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Between state and family: managers' implementation and evaluation of parental leave policies in Japan

Mary C. Brinton[1,*] and Eunmi Mun[2]

[1]Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA, and [2]Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Amherst College, Amherst, MA, USA

*Correspondence: brinton@wjh.harvard.edu

Abstract

Work–family policies have been widely adopted in post-industrial societies. This paper brings the organizational level into the analysis of work–family policy effects on female employees. We theorize that managers' evaluation of female employees' use of parental leave is shaped not only by policy content, but also by labour market structure and the dominant cultural model of household gender relations. Using Japan as a case study, we analyse in-depth interviews with human resource managers in 25 large firms and show that managers' implementation of parental leave and their evaluation of leave-takers occur within the context of norms about ideal employee behaviour in firm-internal labour markets and about the gendered division of care work. These conflicting norms produce managerial expectations that can only be met by a small number of women. The article contributes to theory and research on work–family policies and female employment outcomes in two ways: by demonstrating the critical role of managers, and by showing how labour market structure and associated work norms together with the dominant cultural understanding of household gender relations act as filters through which managers construct their evaluations of employees who take leave.

Key words: firms, Japan, social policy, women, state

JEL classification: J13 Demographic economics: childcare, J18 Demographic economics: public policy

1. Introduction

Women's labour force participation patterns have changed dramatically in post-industrial societies in the past several decades. The increase in the labour force participation of mothers has been particularly dramatic, with many countries experiencing an upswing in

the number of women who remain in the labour force after childbirth (Stier *et al.*, 2001; Pettit and Hook, 2005). Mothers' greater propensity to remain in the labour force can be traced to women's higher educational attainment, greater normative acceptance of working mothers and state policies designed to facilitate work–family balance. A large literature on the welfare state analyses the macro-level political and cultural influences on the design of policies related to parents' employment and the care of children (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Morgan, 2008; Ciccia and Verloo, 2012). This literature convincingly argues that underlying models of household gender relations, involving the assumption of a male-breadwinner or dual-earner household, influence *policy formation* (Lewis, 1992; Pfau-Effinger, 2005). At the other end of the methodological spectrum, labour economists and sociologists have used individual-level survey data to analyse the *impact of parental leave* and other work–family policies on women's labour force participation (Ruhm, 1998; Jaumotte, 2003; Pettit and Hook, 2005), wages (Ruhm, 1998; Stier *et al.*, 2001; Mandel and Semyonov, 2005), representation in managerial roles (Mandel and Semyonov, 2005), career trajectories (Joesch, 1997; Waldfogel, 1998; Albrecht *et al.*, 1999; Hofferth and Curtin, 2006; Boushey, 2011; Goldin and Katz, 2011) and fertility (Büttner and Lutz, 1990; Sleebos, 2003; Gauthier, 2007; Neyer and Andersson, 2008).

This article argues that a large gap remains in our understanding of how work–family policies, once formulated at the state level, are implemented and interpreted at the level of the firm. Attention to the organizational level in comparative studies of work–family policy effects is crucial because employees' use of policies is conditioned by corporate managers' policy implementation and their evaluation of policy users'—especially mothers'—'worth' in the workplace. While sociological research on work–family policies often implicitly references managers' and supervisors' attitudes, these actors are rarely the focus of empirical investigation. What forces shape managers' perceptions of the purposes of work–family policies and their evaluation of the employees who use them? Addressing this gap in the literature can generate a clearer understanding of the conditions under which work–family policies either facilitate or deter women's labour force participation and career progress.

We utilize the case of Japan to theorize how *policy content* interacts with *labour market context and household gender relations* to shape managerial expectations of work–family policies and the employees who use them. Japan is a particularly interesting case. Despite the Japanese government's concerted policy efforts to support women's dual roles as workers and as mothers, existing policies have met with very limited success to date. Ironically, Japanese women's quit rate at childbirth remains close to 60 per cent (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012; Yashiro, 2011)—far higher than in most post-industrial societies—despite two decades of increasingly aggressive work–family policy promotion by the government. Analysis of how labour market context and the normative model of household gender relations influence the implementation and evaluation of work–family policies at the firm level can illuminate not only the Japanese case but also can contribute more generally to the theoretical understanding of how state-level work–family policies are mediated by the organizational level.

In the first part of the article, we describe the development of Japanese work–family policies with particular attention to parental leave, locating the content of Japan's leave policies within a larger comparative context. We then theorize how these policies are interpreted by managers within the context of internal labour markets (ILMs) and highly gendered norms of caregiving.

Our empirical data are drawn from in-depth interviews with human resource (HR) managers in 25 large Japanese firms across a range of industries. Contrary to our expectation, we find that the strong majority of managers express enthusiasm regarding parental leave policies, seeing them as a means through which to recruit and retain high-quality female labour. However, further analysis of the data reveals deep ambivalence and concern on managers' part towards female employees who have used parental leave. This ambivalence is rooted in managers' reference to the ideal worker within a firm-ILM, which they conceptualize as an employee who puts company above family and willingly spends almost unlimited 'face time' with his/her employer and colleagues. Rather than expressly ruling out women's potential as committed workers within the firm-ILMs characteristic of large Japanese firms, managers voice frustration that women are unwilling or unable to behave according to the norms implicit in such markets. At the same time, embedded in managers' discourse is their implicit belief that parental leave is a women's issue rather than an issue that also concerns men. This evidences their adherence to a competing set of norms prescribing that women hold primary responsibility for caregiving in the family.

Based on our findings, we expect that the number of women able to take advantage of Japan's generous parental leave policy and establish successful careers is likely to continue to be relatively small until the workplace context and household gender-role norms undergo more significant change. We conclude with broader theoretical implications for the study of work–family policies and their effects on women across post-industrial contexts with varied labour market structures and family models.

2. Japanese parental leave policies in comparative context

In the past few decades, the Japanese welfare state has joined European countries in implementing extensive work–family policies. Japan's recent efforts represent a break from its previous welfare regime, which had relied heavily on a male breadwinner–female caregiver model where women were encouraged to prioritize care for children and the elderly over wage-earning. Esping-Andersen aptly describes the institutional design of Japan's welfare state as 'Japanese style corporatism' (1997, p. 184), whereby a familialistic ideology is supported by company-provided benefits to long-term male employees. This model has prioritized women's domestic role and implied only a peripheral role for them in the labour market (Osawa, 2002; Peng, 2012).

