

Discourses of Anticipatory Futures Among Contemporary Japanese Younger Adults

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which younger adults in contemporary Japan discursively articulate possible futures under continuing conditions of socioeconomic precarity and marginalization (Brinton 2010), emphasizing how anticipation (Bryant and Knight, 2019) of *antei* 'stable' and *fuantei* 'unstable' futures organizes younger adults' perceptions of future possibility and of successful futures. Anticipation and anticipatory futures highlight the ways in which individuals' discourses of past and present social conditions delimit future possibilities, rendering the future as a realized present and foreclosing the possibility of imagining futures that diverge from the present. Data includes casual conversations recorded during extended ethnographic fieldwork with students at a public university in Yokohama, Japan; the current paper focuses on casual conversations with students at various stages of *shuushoku katsudoo* 'job hunting activities' and tracks these individuals interactionally conveyed alignments with respect to successful future work life. While describing successful lives as those that can endure (Povinelli, 2011) into the future, younger adults articulate the dangers of desire, which is to say of futures that are based on *yume* 'dreams' and *yaritai koto* 'things I want to do'.

For younger adults such desires are perceived as leading to failure and to the exhaustion of life. This paper demonstrates how younger adults respond to economic neoliberalization through the management of risk.

Keywords

Japan, Anticipation, Precarity, Job Hunting, Youth

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Introduction

This paper examines the ways in which younger adults in contemporary Japan discursively articulate possible futures under continuing conditions of socioeconomic precarity and marginalization (Brinton, 2010), emphasizing how anticipation (Bryant and Knight, 2019) of stable and unstable futures organizes younger adults’ perceptions of future possibility. Analysis of the ways in which anticipatory future orientations are conveyed, characterized and constructed has attracted significant attention in recent years (Adams, Murphy and Clarke, 2009; Bennett, 1976; Bryant, 2016; Choi, 2015; Hastrup, 2005; Hermez, 2012; Mattingly, 2019; Molé, 2010; Poli, 2014; Stephen, 2019; Stephen and Flaherty, 2019), frequently building on philosophies of temporality, durativity, and the characteristics of existence and subjectivity (see for example Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1964).

The anticipatory futures that I focus on here can be understood as forms of future-directed orientations that incorporate “the sense of thrusting or pressing forward, where the past is called upon in this movement toward the future” (Bryant and Knight, 2019: 28). Anticipatory futures highlight the ways in which individuals’ discourses of past and present social conditions delimit future possibilities, rendering some futures as realized presents.

The Japanese context that is the focus of this paper offers a unique vantage point for considering these futures since the question of the future and whether a future is at all possible or even desirable is under significant debate. Younger Japanese adults are coming of age in a Japan that is marked by decades of asset deflation and the neoliberalization of employment laws that have made it easier for firms to hire *hiseishain* ‘non-regular, contract workers’, who are doing the same jobs as *seishain* ‘regular salaried workers’ but are denied core benefits including substantial year-end bonuses and retirement funds (Allison, 2013; Brinton, 2010; Genda, 2005; Honda and Tsutsui, 2009; Kosugi, 2007; Toivonen, 2013; Yamada, 2015). These benefits constitute a replacement for the kind of public-funded social services that are seen as the backbone of social welfare states (Suzuki et al., 2010) and without them younger adults are marginalized from once taken for granted social practices such as home ownership, marriage, and family creation (Yamada, 2015).

Related to this rapid shift in core social practice, the subjectivities of younger adults in Japan are also very different to that of their parents, who were the last generation to be hired under conditions of (seemingly boundless) economic growth and began their working lives at the tail end of the so-called Japanese bubble period of the 1980s (McCormack, 1996). Thus, in contrast to their parents’ experiences of inflation in stock and real estate values, younger adults have no memory of Japan prior to the bursting of the asset bubble and its resulting states of continuing asset and wage deflation. This generational gap in expectations regarding what counts as a good life was explored in Furuichi’s (2011) study of the ‘happy young people of an unhappy nation’, and is summed up by the actor Takeru Satoh, one of Furuichi’s interviewees.

(1)

Ima no jidai wa “ippaku futsuka de tomodachi to Chiba ni baabekyuu ni iku shiawase” [...] Betsu ni Sakamoto Ryooma mitai ni Ishin no kaze o fukasetai wake de mo naku, kuni no tame ni shinda eiyuu to agameraretai wake de mo nai. Sonna hiroizumu de wa nakute, [Takeru] Satoo ni totte taisetuna no wa “ippaku futsuka de tomodachi to Chiba ni baabekyuu ni iku to iu chiisana shiawase na no da. Satoo no shoochoo

sareru yoo ni, wakamono ni hiromatteiru no wa, motto mijika na hitobito to no kankee ya, chiisana shiawase o taisetsu ni suru kachikan de aru. “Kyoo yori mo ashita ga yoku naru” nante omowanai. Nihon keezai no saisei nante koto wa onegawanai. Kakumei wo nozomu wake de mo nai. Seijuku shita gendai no shakai ni, fusawashii ikigata to itte mo ii.

The present period is “the happiness of going to Chiba with friends for a one night/two day barbeque.” We don’t really want to be like Sakamoto Ryooma and blow in the wind of the Meiji Restoration and be revered as a hero who died for the nation. Rather than this kind of heroism, according to [Takeru] Satoo what is important is “the happiness of going to Chiba with friends for a one night/two day barbeque.” As symbolized in Takeru Satoo’s words, what is becoming popular with young people are values like the relationships with people close to one and the importance of small happinesses. We don’t think things like “tomorrow will be better than today.” They don’t hope for things like the re-birth of the Japanese economy. They also don’t wish for a revolution. One could say that [for them] this is the appropriate way of life, here in the present developed [Japanese] society.” (Furuichi, 2011: 13, translation my own)

In emphasizing strategies such as *mijika na hitobito to no kankee* ‘relationships with people who are close to one’ and *chiisana shiawase* ‘small happiness(es)’ as possibilities for managing the difficulties of life in contemporary Japanese society, Furuichi adopts a perspective also taken by influential Japanese sociologists such as Shinji Miyadai (1993). Miyadai championed the construct of *owarinaki nichijoo* ‘never-ending everyday life’, which he originally used to describe the alignments and practices of younger Japan women during the deflationary, socially unsettled Lost Decade of the 1990s, when Japanese asset and stock prices were in free fall, unemployment and under employment among younger adults skyrocketed, and horrific acts of violence by younger adults were read as emblematic of a nation in decline and disarray.

