Lee (2018:56) suggest that SAHF

do not simply trade gendered roles with their spouse or partner. They rather “recast traditional masculine values in their efforts to primarily construct new masculine identities that align with and support their caregiving roles and experiences.” In this article, I aimed to show that Japanese househusbands do not only reorganize their masculine identities. In fact, through the dynamic and creative process of crafting their alternative identity as househusbands, they *challenge* conventional understandings of both masculinity and femininity, and thus they are involved in a process of *undoing gender*.

“Undoing Gender” was suggested by Deutsch (2007) to refer to social interactions that *reduce* gender difference, distinguishing these from social interactions that *do gender* by reproducing gender difference (West and Zimmerman 1987). Risman (2009:83) added another criterion for identifying undoing gender, suggesting that it might be “when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is *challenged*.” The doing/undoing gender perspective emerges from a constructionist perspective that regards the interactional level as a site of change. As emphasized by Deutsch (2007:108), if gender is indeed constructed, then it can also be deconstructed. Deutsch thus highlights the “revolutionary potential of human agency” to challenge and potentially change gendered institutions. However, focusing on the interactional level does not imply forsaking the structural level. As Ortner (2006:134) correctly reminds us, “agency” is “always a part of a process that Giddens (1979) calls structuration, the making and remaking of larger social and cultural formations.”

In the Introduction to this article, I suggested that Japanese househusbands affirm their new identity as “self-reliant househusbands” through relating to and differentiating themselves from three *gendered* symbolic others: the *ikumen*, the *sarariiman*, and the dedicated housewife (*sengyō shufu*). Focusing on the crafting of the “househusband” identity, the article illuminates how this

dynamic and proactive process involves both personal and public references, negations and borrowings from these three strongly culturally embedded gendered identities. I suggest placing this process within the perspective of *undoing gender*. Through this process, the men, as active social agents, challenge strongly culturally embedded gender distinctions and thus “resist and/or potentially undo hegemonic gender relations of work and family similarly to SAHF in other countries” (Medved, 2016:16).

The men involved in the process of crafting the new identity of (male) *shufu*, members of *Shufu no Tomo* in particular, but also other househusbands whose narrations and experiences were discussed in this article, should be taken to be “conscious” in the sense of being at least partially “knowing subjects,” self-aware and reflexive (Ortner 2005:45). This sense of “knowing,” as Giddens sees it, certainly does not mean that as social subjects, they are not fully culturally and structurally produced. However, it implies that as “knowing subjects” who have “agency,” they can sometimes act against the structures that made them.

My suggestion is thus that we take seriously *Shufu no Tomo*’s call for a “proactive” (*shutai-teki*) definition of men who share child and house care. The article has explored the experiences, struggles and strongly-held ideological positions of men who were found to be wholly aware of the structures that formed their social and gendered identities; the same structures that they sought to “totally demolish,” as suggested by Taizō, one the founders and a leading voice of the association. The alternative proactive identity which they aim to craft for themselves and as a message for others, does not only come to replace the “hegemonic masculinity” of the “corporate warrior.” It is more generally set against larger social and gender structures, mainly those which emerged in the postwar stable period of economic growth and stability. Namely, the “postwar Japanese family system,” (Ochiai 1996) and its allied “corporate gender contract,” which has

metaphorically and in fact structurally connected the male breadwinner, the dependent wife (usually in the role of a full-time housewife), the corporate sector, and the Japanese State (Goldstein-Gidoni 2019a), resulting in the strongly culturally embedded social “premise” of “Men [at] work, women [at] home” (Yagi 2009:103).