Spurred by what came to be known as the '1.57 shock' in 1989, referring to the lowest fertility rate ever recorded in the country, the Japanese government initiated a series of aggressive work–family policies in the 1990s to motivate couples to have at least two children. The government targeted expansion of the public day-care system and also encouraged companies to provide longer parental leave.[1] The 1992 Childcare Leave Act specified that in addition to the legally mandated right of women to request up to 14 weeks of maternity leave (generally 6 weeks before childbirth and 8 weeks afterwards) with at least 60% wage replacement, employers should 'strive' to provide an additional leave of up to 1 year for either the mother or the

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1   Despite well-intentioned efforts to increase the number of spaces in public childcare for preschool-aged children, Japan ranked last among 33 countries in public childcare availability in 2003 (Fuwa and Cohen, 2007). While Japanese public childcare is of high quality, supply is highly uneven across geographical areas (Schoppa, 2006).

father, with wage replacement set at 40%. A portion of leave pay is paid while the employee is on leave and the remaining amount is paid 6 months after the employee's return to the workplace. Subsequent revisions of the Act in 1999 and 2005 require that firms offer parental leave until a child is 1½ years old if public childcare is not available and that they also offer one of the following: reduced work hours, flextime, a guarantee of no overtime work, childcare in the workplace or flexibility in the starting or ending time of the workday for the employed parent up until the child's third birthday. In 2002, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare also initiated the 'Plus One Proposal to End the Low Birthrate' (euphemistically known as the 'Plus One' programme) to encourage companies to develop action plans to support the 'development of the next generation'. The government prohibits employers from discriminating against employees who take leave, offers a small subsidy (~US$ 8500) to companies that develop proactive measures to implement childcare leave and requests that companies allow workers to refuse overtime work in excess of a set number of hours (Boling, 2007).[2] In response to government pressure, about 60% of Japanese companies had instituted a childcare leave system by 2007 (Atsumi, 2007), a percentage that is considerably higher among firms with at least 1000 employees (Takeishi, 2007). Parental leave is legally available only to full-time workers.

Japan's work–family policies have been designed by the country's powerful bureaucracy, which is heavily influenced by the corporate sector and by major employer associations (Weathers, 2005). The government's laser-like focus on encouraging companies to help women remain in the labour force after marrying and having children (Boling, 2008) has translated into encouragement of ever-longer childcare leaves for female employees in the hope that this will promote their simultaneous labour force attachment and reproduction of the next generation. Ironically, though, the nature of Japan's parental leave policies consists of three features—long parental leaves, partial rather than full wage replacement and the assumption that parental leave is a women's issue—identified in the European welfare-state literature as having a dampening effect on mother's continuous full-time labour force participation.

2.1 Long parental leave

Empirical studies generally converge on the finding that long parental leaves taken exclusively by women tend to reinforce gender inequality (Morgan and Zippel, 2003; Waldfogel, 2001; Galtry and Callister, 2005; Bergmann, 2008; Evertsson and Duvander, 2010; Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011). In their review of European policies, Hegewisch and Gornick point out that 'in all countries longer leaves are associated with [wage] penalties' (2011, p. 125). Bergmann (2008), Waldfogel (2001) and others articulate a range of mechanisms that might account for this. Employers may interpret a woman's lengthy parental leave as a signal of her low commitment to the workplace; this view can easily translate into statistical discrimination against mothers or women in general. Such discrimination can occur at any stage of the employment process including hiring, training, promotion and compensation. Moreover, longer parental leaves can weaken women's attachment to the labour force and eventuate in a shift from full-time to part-time work, producing negative wage consequences.

Long parental leaves can also impact the gendered division of labour at home, reinforcing the centrality of mothers for children's care. Mothers' exclusive focus on the home and

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2   Throughout the article, we use the terms childcare leave and parental leave interchangeably.

childrearing during long parental leaves can solidify the existing gendered division of labour in households, both in care work and in housework. In their analysis of the relationship between housework and social policy in 33 countries, Fuwa and Cohen (2007) find that the household division of labour is slightly more egalitarian in countries with long parental leaves but that the positive effect of wife's full-time employment on a more equitable household division of labour is weaker in such countries. This leads them to conclude that 'parental leave policy may actually weaken the housework bargaining power women get from full-time employment, by helping to maintain women's primary role as mothers even when they are employed' (2007, p. 528). A larger share of housework can further reinforce gender inequality in the labour market by burdening women with a heavy 'second shift,' to borrow from Hochschild's classic work on the gendered division of labour (2012).

2.2 Wage replacement levels

A low level of wage replacement for employees who take parental leave, as is the case in Japan, can also dampen mothers' labour force attachment. A number of male breadwinner societies such as Austria, the Czech Republic and France grant only unpaid parental leave (Ciccia and Verloo, 2012). Unpaid leave or low wage replacement tilts the balance in favour of reifying women's primary caregiving role and possibly incentivizing mothers' transition to part-time employment or their withdrawal from the labour market altogether during the childbearing years. Moreover, a low level of wage replacement coupled with the gender wage gap means that it is generally less costly for a household to lose the mother's earnings while she is on leave rather than to forego the father's earnings if he were to take leave.[3]

2.3 Men's use of parental leave

Finally, countries vary on whether the ideology underlying the design of parental leave and other work–family policies espouses a male-breadwinner model or a dual earner–dual care-giver model (Morgan, 2008). Sweden is well-known as the first country to have adopted paid parental leave that either parent can take, initiating this policy in the mid-1970s (Sundström and Stafford, 1992). But Swedish fathers utilized an average of only 2% of the total leave days taken by a couple in the 1970s. With the subsequent adoption of a 'use it or lose it' policy specifying that a couples' total allocation of leave is reduced if the father does not utilize any of it, their usage increased and by 2004 Swedish men utilized close to 20% of all leave days taken by the average couple (Morgan, 2008). Swedish women's labour force participation is heavily concentrated in part-time work, but employment among mothers of children under age 3 is one of the highest among OECD countries (www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database).

In sum, European studies suggest that long parental leaves, unpaid leave or leave with only partial wage replacement and norms that support only mothers as leave-takers constitute dimensions of parental leave policy that tend to encourage a traditional gendered division of

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3 Recent German efforts have tried to change the incentives offered by parental leaves (Morgan and Zippel, 2003; Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Facing very low fertility and a cultural context that prioritizes a male breadwinning–female caregiving model, Germany has reformed family policy in the direction of a model that presumes the universality of paid work for all adults, despite the relative tenacity of conservative gender-role ideology. These reforms are geared principally towards making work and family more compatible for women so as to boost the country's low fertility rate.

labour and may discourage women's continuous labour force participation, particularly their full-time employment. The development of parental leave policy in Japan has resulted in precisely this constellation of features. We turn now to hypothesize how the content of leave policies is likely to interact with labour market context and gender norms to affect employers' evaluation of employees who use leave policy.