What distinguishes Furuichi’s reading of younger adults is his insistence, highlighted in the quote above, on their *koofuku* ‘happiness’—the title of Furuichi’s text is *Zetsuboo no kuni no koofuku na wakamonotachi* ‘The happy young people of a hopeless nation’. For Furuichi, futures grounded in *kakumei* ‘revolution’ and *Nihon keezai no saisei* ‘the re-birth of the Japanese economy’ are not the loci of *nozomu* ‘hop[ing]’ and *negau* ‘desir[ing]/wish[ing]’. Rather, the future is located in the ordinary and quotidian present, as articulated in *ippaku futsuka de tomodachi to Chiba ni baabekyuu ni iku shiawase* ‘the happiness of going to Chiba with friends for a one night/two-day barbeque’.

However, for many younger adults even the *chiisana shiawase* ‘small happiness’ that Furuichi and his interviewee Takeru Satoh describe cannot be taken for granted. For them, the quotidian and ordinary do not articulate futures that contain the possibility of alternatives, but are rather sites of loss of once taken for granted lifeways. Younger adults like Ryusei (2), a second-year university student at the public university that is the field-site of this study, are poised to enter the job market but interpret ordinary life and ordinary practice, which were once understood as paths to ordinary *shiawase* ‘happiness’ as sites of risk, pregnant with the possibility that *umaku ikanai* ‘[things] won’t work out’.

(2)

Context: Ryusei discusses the difference between his parents' generation and his own

Ryusei; *ima made nihon oya no sedai wa ma futsuu ni futsuu ni sureba futsuu ni shiawase ni nareru tte iu kankaku ga moshikashitara atta no kamo shirenai kedo ima wa futsuu ni shitete mo umaku ikanai koto ga aru imeeji*

Until now [in] Japan, well, as for the parents' generation, ordinarily, as long as you did things *futsuu ni* [ordinarily] *futsuu ni* [ordinarily], there was maybe a sense that you would be *futsuu ni* [ordinarily] happy, but as for now, even if you do things *futsuu ni* [ordinarily], there is an image that things won't work out.

Articulating *futsuu* 'ordinar[iness]' as structuring both the desired form of life and the manner of its achievement, Ryusei situates successful futures as those that are in some ways continuations of the present—'ordinary' practice leading to 'ordinary' happiness. At the same time, Ryusei describes the extent to which such ordinariness is increasingly unattainable and in this way is emblematic of societal shift and increased precarity. For younger adults like Ryusei, *futsuu ni shiawase nareru* 'becoming ordinarily happy' is potentially unachievable.

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Looking more closely at the ways in which younger adults like Ryusei discursively project and imagine available futures, this paper uses data from a long-term ethnography of younger Japanese adults at a mid-high academic level university in the suburbs of Yokohama City and focuses on the ways in which the discourses of *antei* 'stability', *funatei* 'instability', and *yaritai koto* 'things I want to do' structure talk of the future, highlighting how younger adults convey narratives of anticipatory futures and locate dreams and desires as potential sites of risk. While the current analysis focuses narrowly on Japan, it is worth noting that conditions in Japan closely resemble those in many other socioeconomic contexts and as such the findings of this paper can contribute to broader understandings of the ways in which contemporary younger adults imagine and project possible futures.

1. Literature Review: Narratives of a future-less future in Japan

In focusing on how younger adults convey and interpret possible futures (both successful and unsuccessful), this paper considers the relationship between the abstract (broad social forces) and the particular (specific interactional moments). In this, it joins a wide body of research that uses natural conversation and attends to and highlights individuals' shifts, stances, and alignments within and across interactions and the ways in which individuals reference, negotiate, contest and/or align with broader social norms and discourses (see for example Bucholtz, 2003, 2010; Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, 2005; Du Bois, 2007; Irvine and Gal, 2000; Matsumoto, 2002, 2004; Ochs, 1991, 1993).

The analysis of this paper is also inspired by Bryant and Knight's (2019) reading of future-oriented imaginings alongside a range of work in the linguistics and anthropology of anticipatory subjectivities, practices and temporalities (Adams, Murphy and Clarke, 2009;

Bennett, 1976; Bryant, 2016; Choi, 2015; Hastrup, 2005; Hermez, 2012; Mattingly, 2019; Molé, 2010; Poli, 2014; Stephen, 2019; Stephen and Flaherty, 2019). Most pertinent for the present analysis, Bryant and Knight locate distinctions between forms of future-thinking as dependent on the ways in which the past becomes the ground for imagining a future horizon. In this matrix, an anticipatory future is one in which the present and past push into the future, restricting the possibility of alternatives to present conditions. Bound by the limitations of the present, anticipatory futures are thus not hope-ful, since hope requires the ability to project positive alternatives to present circumstances, imagining that things might be otherwise.