Focusing on a group of men who proactively seek change, I, just like Deutsch (2007), Risman (2009), Medved (2015; 2016), and others who have adopted the perspective of *undoing gender*, certainly do not suggest that we ignore the persistence of gender inequality. The obvious obstacles which men like Shūichi, Jōji, Shō and others, who have chosen to publicly reveal their househusband identity, have had to face, indicate the tenacity of well-accepted gender divisions. In fact, the voices of wives of these changing men, shed yet another significant light on such barriers on the path to their desired change. During their joint interview, Emiko, Hajime’s 32-year-old wife, who enjoyed the freedom of keeping a busy working schedule as he willingly took the main responsibility of home and childcare, clearly elucidated what others had hinted at more subtly: “Now the whole society is so nice to fathers doing childcare, but very harsh to mothers who are not doing childcare.” In his illustrated narrative of the story of his “different” family, Sugiyama describes this same harsh experience of “working mothers” like his wife, picturing the criticism that they have to face as “a bed of nails.” Nevertheless, my aim in this article follows the plea made by Deutsch (2007:114), “that we shift our inquiry about ongoing social interactions to focus on change.” Like Deutsch, I do not have the answers; but I do believe in posing new questions relating to change, all the while maintaining a critical perspective.

Concluding her extended study of Canadian couples “who in their daily practices as parents explicitly contravene” dominant gender expectations, Ranson (2010:173) suggests that these couples “have the potential to change, over time, the nature of those expectations.” Like Ranson,

I am aware of the limits of a small, and in this case in fact mainly middle-class group, to “legitimately be viewed as representatives of a change in gender relations” (2012:746). However, like Ranson (2010, 2012), I not only take seriously the constructionist approach to gender, I also join a perspective of change in gender relations that is not an upheaval, but rather a “slow dripping” change that is occurring in individual households as suggested by Sullivan (2004, 2006). The question of general change was not at the center of this article. Nevertheless, I propose that as the Japanese men and fathers who I study *craft* their “househusband” identity, they are involved in a process of *undoing gender*. Moreover, I have emphasized that ideologically, and especially with regard to the core members of *Shufu no Tomo*, these men were committed to larger structural change than the individual one they experienced. Will others, who may follow after them, find their “going against the grain” smoother, as suggested by Ranson (2010:182)? As a prediction, it may not only extend beyond the scope and goals of the ethnographic study offered here, but may also be too optimistic.

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Notes

1. In the case of those research participants who have appeared in public media, like Shūichi, or those whose books about their experience as househusbands I have cited, I decided to use their real names. These two are Jōji (Sugiyama) and Taizō (Horikomi); in both cases, I received their consent for this. Elsewhere, I have used pseudonyms.
2. For a discussion of the “housewife debate,” see Goldstein-Gidoni (2012: 44-49).
3. <http://www.ikumenclub.com/> , accessed 11/03/2020.
4. Interestingly enough, “work-style-reform” has been recently described as getting a “much-needed boost” with the Corona crisis—at its peak as these lines are written—a boost which has been regarded as “one welcome by-product of this crisis.” Moreover, a specific focus has been put on “fathers [who] will be able to spend more time participating in child care” (Editorial, Japan Times, March 5, 2020). <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/03/05/editorials/use-coronavirus-crisis-promote-teleworking/#.XmiYJqgzY2w>
5. “Secret Society Shufu no Tomo”’s website <http://xn--tiq99x.com/about>, accessed 11/03/2020.
6. <http://xn--tiq99x.com/about>, accessed 11/03/2020.
7. <http://xn--tiq99x.com/about>, accessed 11/03/2020.
8. “Air combat” is a term commonly used in Japan in relation to mass advertising. The terminology of war is also commonplace with sales promotions in stores, which are frequently called “ground war” (Fujisaki 2017).
9. <https://sukusuku.tokyo-np.co.jp/family/7274/>, accessed 11/03/2020.
10. A full description of the event, including the citations, appeared in <https://papimami.jp/56205/>, accessed 11/03/2020.

11. Taizō, a graduate of the prestigious University of Tokyo, worked as an engineer with a major automobile maker until circumstances related to his wife's career made him decide to ask for a long childcare leave. Subsequently, he quit his job because his wife needed to extend her overseas research position. He published an account of his experience as a Tokyo University graduate househusband in a book (Horikomi, 2012).
12. The collapse of the Lehman Brothers in 2008 led to a major dip in the Japanese economy, commonly referred to as the "Lehman shock."
13. <https://www.makuake.com/project/papanotsunagi/>; <https://switch-kosodate.com/papa/post-6490>, accessed 11/03/2020.