3. Labour market structure, workplace norms and gender-role norms

Despite the large body of research on the origins and structure of parental leave policy in post-industrial societies and especially across Europe, very little research examines how labour market structure and the accompanying expectations within work organizations influence how leave-takers are evaluated. Nevertheless, scholars of work–family policy have increasingly called attention to the importance of studying how national variation in cultural and organizational context affects employees' exercise of their rights and managers' subsequent evaluation of employees (Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Fahlén, 2014; Hobson, 2014; Mun and Brinton, 2015). A few studies have focused on male employees' difficulties in exercising their right to take parental leave, even in political contexts such as Sweden that are characterized by a strong egalitarian ideology (Haas *et al.*, 2002; Haas and Rostgaard, 2011). For instance, Bygren and Duvander (2006) demonstrate that Swedish men's workplace conditions significantly influence their probability of taking leave.[4] The influence of organizational context on men's parental leave-taking in a case as ideologically egalitarian as Sweden suggests the power of workplace norms in shaping employees' perception that leave-taking may signal lower work commitment.

We predict that norms of high work commitment are likely to be even stronger in a labour market context such as Japan's, which has been dominated by the logic of firm-ILMs. Despite recessionary strains, Japan's employment system has continued to prioritize job protection for 'core' workers in the ILMs of large firms (Yashiro, 2011; Osawa *et al.*, 2013). This job protection is based on the assumption that the most valued employees are those who develop firm-specific skills, willingly work long hours, accept short- and long-term transfers that may involve family separation and work in uninterrupted fashion for the firm over a long period of time (Rebick, 2005; Moriguchi and Ono, 2006; Shuto, 2009; Yashiro, 2011). The absence of a fully developed external labour market in Japan means that opportunities for interfirm mobility are rare (Osawa *et al.*, 2013).

Given a weak external labour market, Japanese employees fortunate enough to have positions in firm-ILMs do not feel highly empowered to refuse overtime hours or to exercise their right to vacation days (Takahashi *et al.*, 2014). Informal norms in Japanese white-collar workplaces prescribe that employees should not leave work before their boss or their colleagues in the same section (Roberts, 2005; Imai, 2011; Takahashi *et al.*, 2014). Long work hours and an emphasis on face time are coupled with near-compulsory participation in after-hours socializing, although some studies suggest that younger Japanese men are increasingly trying to counter these norms (Taga, 2011). In sum, the image of the 'ideal worker' in Japan has been

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4   In their study of first-time fathers in Stockholm in the late 1990s, they found that men working in the private sector, in small companies, and in more male-dominated workplaces were less likely to take parental leave than other fathers. Moreover, there appeared to be an influence of other male workers' choices: a new father was more likely to take leave if other men in his workplace had recently done so.

one of undiluted commitment to the workplace, an image that is only possible to fulfil if the worker devotes minimal time to housework and care responsibilities. This ideal-worker image is intricately related to the fact that the 'best' jobs continue to be located in firm-ILMs, giving employers considerable leverage in setting the norms for employee behaviour.

Under these labour market circumstances, it is not surprising that the idea of taking parental leave is highly non-normative in Japan—so much so that very few men even consider the possibility (Takahashi *et al.*, 2014). A recent poll conducted by the Japan Management Association shows that support for work–life balance ranks in last place as a priority of managers (Sato, 2012). Rates of parental leave uptake by Japanese men remain extremely low (less than 1%; Sakai, 2007), and men who do consider taking leave are likely to limit it to several days or 1 week (Takahashi *et al.*, 2014).

In order to maintain job security for employees in ILMs, large Japanese firms also hire a large number of workers into non-career track positions with few benefits and little wage growth with years of experience. This creates a needed buffer against economic downturns, as these workers do not have the implicit employment guarantee that core workers enjoy (Moriguchi and Ono, 2006). The system of career-track (core) and non-career track positions has been nearly completely sex-segregated (Lam, 1992; Brinton, 1993; Ogasawara, 1998; Roberts, 2005; Yu, 2009). Women have typically been expected to be sojourners in the world of work, the underlying assumption being that they are only capable of fully devoting themselves to the workplace while they are single (Brinton, 1993, 2001; Ogasawara, 1998; Schoppa, 2006; Ochiai and Molony, 2009; Yu, 2009).

It would nevertheless be a mistake to view gender segregation in large Japanese firms as static over time. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law in the mid-1980s made it formally illegal for employers to explicitly label jobs as 'male' or 'female' and to engage in sex-specific recruitment for jobs. While the original law had little effect (Abe, 2013; Mun, 2015), it has since undergone successive revisions and Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare data indicate that women now constitute just under 20% of career-track hires. While this figure may seem low (especially in light of the fact that women make up 90% of non-promotional track hires), it constitutes a change from the nearly complete exclusion of women from ILM jobs in prior decades. As women have gradually entered the career track, the ways that managers implement and evaluate women's use of work–family policies have become critical in creating a more level playing field with their male counterparts.

However, the ILM structure of large Japanese firms and the demands placed on career-track workers operate in conjunction with strong gender norms prescribing that women hold primary responsibility for housework and childcare. Indeed, national and international surveys consistently demonstrate that Japan has the most gendered division of household labour of any post-industrial country (Fuwa, 2004; Fuwa and Cohen, 2007; Knudsen and Wærness, 2008; North, 2009). Depending on the particular survey, Japanese married women spend between 3 and 10 times as many hours per week on household labour and childcare as Japanese married men, a ratio that remains very high even when studies are restricted to dual-career couples. In a recent comparative study of the work–family interface, Ruppanner and Huffman (2014) find that low proportions of Japanese men report experiencing either non-work–work conflict or work–non-work conflict. In fact, Japan is the only case among the 31 countries studied where women report experiencing significantly more of each type of conflict than men. This highlights the fact that Japanese men experience a nearly complete separation of the spheres of work and family.

In sum, the labour market structure within which work–family policies have been imposed by the Japanese government operates in tandem with a highly gendered division of labour, representing what some scholars have termed a 'male breadwinner work time regime' (Mutari and Figart, 2001). As Takahashi et al. state, '. . . the emergence of WLB [work life balance]-related policies, including leave arrangements and reduction of working hours, has not altered the core of the social structure premised upon the gender logic that defines "men as earners and women as caretakers"' (2014, p. 92). A much higher proportion (31%) of individuals in Japan agree with the male breadwinner–female career model than in all European countries except those in Eastern Europe (Fahlén, 2014).

What then are the effects of these norms on Japanese career-track employees who take parental leave? Kato et al. (2013) used detailed personnel records over a 20-year period from a large Japanese corporation to examine leave usage and its career effects. Among the 1022 female employees in the company, nearly 30% had taken parental leave. Consistent with European research, Kato et al. found that women who take parental leave of 6 months or less do not experience a wage or promotion penalty, but those who take a longer parental leave or have more than one child experience a significant wage penalty and significantly lower chances of promotion. Moreover, Kato et al. found female employees' promotional probability to be much more highly correlated than men's with the number of hours they worked in the preceding year. This mirrors American research arguing that women in competitive white-collar workplaces need to exert great effort to signal their commitment (Blair-Loy, 2003; Turco, 2010; Cha and Weeden, 2014) and are subject to penalties from using some work–family policies (Glass, 2004).