Such a state of hope-lessness, along with dissolution and unravelling, dominates narratives of life in contemporary Japan, where seemingly stable and unchanging rhythms of daily life obscure structural instabilities and dampen the impetus for social change (Armstrong, 2016). These narratives of futureless disintegration and precarity have been chronicled in contemporary media, such as the novels of Tomoyuki Hoshino, and have also provided inspiration for insightful anthropological accounts (Allison, 2013). Notably, Hoshino's *Ronrii Haatsu Kiraa* 'Lonely Hearts Killer' describes a Japan where ordinary life intermingles with urban horror (Huang, 2020)—Tokyo is covered in yellow sand, individuals fall into inscrutable depressions, children are metaphorically crushed by the weight of the elderly, and suicide is seen as a recognition that the nation is already dead (Hoshino, 2004).

These narratives are rooted in the continuing precarity that has marked contemporary Japan since the collapse of the 1980s asset bubble, with diverse effects rippling across multiple planes of social life. Younger adults are coming of age at a time when more and more individuals are cut off from so-called *seishain* 'regular, full-time worker' jobs and are employed as contract workers (Brinton, 2010). As a result of the relaxation of labor laws and the neoliberalization of the labor market, it is estimated that over 30% of workers are now engaged as contract workers or *hiseishain* 'non-regular, non-fulltime workers' (Yamada, 2015). Economists argue that even recent developments such as the 2018 'Work Style Reform Law' *Hataraki Kaikaku*, which includes language that is meant to ensure that *hiseishain* 'non-regular workers' and *seishain* 'regular workers' earn equal pay for the work that they do, merely allow corporations to cut benefits and pay for permanent *seishain* 'regular workers' (Okutsu and Sugiura, 2018).

Of course, conditions of neoliberal precarity and attendant interpretation of futures as full of risk are not confined to Japan. A range of contemporary accounts (Berlant, 2011; Lorey, 2015; Povinelli, 2011) highlight the potential for future-directed optimism to be a site of cruelty (Berlant, 2011), interrogating the ways in which the quotidian and ordinary can be a form of endurance (Povinelli, 2011) in which once taken for granted future-oriented subjectivities are interpreted as lost (Lear, 2008). For Berlant, optimism is 'cruel' when it consists of "maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (Berlant, 2011: 24), when the attachment to a dream or imagining is "actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011: 1). While Berlant is relatively pessimistic about the possibilities of 'optimism', at one point suggesting that all optimism might be cruel, there are hints at ways of living life that are, in their own way, optimistic. These lifeways are not grand and are marked by a kind of instability—they do not contain easy trajectories towards futures, but a "more sustainable optimism" that foregrounds "politically affective immediacy" (Berlant, 2011: 262). This notion of positive futures also finds some parallels in Povinelli's (2011) account of the forms of endurance that are possible for individuals who are marginalized from standard life practices, for whom the horizons of life are already "detached" (Povinelli, 2011: 263). Considering practices as diverse as augmented reality projects in the Northern Territories of Australia and alternative food movements in the United States, Povinelli tracks the ways in which individuals

endure, where enduring is understood as “striv[ing] [...] to persevere” (Povinelli, 2011: 9). In enduring, these individuals do not engage in fantasies of a good life, of a future dream horizon; their focus on endurance means that rather than “trying to become otherwise we are trying to be same, and this is enough for us” (Povinelli, 2011: 121). For Povinelli, endurance is defined as relational with respect to exhaustion and has a strongly temporal character, the “temporality of continuance, a denotation of continuous action without any reference to its beginning or end” (Povinelli, 2011: 32). In this way, endurance shares characteristics with anticipation, since both project the present into the future. Concurrently, ‘mere endurance’ contains a positive potentiality, allowing ‘at least’ for continuation of the present.

Attending to the ways in which the younger adults in this study consider and describe their futures, this paper asks how they narrate and imagine a good life, and why certain kinds of imaginations, such as those linked to *risoo* ‘ideal’ futures, seem to become loci of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011). The perceived regulation and delimitation of possible options are especially pertinent in the context of neoliberal economic policies since in spite of neoliberalism’s discourses of ‘freedom’—freedom of choice, freedom from regulation, freedom to engage in flexible work etc.—the actual availability of practices and lifeways creates radically imbalanced access to ‘freedom’ and strengthens existing inequalities (Harvey, 2005). Under this socioeconomic regime, which substantially reduces institutional requirements of care and tolerates increasingly stark inequalities and precarious work flexibilities, decisions about the future are often reconfigured in terms of risk. The management of the future is in some ways a management of the risks of failure and the attempt to ‘optimize’ the self and maximize the chances of a successful life. This management and its attendant temporality constitute the primary concern of the current paper.

2. Fieldwork Site: Documenting Precarity and Contemporary Japanese Futures

The Japanese university that constitutes the ethnographic field-site of this paper offers a unique perspective for thinking through ‘ordinary’ younger Japanese adults’ navigation of future possibilities. I use ‘ordinary’ here in the sense of the Japanese *futsuu* ‘ordinary’, where compounds such as *futsuu ningen* ‘ordinary person’ or *futsuu gakkoo* ‘ordinary school’ index alignments towards socially encoded expectations of normativity or standard. In the Japanese context, *futsuu ningen* ‘ordinary people’ are middle class, occupying a position that is neither subaltern nor elite. Ordinarity also involves participation in standard life practice—at the *gakusei* ‘student’ life stage this includes school clubs, part time jobs, and educational practice. Importantly, under conditions of continuing socioeconomic precarity, being *futsuu* ‘ordinary’ is not perceived negatively, but as its own kind of achievement.

Ichi City University (Ichi U.), the field site of this project, is located in the suburbs of Yokohama in the southern part of Tokyo Bay. Although nominally part of Yokohama City, the students of Ichi U. consider their university to be suburban since it takes roughly 30 minutes by express train to reach Yokohama Station and roughly an hour to reach Tokyo. Ichi U. is a mid-high academic level university and as a public university it has greater status than most private universities that rely on student tuition and therefore admit students with lower entrance exam scores. However, Ichi U. is not part of the top-tier of elite public universities and some students described the university as their *suberidome* ‘safety school’, one that they attended because they failed to get into their first choice of university. Others, meanwhile, had been admitted to elite level private universities, but ended up choosing Ichi U. because they could not afford private university tuition.

I began ethnographic research with Ichi U. students in 2014, including a 10-month period from 2017 – 2018. Students first got to know me either through teacher introductions or through flyers posted on the university campus. Over time, students introduced me to their peer networks and allowed me to participate in social gatherings, club practices, and other activities. I spent much of my time with Ichi U.'s nationally ranked cheerleading club and got to know students who had just begun or were planning on beginning the year long process of *shuushoku katsudoo* 'job hunting activities'. When I returned to Ichi U. in the Summer of 2019, many of the initial cheerleading club members had gone through job-hunting and had either been offered jobs or, after finding themselves unsuccessful on the job market, were considering whether to delay their graduation by a year and try again.

In previous work (Kroo, 2021) I used the term *discourse (re)-framing* to describe younger adults' apparent alignment with seemingly conservative discourses linked to marriage and work life and the ways in which these alignments concealed complex configurations of 'making do' (De Certeau, 1984) that emerged from the space of perceived available options and from the ways in which these options mapped onto differing levels of difficulty, risk, and potential for joy. However, this work was conducted with individuals who were still preparing for or who had just started *shuushoku katsudoo* 'job hunting practice', a time when the future was understood as full of diverse possibilities. In contrast, the present study considers what happens as the future horizon of 'adulthood' is slowly actualized into present reality and tracks how individuals, when confronted with different possible futures, decide on a particular path. This paper centers on interactions with present or former cheerleading members. I was present for all of these interactions.

The management of the future is important for Ichi U. students' discursively conveyed interpretations of future life. On the one hand, Ichi U. students attend a public university, one that required them to achieve relatively high scores on their entrance exams. Consonant with this, students claimed that 98% of Ichi U. students would engage in standard *shuushoku katsudoo* 'job hunting practice' aimed at getting a white-collar job. At the same time, recent work on *shuushoku katsudoo* 'job hunting practices' demonstrates a significant gap between top tier and second tier university students with respect to the number of job offers received as a ratio of total applications submitted, and the timing of students' first job offer (Kosugi, 2007). Kosugi (2007) describes how top tier university graduates receive on average more job offers total and also receive their first job offer earlier in the year-long job-hunting cycle than second tier university graduates. At the same time, there is less of a difference with respect to when the students accept a job offer. That is to say, top tier university students will be more likely to wait for a highly desirable job offer than their second-tier university peers, who are more likely to accept their first job offer.

All of the participants in the following interactions are young women. While gender is not explicit in these interactions it informs expectations and possibilities of desirable lifeways, including those related to economic sphere participation and marriage (Hidaka, 2014). Research (see for example Brinton, 2010; Hidaka, 2014; Kroo, 2021) has documented the ways in which young men are subject to strict expectations regarding work practice—for the students of Ichi U. this amounts to finding a full-time *sarariiman* 'salaryman, white collar worker' job—whereas women may leave full-time work after marriage. At the same time, previous research (Allison, 2013; Suzuki et al., 2010) has articulated the ways in which discourses of precarity cut across social categories (age, gender, geography, and socioeconomic status among them). Thus, while the following analysis focuses on a narrow subset of younger adults and

interactions, the negotiations and pressures depicted refract larger concerns and are in many ways representative of the broader practices and alignments of Ichi U. students including male students. For example, Ryusei, the second-year student from (2), had hoped to be able to work abroad but gave up on this *yume* ‘dream’ and chose a stable teaching career in the university area, an experience shared by other male students including those who had previously participated in study abroad. The findings are also consonant with research on the phenomenon of *uchimukishikoo* ‘inward looking’ Japanese (Burgess, 2015), which describes younger Japanese adults’ lack of interest in studying, working and living outside of Japan. They also shed light on analyses of younger adults’ supposed turn towards conservatism and relative laziness (lack of interest in dreams) compared to previous ‘hardworking’ generations (Yamada, 2015).

3. Analysis

3.1 Background on Precarious Futures

Younger adults in contemporary Japan appear to recognize that the horizons of future possibility that guided their parents are not available to them—they can no longer count on established *futsuu* ‘ordinary’ practices of marriage, full-time regular jobs and family making to structure lifeways. Indeed, even as many Ichi U. students consider that they are well-positioned to navigate the precarities of the contemporary Japanese job market, the sorts of jobs that these individuals aim for demonstrate their keen awareness of the risks that attend aiming for a *risoo* ‘ideal’ job in contrast to a *genjitsu* ‘reality [realistic]’ one. In (3) two female fourth year students, Kimiko and Sara have just discussed the difference between *risoo* ‘ideal’ and *genjitsu* ‘reality [realistic]’ jobs. *Genjitsu* jobs, such as those at CROs (Contract Research Organizations) are described by Kimiko as *ukari yasui* ‘easy to get’ (line 3) and thus she has decided to target those over *risoo* positions at *kagaku meekaa* ‘scientific instrument manufacturers’, which are more well known, but are also considered more competitive *ironna hito ga miru kara* ‘because they look at various people’ (line 4).