The structure of the labour market and accompanying workplace and gender norms lead to several hypotheses about how Japanese managers might be expected to implement parental leave policies and evaluate the employees who use them. We frame these expectations within the context of Japanese government encouragement of women's use of ever-longer leaves, based on the government's logic that this will facilitate their return to work. We hypothesize that Japanese managers will generally not express enthusiasm vis-à-vis the implementation of parental leave policies and will discourage both male and female employees from utilizing parental leave. Managers' discouragement of female leave-taking is likely to be especially strong for women who are in career-track positions in ILMs, as the company is investing in their on-the-job training and expecting high productivity in return. Furthermore, we predict that managers will expect employees who utilize parental leave to minimize their time away from the workplace.

With these expectations in mind, we turn now to original qualitative data to examine how Japanese HR managers' implementation and interpretation of employees' parental leave-taking is conditioned by ideal-worker norms in ILMs and the 'natural' gendered division of caregiving labour.

4. The role of Japanese HR managers in policy implementation and employee evaluation

Our empirical data come from interviews with Japanese HR managers. HR managers are highly salient actors in the implementation and evaluation of parental leave policies in Japanese companies. First, they are almost always 'homegrown', staying within the same company over many years. They therefore tend to strongly identify with the interests of

their own company (Jacoby, 2005; Hirano, 2013). Second, HR is one of the most powerful departments in Japanese companies, exerting considerable influence in the corporate decision-making process. HR managers have traditionally held primary responsibility for constructing and managing the ILM system so heavily praised as an engine of Japan's rapid economic growth during the post-WWII period (Jacoby, 2005). ILMs are thought to increase employee productivity by guaranteeing long-term employment and encouraging employees to develop firm-specific skills, and HR managers plan and manage the within-firm career development of employees (Aoki, 1990; Moriguchi and Ono, 2006). An indicator of HR managers' influence is that Japanese CEOs (who often have engineering or marketing backgrounds) generally turn to HR managers to consult on employment-related issues, and many Japanese companies have board members whose functional background is in HR (Olcott, 2009; Hirano, 2013). HR managers thus not only implement work–family policies 'on the ground' but are influential in shaping corporate decision-makers' attitudes towards such policies.

Another important role of HR managers is that they are instrumental in the diffusion of policies across companies. Major Japanese companies monitor the policies adopted by other companies and often try to imitate them in order not to be left behind, a tendency denoted by the term *yokonarabi* in Japanese (Olcott, 2009). HR managers are central actors in this process, collecting information about new employment policies by attending seminars organized by business associations and HR research institutes and by reading professional HR journals. Through these activities, HR managers develop shared understandings of the purpose of new employment practices (Mun, 2015). HR managers in large, well-known companies are particularly likely to be aware of new employment policies, as they have the greatest access to seminars and workshops outside their own company. In our interviews (described in the following section), all HR managers said that they were aware of the work–family policies adopted by peer companies and had attended multiple workshops organized by HR research institutes in order to learn about new work–family policies and determine the policies most relevant to their own companies.

5. Methods

5.1 Data collection

Our data come from semi-structured interviews conducted with HR managers in 25 large Japanese companies based in Tokyo. To qualify for the study, companies had to be privately owned, highly visible, and have an HR department. Visibility was an important criterion for the study because as stated above, the policies of well-known companies tend to be studied and imitated by other companies. HR managers in such companies are likely to have shared understandings of work–family policies among companies in their respective industry. Moreover, these companies are under the greatest pressure to adopt government-mandated policies. All of the companies in our sample are well-known in their respective industry. The smallest company employs 300 full-time workers, and the largest one employs over 30 000 workers. The selected companies are highly visible within Japan, and it is likely that any relatively well-educated Japanese adult would recognize their names.

We gained access to companies through contacts we established with two research institutes, one in Japan and the other in the USA. These institutes organize short-term certificate programmes, workshops and seminars for use by large Japanese companies to train their managers. The two institutes are neither formally nor informally related to each other, but their

company lists have some overlap because several very large companies send managers to both institutes. In our selection of companies from these lists, we strove for industry variation. Our sample includes companies from finance, manufacturing, professional services and retail services (see Supplementary Material, Appendix A). About half of our final list of companies was drawn from each research institute's list, respectively. Contacts at the research institutes provided company introductions, which were critical for our research because of the difficulty in gaining access to large Japanese companies without a personal introduction.[5]

Although the sample is not representative of a particular universe of companies, it includes large companies that exert influence in their respective industries as leading players who create and promote new corporate practices. In addition, the sampled companies each have a highly gendered workforce characteristic of large private companies in Japan. Women are underrepresented in managerial positions in these firms, with the proportion of female managers ranging from 0 to 20%. According to a 2006 survey of companies with 300 or more full-time employees conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, the average proportion of female managers is 8.4%, with nearly 40% of large companies having none at all (Kawaguchi, 2013). Only two companies in our sample had a female board member. Indeed, only 10% of publicly traded Japanese companies have at least one woman holding either a senior executive position or board member position (Tōyōkeizai Shinpōsha, 2012). These similarities between the companies in our sample and in national establishment surveys give us confidence that the HR managers we interviewed are likely to have perceptions about work–family policies that are commonly shared by managers in large private companies in Japan.

5.2 Analytic process

To understand how work–family policies are implemented and interpreted at the organizational level, we conducted two rounds of interviews. In the first round, we gathered general information about employment practices and the firm's response to the government's promotion of work–family initiatives. The second round of interviews focused more specifically on HR managers' perceptions of employees' use of work–family policies. In the first round, we interviewed HR managers in 20 companies (see Supplementary Material, Appendix A). These interviews were conducted in 2009 and lasted an average of 1 hour. The interview was semistructured (First Round Interview, Supplementary Material, Appendix B) and was designed to elicit information about two sets of issues: (a) general employment practices such as payment and evaluation systems, and (b) how the company responded to the implementation and revision of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and successive government mandates for firms to implement work–family policies such as childcare leave and flexible work hours.

The first round of interviews provided a general picture of HR policies especially as they relate to women and also produced two surprising initial findings on which we subsequently followed up: (a) nearly all HR managers stated that their companies 'voluntarily' provide very generous work–family policies, with many offering longer maternity and childcare leaves than mandated by law and wage replacement rates that are higher than what the government specifies; (b) HR managers emphasized that their company wants to recruit and utilize more women in full-time career-track positions and expressed the opinion that generous

5   Only one of the companies we contacted declined our request to interview one or more managers from the company.

work–family policies are instrumental in this effort. These viewpoints, which we heard consistently across the first-round interviews, were unanticipated and generally inconsistent with our expectations. We did not anticipate that managers would express enthusiasm over the necessity that their company have a parental leave policy, nor did we expect them to be enthusiastic about long leaves, especially for women in career-track positions.