(3)

1 Kimiko; *kekko ippai tairyoo ni saiyoo shiteru kara*

Because they accept people in large quantities

2 Kimiko; *soko ni ima wa ukari yasui kara*

Because it’s easy to be accepted [for a job] there now

3 Kimiko; *soko ni uketete kagaku meekaa wa kekko*

I am getting [a job] there; scientific instruments are fine [in the sense of ‘I’m fine’ and by implication not what Kimiko is aiming for]

4 Kimiko; *ironna hito ga miru kara chotto*

Because they are looking at various people, it’s a little bit

5 Sara; *bairitsu ga takai kara*

Because the acceptance rate is high

In line 5, Sara sums up Kimiko’s rationale for considering CROs to be a better route for the future—*bairitsu ga takai kara* ‘because the acceptance rate is high’. That is to say, the desirability of a job is defined partially as the extent to which it is understood as achievable. In Kimiko and Sara’s discussion of successful jobs in (3), discourses of precarity, such as *which* jobs are obtainable structure the understanding of the future as well as the practices to which it

is linked, in this case which jobs Kimiko will apply to. Anticipation of precarity in advance of its emergence structures the future.

The following interactions incorporate these diverse threads, including the management of risk, the discursive imagination of and construction of possible futures as anticipatory, and the subsequent understanding of hopes, dreams, and desires as untenable. It is my thesis that the ‘ordinary’ younger adults who are the focus of this paper convey imaginaries of the future that do not misrecognize norms as desirable (Berlant, 2011). At the same time, horizons of the future are anticipatory in that alternatives to quotidian, recognizable presents are understood as dangerous and risky. There is thus neither a suspension of the difficulties of life, nor a cruel attachment to destructive possibilities. In this way, theirs are futures of endurance (Povinelli, 2011), understood as a continuation of existent lifeways.

The cheerleaders whose interactions are discussed below are all fourth-year students and the interactions were recorded in the course of casual excursions: (4) was recorded at a post-practice lunch; (5) at a coffee shop between classes; (6) and (7) during a day trip to the nearby town of Kamakura. Discourses of the future emerged organically as part of everyday talk about romantic life, classes, summer travel plans and so on. The interactions should thus be interpreted in the context of these younger adults’ choices with respect to economic futures, particularly jobs that diverge from previous imaginings of future life, and the ways in which they seemed to have given up on dreams, desires, and imaginings of alternative futures.

Yui, Kimiko, Maya, Sara, Anna and Kira have been friends since their first year of university and form the complete cohort of fourth-year cheerleaders. Anna appears most frequently—she is the captain of the cheerleading team and is an active participant in cheerleading outings and events. While Sara and Kira do not appear directly in the interactions below, their situation animates other interactions, notably (7) where Anna discusses Sara’s failure to get a job.

3.2 Antei and Fuantei

The interactions in (4) and (5) highlight the ways in which anticipatory futures emerge through systems of contrast. *Antei* ‘stability’ and *fuantei* ‘instability’ articulate and crystallize differing potentials for endurance, that is to say the temporal duration of the present into the future. In (4) Yui’s understanding of a successful future is one in which present instabilities are resolved into a future that is marked by certainty—by being able to project into the future. It is this ability to project the future from the present that I describe as ‘anticipatory’ and it is a future that is not ‘hopeful’ in that it does not imagine alternatives to the present, but rather one in which Yui *hayaku kimaritai desu* ‘wants it to be decided quickly’.

The interaction in (4) took place during the summer at a restaurant close to the university campus following a cheerleading practice. The fourth-year cheerleaders had begun *shuushoku katsudoo* the year before and now, with roughly eight months remaining until graduation next April, some of them were already *kimatta* ‘decided’, which is to say that they had received and decided on job offers. However, this was not uniformly the case—some individuals were in the middle of *shuukatsu* ‘job hunting’ and others were finding themselves rejected from all the jobs they had applied to and were contemplating delaying graduation by a year. In this moment, the question of the future acquired particular urgency as they confronted not only their own horizons of possibility but also the ways in which these horizons were mingled with the horizons of their peers.

(4)

1 Yui; *shitai to wa omowanai kedo, hayaku **antei shita** tokoro ni ikitai desu*

I don't think that I want to do it*, but I want to go to a stable [**antei shita**] place quickly

*here it refers to *shuukatsu* 'job hunting'

2 Yui; *nanka ima **fuantei** dakara e nanka futsuu ni daijoobu kana mitai na shinpai? shuukatsu hajimaru kara demo hayaku kimaritai desu moo*

Like because my position is now not stable [**fuantei**] now eh like it's like a worry of will it be ordinarily okay? because job hunting is starting but I want it to be decided quickly

3 Anna; *nanka sa ANNA mo hiki nobashitakatta kedo demo nanka sono nanka minna ga moo dooki ga owatteru no ni*

Like so Anna* also wanted to delay it but, but like that like even though everyone in the same class is already finished

*Use of one's own's name as a first-person marker is common among younger Japanese women

4 Anna; *jibun ga ima kara hajimaru no ga chotto nanka kanashikunai*

Isn't it like a little bit sad that one is starting from now

5 Anna; *nanka soo demo nai minna wa moo kimatte **antei shi tsutsu** aru no ni watashi wa ima kara kimenai to ikenai mitai na*

Like it's not really even though everyone is already in a state of decision and is stable [**antei shi tsutsu**] it's like I have to decide from now

6 Yui; [laugh] *nanka taihen soo da na::tte*

[laugh] Like it seems tough!

Across (4), Yui and Anna contrast two opposing states—present *fuantei* 'uncertainty' and an anticipated future *antei* 'stability'. In lines 1 and 2, Yui suggests that even though she doesn't personally want to do job hunting, she wants to enter into a place of stability, *antei shita tokoro* 'a stable place', *ima fuantei dakara* 'because [her place is] currently not stable', suggesting that *fuantei* is itself a site of risk and danger. In line 3 Anna follows up on Yui's sense of anticipatory *antei* 'stable' futures and adds that even though she (Anna) also wanted to delay job hunting, she couldn't because everyone around her already had finished, *hiki nobashitakatta kedo demo nanka sono nanka minna ga moo dooki ga owatteru no ni* '[Anna] wanted to delay it but, but like that like even though everyone in the same class is already finished'. In other words, she located herself as 'behind' and needed to catch up. In line 5 Anna articulates this further: *minna wa moo kimatte **antei shi tsutsu** aru no ni watashi wa ima kara kimenai to ikenai mitai na* 'everyone is already in a state of decision and is stable [**antei shi tsutsu**] it's like I have to decide from now'. For Anna, then, her peer's present state constructs and anticipates her own future state—everyone's present stability becomes the model for Anna's future. The successful future then is knowable and constructed through considerations of the present of one's peers.

In describing the future that Anna and Yui articulate in (4), I use the term successful rather than desirable. This is because Anna and Yui equivocate about whether this is truly a future that they 'want'. In line 1, Yui notes that *shitai to wa omowanai* 'I don't think that I want to do it', where it refers to *shuukatsu* 'job hunting'. Similarly, in line 3, Anna concurs: *ANNA mo hiki nobashitakatta kedo* 'Anna also wanted to delay it', again referring to *shuukatsu* 'job hunting'.

This equivocation of desire, of ‘wanting for things to be decided quickly’ *hayaku kimaritai desu* but not wanting to actually do job hunting (*shitai to wa omowanai* ‘I don’t think I want to do it’) is echoed in other individuals’ negotiation of the relationship between futures that are desired and those that seem possible.

Notably, while the relational discourses of *antei* ‘stability’ and *fuantei* ‘instability’ create categories that project what counts as a successful future, the risks that are understood as inherent to *fuantei* ‘instability’ itself delimit the horizons of younger adults’ possibilities. The interaction in (5) demonstrates how this takes place. In contrast to her peers, Kimiko spent a year in the United States as an international student. She was regarded by other cheerleaders with some jealousy since she had quickly mastered difficult tumbling combinations even though she had taken two years off from cheerleading (one year as an international student and one year because she couldn’t afford the cost of the cheerleading club). Kimiko stood out in other ways as well—for example, she had been living with her boyfriend, the only university student that I know of at Ichi U. to do so. The following conversation was recorded during a coffee outing with Kimiko, Anna and Maya in between classes and cheerleading practice. Kimiko described her desire to become a *jimu toreena* ‘gym trainer’, and her reasoning for why this desire was incompatible with a successful future. This interaction is quite long and the extracts in (5) were selected to allow the reader to follow the flow of Kimiko’s decision-making process.

(5)

1 Kimiko; *jimu toreenaa de ii*

It would be great to be a gym trainer

[9 lines deleted]

2 Kimiko; *dakara chotto nanka sentaku ga ne nanka semareru janai mirai ga*

So a little bit like choices become like narrow don’t they, the future

[1 line deleted]

3 Kimiko; *kyooshoku mo toreru shi taiiku oshietai kedo u::n demo maa*

I can get an educational job and I want to teach physical education but umm well

[3 lines deleted]

4 Kimiko; *dakara basuke bu no sensei wa imada ni ukattenakute*

Because the basketball teacher still hasn’t gotten a job

5 Anna; *e?*

eh?

6 Maya; *e::*

ehh

7 Kimiko; *juunen ijoo*

For more than ten years

8 Maya; [*hh*] *yabai yabai*

[*hh*] That’s dangerous, that’s dangerous

9 Kimiko; *fuantei sugiru*

It’s too unstable [fuantei]

10 Anna; *ikiru ki nai jan*

There’s no will to live

In (5), Kimiko’s offers a variety of reasons for setting aside her previous desire to become a gym trainer, where these reasons are linked to delimited and potentially destroyed futures. In line 2, Kimiko suggests that future choices are narrowed, *nanka sentaku ga ne nanka semareru janai mirai ga* ‘choices become like narrow don’t they, the future’. Becoming a gym trainer is reconfigured from the site of the possibility of an alternative future to a site of risk. Similarly, in lines 4 and 7, Kimiko links the possibilities of her own future to the present circumstances of the university’s basketball coach who hasn’t found a permanent job for over ten years: *basuke bu no sensei wa imada ni ukattenakute [...] juunen ijoo* ‘the basketball teacher still hasn’t gotten a job [...] for more than ten years’.

Kimiko’s reasoning in some ways resembles Anna and Yui’s structuring of their future horizons with respect their peers’ present states of *naitei* ‘receiving an unofficial job offer’. However, while Anna and Yui connect their peers’ present to a positively anticipated future, Kimiko’s interpretation of the basketball coach’s anticipatory future is negative—a future of economic adversity that has left the basketball coach without a stable job for *juunen ijoo* ‘more than ten years’. This future is thus *fuantei sugiru* ‘too unstable’ as Kimiko says in line 9. For her friend Anna, the instability is such that life itself is exhausted and *ikiru ki nai jan* ‘there’s no will to live’. Articulating *fuantei* as the loss of endurance suggests a future-less future, one in which even the present state of existing is extinguished. On this paradigm then, endurance might be categorized as a kind of successful future, one in which—regardless of the ways in which desire is understood as unachievable—life itself can continue.

3.3 Dreams of Security

For the younger adults who attend Ichi U. the discourse of *antei* ‘stability’ is also critical with respect to systems of value that are mobilized to distinguish companies and evaluate the possibility of *anzen* ‘safety’ with respect to future-oriented horizons. As in the previous examples, such safety is understood relationally through contrast—in this case, *anzen* ‘safety’ contrasts with *yume* ‘dreams’ or *yaritai koto* ‘things [I] want to do’. Such contrasts emerge particularly strongly in Anna’s talk about her present *shuukatsu* ‘job hunting’ practice during a weekend outing with me to the tourist town of Kamakura, roughly half an hour from the university campus by train. In (6) Anna suggests that futures that break from present circumstances are in a sense un-imaginable, that dreams are understood as the replication or endurance of present circumstances. This expression of the future was how Anna described her decision to forgo her desire at a start-up and focus instead on larger, established firms.