Based on our reading and rereading of the first-round interviews, we sensed that the gap between companies' provision of generous leave policies and only modest improvement in women's status in the workplace might be due to corporate managers' interpretation of policy goals and their consequent evaluation of female leave-takers' ability to maintain the behaviours of the ideal worker while also tending to their role as new mothers. This led us to conduct a second round of interviews designed to probe in more detail managers' perceptions of the utility of parental leave policy in the workplace and their views on how employees should handle parental leave and the subsequent return to full-time work.

The second round of interviews was conducted in 2013 with HR managers in 10 large companies. We selected 5 of these companies from the original 20 firms where we had conducted first-round interviews, choosing specific companies because of their extensive work–family policies and our ability to gain access to the head of the taskforce (generally called the 'taskforce for diversity promotion') in charge of work–family policy implementation. We then selected five additional companies in industries other than those represented by the five companies from the first round. All 10 companies in the second round are among the three largest companies in their respective industries (such as pharmaceuticals, steel, publishing, development of on-line games and food and beverage manufacturing and distribution; see Supplementary Material, Appendix A). Because our first-round interviews did not reveal patterns by industry, we chose not to focus on one particular industry or to make comparisons across a particular set of industries in the second round. Rather, we chose to continue to have a broad distribution of large companies across industries.

All interviews were conducted in Japanese by one of the authors. Although the interviewer is fluent in Japanese, her status as a foreigner proved useful because it allowed her to ask HR managers to explain things they may consider taken-for-granted among Japanese people. Managers tried to provide detailed explanations because they were unsure of her familiarity with Japanese corporate culture. With the exception of three interviews that were conducted in coffee houses, interviews took place in the office building where the managers worked. A few of the interviews in the first round were not recorded due to the interviewee's request. All interviews in the second round were recorded and transcribed.

In the analysis that follows, we draw particularly on materials from the second round of interviews. Having found that the first-round interviews did not support our initial hypotheses, we used the second-round interviews to gain additional knowledge that would help us develop a richer understanding. As Supplementary Material, Appendix B indicates, the second-round interview included questions regarding when and why the company adopted work–family policies and who within the company had proposed them. HR managers were asked to explain how they are implementing the policies, whether and how they advertise them, how well employees seem to be informed about the policies, how many employees have utilized them and which employees have returned to the workplace after taking parental leave and what their experiences seem to have been. We inquired about the goals envisioned by the company in implementing and promoting the policies, HR managers' perceptions of the

policy costs and benefits, their definition of a 'successful' outcome of the policies and any concerns they have.

Both first- and second-round interviews were semi-structured. Both authors' prior interviewing experiences in Japan indicate that especially when Japanese individuals who represent formal organizations such as companies or schools are going to be interviewed by a foreigner, they generally feel more comfortable if they know beforehand the topics that will be covered. Seeing well-worded questions in print in Japanese also assures interviewees that the interviewer can understand Japanese and that there will not be serious communication issues that would make the interview awkward and uncomfortable. Therefore, after being granted an appointment to interview HR managers, we sent a list of interview questions and topics to the company. The interviews themselves followed a semi-structured format so that we could cover the themes addressed in the questions but also allow interviewees to elaborate and give examples of the points they were making. In the case of the second-round interviews, we made sure to cover eight specific questions (Supplementary Material, Appendix B) in the course of the interview even if the natural flow of the interview did not lead the conversation into those questions.

We used the second-round interview transcripts to develop codes in relation to managers' level of encouragement/discouragement to employees (especially female career-track employees) with regard to parental leave and length of leave. Successive rounds of coding focused on the identification of patterns of reasoning offered by managers and the consistencies or contradictions across each manager's answers. We also looked for patterns by industry and by the sex of the managers. In the second round, we interviewed a total of 15 HR managers, of whom 9 were female and 6 were male. Six interviews were conducted with female managers only, two were conducted with at least one manager of each sex present, and two were conducted with male managers only. Narratives were similar across industries, and none of the HR managers made reference to industry characteristics. We also found very similar narratives about work–family policies regardless of the sex of the manager, with the exception of additional comments by a few female managers that we explain below.

6. Results

As indicated above, two unexpected themes emerged with respect to work–family policies in the first-round interviews. Both of these themes relate to our original expectation that managers would be generally unenthusiastic about the implementation of work–family policies in their firm.

First, it became clear that the majority of HR managers consider their company's policies to be indicative of efforts towards *voluntary improvement*, independent of government pressure. This is not to say that managers did not reference the government at all. Rather, most asserted that they would have tried to promote work–family policies even without government promotion of them. All managers spent considerable time explaining changes their company had made, such as providing generous work–family policies, opening up career-track jobs to women and establishing diversity offices. The creation of corporate social responsibility and diversity offices was emphasized as evidence of the 'voluntariness' companies showed in making improvements in the direction of greater gender equality and work–family balance. No managers stated that their company was unhappy about the government's passage of work–family initiatives and laws.

While it is possible that the HR managers we interviewed were attempting to be diplomatic in order not to give the interviewer a negative impression about the company, they went to considerable lengths to describe the process through which their company had initially adopted generous work–family policies. A prominent reason referred to by nearly all managers was *yokonarabi*, mentioned earlier in the article. This term was defined by an HR manager at a company in the food industry as 'companies following other companies in the same industry or famous/large companies in Japan'. Managers emphasized that rather than trying to achieve the legally stated policy goals, their company endeavours to match or exceed the benefits provided by peer companies. For this reason, many companies provide benefits that are more generous than the legal mandate.

The second unexpected finding from the first-round interviews was the degree to which HR managers expressed interest in better utilizing female labour. With the exception of HR managers we interviewed in a large construction company (who stated their view that women tend to have a hard time supervising blue-collar workers), managers emphasized the importance of utilizing female labour better than in the past. Some managers further explained that they needed to learn more about female employees' needs and be able to meet them because there would be a labour shortage in the near future due to Japan's past few decades of very low fertility. In line with the first theme of 'voluntary improvement', managers often spoke of the company [or the CEO] 'deciding' to utilize more female labour. Interestingly, however, many managers admitted that their efforts to date to increase the number of women in career-track jobs and in managerial positions have been unsuccessful. We did not detect any consensus as to why they had failed, but it was clear that managers perceived that their company had tried. The narrative of an HR manager at a large insurance company is telling: '[The company] tries to be conscious about diversity and wants to better utilize female labour, but the reality is that those women who want to work like men (*dansei to onaji yō ni hatarakitai josei*) self-select into foreign companies.' Managers' assertion that companies want to hire women and see them advance was unexpected and shaped our design of the second round of interviews to probe what shaped managers' perceptions about how work–family policies could enhance women's careers and company productivity.