(6)

1 Anna; *soo Nihon watashi toka wa moo nanka shuukatsu yatte iku uchi ni dandan dandan nanka nan daro*

Right, Japan, as for me and stuff well like while I’m in process of doing *shuukatsu* gradually gradually like I wonder.

2 Anna; *ya- yaritai koto tte iu yori wa nanka kore o yaranai to ikenai tte iu kanji ni natte kichatte nanka [...]*

Rather than it being like things I wa- want to do [*yaritai koto*] like it’s totally come to be something like I have to do this like,

3 Anna; *dakara nanka sono nanka moo nanka hontoo no yume wa betsu ni atte mo, nanka shuushoku suru tokoro ga yume mitai na*

So, like, that, like, well, like, even if I particularly had a dream [*yume*], like it’s like my dream [*yume*] is a place where I get a job

4 Anna; *nanka moo kaeta kaeta kanji de un nanka ne gyookai burebure da to shuukatsu choo shizurai da yo ne nanka*

Like well, changing, changing is um like right, if you are inconsistent about the industry then it's extremely hard to do job hunting right, like

[2 lines deleted]

5 Anna; *mukashi kara no kaisha tte nanka sugoi **antei shiteru** shi nanka koo ochitsuite nanka sore nari ni shigoto shitokeba tabun **anzen** janai desuka?*

Longstanding companies are like totally stable [**antei shiteru**] and like in this way it's calm like in its own way if you can prepare a job then maybe it's secure/safe [**anzen**] isn't it

In line 2, Anna describes her present job-hunting as 'something I have to do': *yaritai koto tte iu yori wa nanka kore o yaranai to ikenai tte iu kanji ni natte kichatte nanka* 'Rather than it being like things I wa- want to do like it's totally come to be something like I have to do this like'. Job-hunting for Anna does not include the potential to find meaning through her job and is rather understood as an obligation *yananai to ikenai* 'I have to do'. In line 3 this sense of entering the future as a locus of obligation is expressed by replacement of *yume* 'dream(s)' with the things that 'I have to do': *hontoo no yume wa betsu ni atte mo, nanka shuushoku suru tokoro ga yume mitai na* 'even if I particularly had a dream, like it's like my dream is a place where I get a job'. For Anna, *yume* 'dream(s)', which might be considered as the space of the most desirable futures, are (re)-configured as the successful completion of the things that must be done. Put another way, *shukushoku* 'getting a job' is *yananai to ikenai kanji* 'something I have to do' and Anna's *yume* 'dream' is defined as her *shuushoku suru tokoro* 'the place where I [will] get a job'.

The other ways in which desirable futures are anticipatory is that they emphasize stability and suggest an unbroken continuation from the past. In line 5, Anna notes that *mukashi kara no kaisha tte nanka sugoi **antei shiteru** shi nanka koo ochitsuite nanka sore nari ni shigoto shitokeba tabun **anzen** janai desuka?* 'longstanding companies are like totally stable [**antei shiteru**] and like in this way it's calm like in its own way if you can prepare a job then maybe it's secure/safe [**anzen**] isn't it'. For Anna, stability is understood in much the way that Povinelli (2011) describes endurance—not only as the continuation of the past into the present, but as a projection of the present into the future. For Anna jobs at companies that can be trusted not to fall apart are *anzen* 'safe', where *antei* 'stability' and *anzen* 'safety' become their own form of dream. As noted above, Anna had previously wanted to work at a startup, but here she not only emphasizes stability and security as aspects of a successful future, but also contrasts them with being *burebure* 'blurry, inconsistent'. In line 4, Anna notes that being *burebure* makes job-hunting difficult: *burebure da to shuukatsu choo shizurai da yo ne* 'if you are *burebure* [inconsistent] about the industry then it's extremely hard to do job hunting right'. In this way, lack of consistency, understood here as 'changing' will create the conditions in which successful futures, themselves interpreted as bringing the present into the future, are denied.

3.4 The Risks of Desire

The previous interactions have alluded to younger adults’ interpretation of desire-able futures, *jibun no yaritai koto* ‘the things I want to do’, as full of risks that can lead to an exhaustion of living itself. In this section, I turn to the ways in which these risks are articulated in university students’ talk about and characterization of the failure of one of their peers to get a job. This interaction highlights the ways in which these younger adults perceive non-anticipatory futures, which are marked by the potential for alternatives to present conditions, as exhaustive and prone to failure.

In (7), Anna describes the plight of Sara, who had failed to get a job offer and was frantically applying to smaller companies to avoid having to repeat her senior year. I was surprised by Sara’s lack of success on the job market since I had found Sara to be outgoing, sociable and a very hard-working member of the team. Anna explained why Sara was without a job offer, articulating how it was a result of having ‘strong preferences’ *kodawari ga tsuyoi*.

(7)

1 Anna; *sugoi nandaroo nanka ano:: kodawari ga tsuyoi*

She’s totally what is it like that she has strong preferences [*kodawari ga tsuyoi*]

2 Researcher; *a:::*

Ahhh

3 Anna; *dakara dakara nanka shikamo kekko nanka koo makezu? makezu kirai ja nai kedo, ganko? de*

So so like moreover like losing? it’s not like she hates losing but is stubborn

4 Researcher; *a:::*

Ahhh

5 Anna; *dakara nanka ikitai tokoro ga kekko u::n amefutto toka ragubii toka moo sugoi koo iu tairyoku no arisoo na? otoko no hito bakkari ga atsumaru yoo na kaisha ni*

So like the places she wants to go are to companies where just guys who seem in this way totally to have physical strength are gathered umm American football and Rugby and stuff like that

6 Anna; *SARA wa ikitakute*

As for Sara she wants to go [to these kinds of places]