Before turning to the key themes that emerged particularly strongly in the second-round interviews, we note that the interview process itself revealed the highly gendered assumptions held by managers. Given the very low number of female managers in Japan, it was striking that slightly over 40% of the HR managers interviewed in the first round were women. Even more remarkable, though, is that 70% of the interviewees in the second round were women. We suspect that two processes were at play in skewing the gender composition of the HR managers we interviewed. First, it gradually became clear to us that many managers seemed to feel that since the interviewer in the research project was a woman, it was appropriate for the interviewee to also be a female. For instance, one of the male HR department heads interviewed for the project came to the interview with a female HR manager even though she was not the person in charge of work–family issues; he stated that he had brought her along because he knew the interviewer was a woman. Similarly, a male HR manager who did not bring a female manager with him to the interview made a point of apologizing that he had not been able to do so because there are none in his company. Second, relative to other tasks it is more likely that female managers are assigned the job of managing work–family benefits within the HR department. When scheduling the second round of interviews, we made it clear that our purpose was to learn more about the

implementation and effects of work–family policies. The fact that these issues are handled by a larger number of female HR managers than other employment issues and that work–family issues in the Japanese context are interpreted as applying to women undoubtedly led to managers' selection of female HR managers as interviewees.

We identified three overarching themes in managers' discussion of the implementation and usage of work–life policies. First, in both the first- and second-round interviews, it was very apparent that managers implicitly assume work–family policies to pertain only to female employees. When asked about the purpose of providing work–family policies, all managers answered that the policies are designed to enable women to return to the firm after having a baby. One female manager added another interpretation, arguing that leave-taking is women's right; this was clearly a minority view but is nevertheless a highly gendered one in that it was not suggested that parental leave is also men's right. Parental leave is not viewed by Japanese managers as a mechanism through which male employees can share in the responsibilities of active parenthood by taking leave; rather, women are to continue bearing primary responsibility for the family while they work full-time due to the availability of parental leave. In this way, managers' responses indicate the cultural taken-for-grantedness in Japan of the gendered division of labour at home and the pervasiveness of a gender-essentialist view with respect to who should perform the primary nurturing role in the family.

The second emergent theme is that parental leave policies are viewed as a key element in the company's strategy to recruit and retain talented female labour. Parental leave is regarded as a way for employers to accommodate and fully utilize female employees for company productivity. In this sense, managers' implementation and evaluation of parental leave is based strongly on the business case for it. Policies are viewed primarily as an adaptation to the fact that women are an increasingly valuable source of labour and that it is therefore costly to the company if they quit when they become pregnant. This interpretation was emphasized by all interviewees. A subset of managers also mentioned that the policies were adopted to obtain external legitimacy for the company, and they defined legitimacy as important for the company's ability to attract talented women.

Third, managers voice a frank desire for employees to prioritize company needs over family responsibilities. In this way, managers' view of the *ideal worker* underlies their reactions to how female employees utilize company policies. A number of managers question female employees' ability and willingness to adhere to ideal-worker norms. In voicing this anxiety, they express doubt as to whether work–family policies will indeed increase employee productivity and efficiency. We therefore see a sense of tension between managers' *desire to believe* in the business case for work–family policies and their *uncertainty* that the business case will be substantiated by female employees' behaviour. This tension can be traced to their assumption that the business case is not based on employee satisfaction but on the employee's ability to be an 'ideal worker' in the traditional mould. In the Japanese corporate context, this means sacrificing time with family to be at the workplace. In the second round of interviews, managers in 7 of the 10 companies explicitly discussed long working hours as prevalent in their companies and related it to widespread scepticism about the feasibility of work–family policies. Managers in the other three companies made a point of mentioning that employee evaluation is not based on the number of hours worked. At the same time, they mentioned that employees tend to regularly stay late at work (until 8 PM, or sometimes until midnight). This indicates the prevalence of long working hours as a deeply ingrained norm. While both male and female managers considered women to be personally liable if

they do not increase their productivity, most of the female managers expressed sympathy for female leave-takers. In particular, two female managers expressed the view that parental leave policies are a failure due to managers' adherence to the ideal-worker framework.

We examine each of these three emergent themes in turn—parental leave as applying exclusively to female employees, parental leave as a method of recruiting and retaining women and of increasing their productivity and the image of the ideal worker as putting in long hours of face time and thus demonstrating the priority of company over family—drawing relevant examples from the interviews. In so doing, we demonstrate how managers' expectations and perceptions are filtered through the dominant work norms in firm-ILMs and the gendered norms of caregiving.

6.1 Parental leave as applicable only to female employees

Managers consistently discussed parental leave as a policy designed for use by female employees. At the same time, some managers alluded to government pressure on companies to demonstrate that at least some male employees do take leave. Indeed, in Kato *et al.*'s (2013) review of detailed personnel records over a 20-year period from a large Japanese corporation, only 0.2% of the firm's 8602 male employees had ever taken parental leave. The remarks of one of the female HR managers we interviewed are representative of managers who discussed the issue of fathers not taking leave:

> Most of the leave-takers are women, and the number of men who take leave is not really increasing —it is just one or two a year. But in order for the company to obtain the *kurumin* mark [a mark of recognition given by the government to companies considered to be 'family-friendly'], both male and female employees have to take childcare leave. The length of the leave does not matter, meaning that even one day of childcare leave is counted.

Ironically, this manager added, 'Therefore, a couple of male employees in our firm took a short childcare leave last year. Both of these men work in the HR department'. These comments demonstrate the extent to which parental leave is implicitly recognized as *maternal* leave. Consistent with our expectation, men are not encouraged to take parental leave, with the exception of the symbolic utility to the company if they do so. This evidences the taken-for-grantedness of women as the exclusive caregivers in Japanese families.

6.2 Recruitment and retention of talented women

All of the HR managers we interviewed said that they consider work–family policies to be a way for the company to recruit high-quality female employees. Many managers explicitly mentioned that the company would have to forego the recruitment of many highly talented workers if it did not recruit young women. An HR manager in a publishing company observed, 'When we see the test scores of job candidates, we are noticing that female applicants generally score higher than male applicants. So the HR department cannot help but think about diversity and female employees'. An HR manager at a large bank also commented on the appeal of work–life policies to job candidates: 'When we recruit new employees, new graduates compare the policies of different companies to each other. We do not want them to think, "This company provides only the legally-required level of benefits" or "this company doesn't seem to be good for women". We feel it is important to have generous policies in order to attract applicants'. Some managers report giving examples of 'success stories'

to job applicants, such as stories about female employees taking childcare leave and then coming back to work.

In addition to recruitment, the retention of female employees also emerged as a major theme in HR managers' explanation of companies' interest in implementing leave policies and promoting their use. Consistent with the logic of ILMs, managers mentioned that high turnover among female employees is costly because the company has invested in their training; the company's investment in leave policies is therefore efficient because it facilitates women's leave-taking and their return to the firm. The HR manager in a bank remarked that only 7% of new hires made by the bank in 2006 were women and that the new target is 30%. She continued, 'But we cannot ask new female employees not to have children. Since we want them to continue to work and to have careers while also having children, we need to construct policies to make that possible'. An HR manager in an IT company commented, 'The cost of work–family policies is pretty high. But hiring a new employee is even more costly. We want employees who understand the company to continue working here. If we grant parental leave, it is more likely that that will be the outcome'. In this way, managers' enthusiasm about work–family policies was linked to their belief that employees who develop firm-specific skills are valuable to the company and lead to higher productivity.

Recognizing the importance of retaining female employees, some companies are developing policies beyond parental leave in order to more comprehensively support female employees who become mothers. An HR manager at an IT company explained:

> The average age of our female employees is now 30. Five to six years ago, marriage and childbearing were rare among our female employees. But in recent years the occurrence of these life events has increased, so the company is making new policies. For example, a few months ago the company started a policy of subsidizing employees who hire babysitters when they come back to work. Also, if an employee comes back to work when her baby is under one year old, the company provides a subsidy to send the baby to a daycare center because it is so expensive. These are examples of policies the company voluntarily created that go beyond what the government has mandated.

In sum, the emergent theme of encouragement to career-track female employees for utilizing work–family policies contradicts our expectation that managers particularly discourage policy use by women in the career track. Managers' narratives reflect a keen understanding of Japan's declining supply of prime-age workers and their perception that highly educated young women are an underutilized resource. Not only do they express awareness that many young women are as qualified or more qualified than young men for career-track jobs, but they link what they perceive as female-friendly policies to the recruitment and retention of such women. Managers' intention that parental leave facilitates employee retention reflects the priority in firm-ILMs of reaping the benefits of on-the-job training investments in career-track employees.

6.3 Conceptualizing the 'ideal worker'

HR managers also express the hope that generous work–family policies will increase female employees' sense of commitment to the company. Commitment is conceptualized by managers in two principal ways: the wish to stay with the firm over many years, and the desire and ability to 'work hard', which some managers define as working whatever hours are required to get the job done. Common across all managers was the emphasis on parental leave as enabling a woman to return to concentrated and focused work, almost as if no life

event has occurred. But in framing parental leave as a means through which companies help women reaffirm their work commitment, managers expressed a mixture of views with respect to the appropriate length of leave.

Supporting our expectation that managers would encourage female employees to take short leaves, some managers expressed a preference for women to minimize their time away from the workplace. This view is consistent with the fact that it is rare for companies to hire extra labour to replace employees who are on parental leave. In their study of Japanese male and female employees with preschool-aged children, Takahashi et al. (2014) find that both sexes express fear of being a burden to their colleagues and causing 'inconvenience at the workplace' by using work–family policies (2014, p. 108). The managerial point of view on this is expressed by the following HR manager in our sample:

> The ideal way for women to use childcare leave policy is to take leave in order to make it easy to continue to work. The company wants employees to think about the best way to get back to work [when they take the leave]. So they should take a leave when they need it—while coordinating with their colleagues in the team, because their colleagues have to help out with their work. They should return to work as soon as possible when the situation that required a leave is resolved. There are situations that require leaves, such as when a family member is sick or when the mother cannot find a nursery for the child, and in such cases we encourage use of the leave policies. But employees have to think about the best way to continue to work. That is a promise between employees and the company.

In this formulation, family care is viewed as more of an 'event' than a fundamental change in an employee's life. As such, an employee's return to work is expected to naturally translate into the ability to focus better and work harder once the event is over. As another manager expressed it, 'Work–family policies, rather than decreasing performance, can help [female] employees concentrate better, which will lead to an increase in performance. . . . The merit of these policies is that the quality of work is likely to increase'.

But across our sample, a nearly equal proportion of managers expressed willingness for female employees to take long parental leaves (up to 3 years). These managers, when asked to describe a successful case of parental leave usage, articulated the idea that female employees would take maternity and childcare leave and subsequently be able to concentrate well on work due to the fact that their child would be older. This interpretation of work–life balance is based on the idea that long childcare leave 'solves' the problem of women having a dual focus on work and family, as if childcare concerns are once and for all resolved by the leave itself. In the case of managers who considered long parental leaves as a worthy accommodation to new mothers, they voiced an expectation that women would return to the workplace refreshed and able to recommit themselves to working at the same intensity as before they had become mothers.

Underlying the expectation that a new mother's work life and commitment to the company will return to its prior state once the situation that necessitated leave (childbirth) is 'resolved' is the assumption that a woman in the career track will ratchet up her work hours to the level of other (male) career-track employees. Together with the expectation of long-term commitment to the company, this is the second purpose that managers have in mind for parental leave. Several female managers were particularly attuned to the issue of very long work hours, bringing it up spontaneously during the interview. These managers pointed to how the unquestioned social expectation that women are primarily responsible for housework and

childcare—no matter whether they are working outside the home or not—creates a fundamental dilemma and a potential no-win situation for working mothers. The female head of the diversity team at a major bank explained this as follows:

> Among the women in this company who are currently in their forties, almost all are either unmarried or do not have children. If they do have children, they tend to ask for childcare help from their parents. We call these women *gundam* women [*gundam* is the name of a robot in a Japanese family animation show, which implies that these are superwomen]. Most of the men in this company— probably about 80 percent—are married to full-time housewives. Employees in the banking industry tend to work very long hours, until 10 PM or so, so housework is not something they think about. Male managers in their forties and fifties, who were hired during the economic bubble period and are married to housewives, tend to expect young women to be *gundam* women. So if young mothers come back to work and have difficulty balancing their work and family responsibilities, these managers' attitude is often 'why are you not a superwoman'?

The diversity team manager continued somewhat ruefully, 'I think that if what is expected are *gundam* women, there is no need to hire more women; it is just not going to be the case that each one is a *gundam* woman'. Similarly, another manager expressed the tension between long work hours and work–family policies in the following way:

> What influences some people's negative opinions about work–family policies boils down partly to the long work hours in the company. At peak time, such as when there are a lot of deadlines, the work hours become very long. [When the interviewer asked if he meant working until 10 PM or so, the interviewee said that he meant working later than that.] Regardless of employees' gender, these long working hours make it very hard to take a leave or use the reduced work time policy.

Managers' comments illustrate that ultimately, they expect women to personally manage their situation. Even though men are eligible to take parental leave, the cultural assumption that women will assume nearly full responsibility for childrearing so that men can work long hours remains fundamentally unquestioned. Instead, women are expected to conform to the behaviours of the ideal male worker while *simultaneously* taking on the role of primary caregiver in the family. The irreconcilable nature of these two sets of demands on female workers appears to largely escape the notice of male HR managers, while it was raised by many of the (generally childless) female HR managers we interviewed. Rather, several male HR managers stated that many mothers do not put the company first.