7 Researcher; *a:::*

Ah

[3 lines deleted]

11 Anna; *kodawari ga tsuyokute moo hokano tokoro zenzen ukenakatta n desu yo*

She has strong preferences [*kodawari ga tsuyokute*] so she wasn’t able to get into other places

12 Researcher; *o:::*

Ohhh

In (7), Anna details Sara’s failure to get a job in terms of not only *kodawari ga tsuyoi* ‘strong preferences’ (line 1) but also being *ganko* ‘stubborn’ (line 3) and of having too specific a desire

for a particular form of job, specifically a company where ‘are gathered only men who seem to have physical strength’ *tairyoku no arisoo na? otoko no hito bakkari ga atsumaru*. Sara, however, is quite physically short and small, and as Anna argues elsewhere, she doesn’t fit these kinds of companies that are full of ex-American football and rugby players. These ‘strong preferences’ also resulted in Sara not being able to receive any other job offers—*hokano tokoro zenzen ukenakatta n desu yo* ‘she wasn’t able to get into other places’ (line 11).

Sara’s desire proved to be risky not only because she wasn’t able to get a job at a company full of *tairyoku no arisoo na otoko no hito* ‘men who seem to have physical strength’ but indeed that she failed to get a job at *hokano tokoro* ‘other places’. That is to say, being desirous of a particular future means that Sara failed to construct and convey the self necessary to get any form of *seishain* ‘regular, full-time’ job. This line of reasoning—where desire is not only unfulfilled but actually precludes the attainment of other forms of socioeconomic practice—is suggestive of the extent to which these cheerleaders operate under a regime of risk management, one in which younger adults are actively required to construct ‘marketable’ selves and make themselves competitive to corporate entities. Students at Ichi U. talk openly about the necessity of *sukiru o migaite* ‘polishing skills’ and of the importance of creating selves that conform to office cultures, of performing a self that ‘is able to be friends’ *issho ni naka yoku irareru* (Kroo, 2021). Anna’s interpretation of Sara’s predicament complements these perceptions, articulating the dangers of desiring a job that does not align with the limits of a marketable self and the *ganko* ‘stubbornness’ of desire itself.

Conclusion

The analysis of this paper has argued for the ways in which younger adults’ understanding and interpretation of the precariousities of their daily lives structures their future-oriented alignments and practices. Contemporary Japanese younger adults’ entire experience of life has been marked by asset deflation, population decline, and narratives of national dissolution. Against this bleak backdrop, life practices that were once deemed *futsuu* ‘ordinary’ are being reinterpreted as aspirational, and anticipatory futures that emphasize *antei* ‘stability’, or the guarantee of the endurance and continuation of life itself, are understood as successful. Younger adults are also cognizant of and sensitive to the risks associated with alternative futures based on desires such as *yaritai koto* ‘things I want to do’, and *yume* ‘dreams’. Indeed, these risks situate younger adults’ understanding of their peers’ failures on the job market, which are interpreted as the result of having too many desires.

The results of this paper contribute to the broader theorization of contemporary younger adults’ responses to future oriented precarity and inequality. The conditions found in Japan resemble those in many other global contexts. This paper suggests that these future orientations are multi-directional and relational—younger adults interpret the fields possibilities through comparison with their peers and with the adult lifeways that they see around them. At the same time, these younger adults’ conveyed futures are suggestive of complex alignments towards neoliberal ideologies according to which individuals are made responsible for constructing a market-able self even as the profits of this construction primarily accrue in corporations and thus reinforce younger adults’ socioeconomic marginalization (Yamada, 2015). Younger adults like Kimiko frame work as something that they do *ikiru tame ni* ‘in order to live’, rejecting the link between identity and work. Others like Anna explicitly demarcate work life from dreams and desires, framing successful futures as those that provide *antei* ‘stability’, i.e. the possibility of endurance into the future. These findings offer a new perspective on recent work that has emphasized the ways in which neoliberalism controls individuals through discourses of self-making and

freedom (Han, 2017). While Han (2017) argues that the pressures of neoliberalism render individuals incapable of dissent, the examples considered here suggest potential paths of resistance. Namely, even as they recognize the imperatives to make oneself acceptable to corporate entities and are keenly aware of the risks involved in failing to do so, these younger adults seem to be trying to draw distinctions between their private self (the locus of desires and dreams) and their participation in the working world.

While the cheerleaders’ articulation of successful futures was almost always structured around the management of risk and the assurance that life can endure without exhaustion, two of the cheerleaders Kira and Sara, made the decision to get a job based on *yaritai koto* ‘the things I want to do’. Sara failed, and her failure was used as evidence by other cheerleaders of the dangers of desire. Kira, who never participated in social activities outside of practice, received a job offer from her dream company, but turned it down after considering the lifestyle and work hours associated with this *yume* ‘dream’ job. At the same time, Kira was also one of the few students to receive multiple job offers. It is perhaps the case that exposure to alternative futures—after all Kira must actively choose one future from among several—changes the calculus through which futures are understood as more or less desirable. In this way, the availability of options might create the conditions for imagining alternatives that diverge from the present and help to legitimate desire itself. Further research will consider these forms of future imagining. Notably these younger adults’ structuring of desire also appears to reject ideologies of self-construction through labor, suggesting that desire can co-exist with a rejection of neoliberal imperatives.

In the forgoing I analyzed these future-oriented imaginings in the context of Povinelli’s concepts of exhaustion and endurance, in particular the ways in which they lend focus to how “new possibilities of life are able to maintain their force of existence in specific organizations of social space” (Povinelli, 2011: 9). For the younger Japanese adults that are the focus of this paper, endurance frequently looks like “trying to be the same” (Povinelli, 2011: 121), which is to say trying to find a way to survive and continue into the future.

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