The presence of conflicting views across managers with regard to the appropriate length of parental leave is reflected well in one male manager's statement that 'Employees are increasingly using the leave policies. But our concern is that because the policies are so generous and well put-together, even from a global standpoint—for example, 8 weeks of maternity leave before and after childbirth, and 3 years of childcare leave (until the child becomes a first grader in elementary school)—there are employees who overuse the policies'. This manager defined 'overuse' as using the maximum amount of leave time offered, stating that 'We worry that some employees are trying to have life–life balance, not work–life balance'. Such a definition of overuse is consistent with the common viewpoint in Japanese companies that using one's full allotment of vacation days is selfish; government statistics show that less than half of career-track employees in the private sector utilize their full allotment of paid vacation days (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2012).

Answers to our interview question about whether employees who take childcare leave face any difficulties when they return to work revealed a similar theme. As a female HR manager in a large publishing company stated:

> Most female employees in our company who get pregnant these days use childcare leave and then come back to work. These women are not worried about not being able to work while they are on leave. Their worries, I think, are over other things, like the high expectations the company has. There is a strong expectation that people who come back [from leave] will be able to work a lot (*kono hitoni takusan hataraite moraeru*). But the reality for these women is that now they have to take care of a baby, and they are worried about whether they can meet managers' high expectations while taking good care of the baby. If they could do so, this of course would be true work–life balance.

These comments indicate that the definition of work–life balance does not include women's ability to solicit help from their husbands, but rather women's ability to excel in both home and workplace. In this way, Japanese women are expected to place priority not on one realm of their life but on two. This potential no-win situation derives from the cultural imperatives for male and female employees alike to conform to the male image of the highly committed worker and for female employees alone to simultaneously conform to the image of the nurturing parent.

7. Discussion and conclusion

This study uses the case of Japan to theorize and examine how workplace norms connected to labour market structure—in this case, firm-ILMs—couple with the dominant cultural template of household gender relations to influence how managers implement and interpret generous parental leave policies promoted by the state. We motivate our choice of Japan by the fact that it poses a persistent puzzle: Why does the labour force participation rate of Japanese women continue to be low during the childbearing years, in contrast to the majority of post-industrial countries? This is all the more puzzling given two decades of government efforts to formulate parental leave policies that render work and family compatible.

We argue that the answer lies not only in the content of Japan's work–family policies but in managers' interpretation of policy purposes in the context of labour market structure and the prevailing cultural model of household gender relations. First, the content of Japan's parental leave policies mimics features of European leave policies that tend to *discourage* continuous full-time female labour force participation and to reify a highly gendered division of labour. Generous parental leaves with only partial wage replacement coexist with extremely low rates of Japanese male uptake of parental leave. Second, embedded in the structure of the Japanese labour market are workplace norms that valorize the long work hours and single-minded career focus of so-called 'male breadwinner work time regimes' (Mutari and Figart, 2001). Alongside these norms are strong expectations that women will be primarily responsibility for housework and childcare, freeing up their husbands to conform to the ideal-worker behaviours expected in firm-ILMs. In bringing labour market structure and work norms into the analysis of how work–family policies are interpreted on the ground by local managers, we address recent calls in the comparative work–family literature to address how culture affects the capabilities of actors to utilize their rights (Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Fahlén, 2014; Hobson, 2014).

In offering generous parental leaves as a way of demonstrating their adaptation to what they perceive as the specific needs of new mothers, Japanese HR managers strike what they believe to be a fair bargain: employer generosity in the short term in exchange for female employees' commitment to the ideal-worker template in the long term. The Japanese case thus powerfully illustrates how the adoption of policies from other national contexts interacts with local labour market structure and norms (in this case, the implicit interdependence between companies and their career-track employees, characterizing firm-ILMs) to impact managers' expectations of working mothers.

We find that Japanese HR managers carefully frame the purpose of parental leave and other work–family policies in terms of the business case: the value of the policies lies in their utility to attract and retain high-quality female labour and help make female employees more productive. Contrary to our expectations, managers express enthusiasm for the policies and considerable willingness to have career-track female employees utilize them. But simultaneously, HR managers do not question the cultural assumption that female workers bear nearly sole responsibility for childrearing. Managerial awareness, let alone commitment, to work–family balance for male employees is strikingly absent in their discourse. Managers' tacit assumption that it is women's responsibility to care for children reflects their acceptance of a highly gendered division of labour at home, implicitly defining the possibility of new fathers taking leave as outside the scope of what is considered natural. Rather, we find that the occasional case of a male employee taking parental leave is sometimes consciously orchestrated by a company for the symbolic purpose of providing evidence to the government that leave-takers are not exclusively female.

While we cannot predict the future, our qualitative interview data suggest the possibility that the pattern of ever-lengthening parental leaves in Japan taken almost exclusively by female employees may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing the subsidiary workplace status of the majority of Japanese women and reifying the highly gendered division of labour in Japanese households. It is unlikely that many working mothers will be able to fulfil the dual and contradictory demands of being an ideal (viz. male) worker and an ideal mother. Further research should consider the characteristics of the minority of Japanese women who are taking parental leave and returning to career-track jobs in their firm, so as to better understand the personal characteristics and workplace and family conditions that produce this outcome. Strikingly consistent with our interviews of HR managers at 25 large firms, an executive vice-president of a leading Japanese company expressed the following view at a labour policy forum in 2010:

> We implemented all of the measures to support achieving compatibility between work and family that we could think of, but almost all of those who use the system ended up being women. The more that we enhance measures to support child rearing, the more a gap opens up between men and women in terms of their ways of working. It feels as though measures to benefit women are actually causing gender disparities to increase.
> (Iki 2013, p. 123)

The Japanese case is important for both practical and theoretical reasons. On practical grounds, Japan is the first East Asian society to adopt extensive work–family policies and is a reference point for governments in the region that are grappling with similar demographic concerns: very low fertility and an impending labour shortage (Peng, 2012). On the positive side, work–family policies have been widely adopted by large Japanese firms and, based on

our qualitative data, are viewed by many managers as potentially useful in boosting workplace productivity. In order to support mothers' continuous labour force participation, however, a reconceptualization of the ideal worker as one who balances work time and family time and an extension of that concept to men are important future challenges. In Japan as elsewhere, requiring men as well as women to take some parental leave may slowly produce change in the highly gendered expectations for family obligations (Hook, 2006).

While the European welfare-state literature has widely recognized that a country's dominant model of household gender relations is an important driver of work–family policy formation, our analysis contributes two new dimensions to theory linking policy to *outcomes*. First, we argue for the crucial role of managers in evaluating the purposes of work–family policies and the employees who use them. This redirects attention to the meso level of the firm. Second, we posit labour market structure and accompanying workplace norms as an important force that combines with gender relations to influence managers' perceptions and judgements of who should use parental leave, how it should be used and how it will benefit the company. Future research could fruitfully extend this approach to deepen the understanding of how culture and labour market structure condition the effect of macro-level policies on women's employment outcomes in comparative settings in Europe and elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *SOCECO* online.

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