From Men to *Ikumen*: Representations of Hegemonic Masculine Fatherhood in the *Ikumen* Discourse

Gershoni Gad Hai

Abstract

In 2010, to combat the nation's low birth rate, labor shortages, and gender inequalities, the Japanese government adopted the term *ikumen* to promote fathers' participation in childrearing. Since then, NPOs and the media have also adopted the term. As a result, the term *ikumen* was featured extensively in newspapers and magazines, television dramas, manga, movies, and more. Therefore, scholars have studied the '*ikumen* phenomenon' to argue that Japanese masculinity and fatherhood are changing. However, scholars often overlook how the typical father is represented in the *ikumen* discourse. To help fill this gap, this study analyses how guidebooks that explain to fathers how to be *ikumen* represent the typical father. These books are significant because the experts who wrote them advise and help form governmental policies on gender equality and work-life balance issues. The typical father's representations in such books are significant for two reasons. First, the typical father's representations show how the government and experts perceive the typical father. This conceptualization of fatherhood might influence future policies regarding Japan's gendered division of labor. Second, the books compare the stereotypical father with *ikumen,* arguing that *ikumen* are better for Japanese society and families. This comparison sheds light on how the Japanese government and the experts in question aim to change the Japanese gendered division of labor. This study found that the typical father is represented as an emotionally detached and absent parent who their wives shun due to his prolonged working hours. Furthermore, the typical father is perceived as emotionally stunted – unable to discuss feelings, identify with others, or show empathy. Additionally, such fathers are shown as unable to perform elementary house chores and childrearing activities. Lastly, such fathers are portrayed as inefficient workers. In contrast, *ikumen* are represented as fathers who overcome these shortcomings. Hence, *ikumen* are argued to be empathic communicators who participate in family life, have strong ties to their community, and are efficient workers. The paper hypothesizes that such representations are used to elevate *ikumen*'s image while keeping it 'masculine.' This enables experts to add new responsibilities to fatherhood practices, to be good workers *and* fathers. However, *ikumen* are not shown to be equal to mothers, but only to *support* mothers enough so they can become 'working mothers.' Therefore, this study argues that the *ikumen* discourse has not fundamentally departed from the Japanese gendered division of labor.

Keywords: *Ikumen,* Japanese Fathers, Masculinity, Japanese Masculinity, Japanese Salaryman.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Japan has been dealing with a low birth rate, an aging society, a persistently unequal gendered division of labor, and economic stagnation. All these problems are intertwined, creating a circle that exacerbates them all (Suzuki 2017). For example, the gendered division of labor in Japanese society contributes to the low fertility rates because it forces many families to rely on a single income – usually the father's – for their livelihood (Nagase and Brinton 2017). As childrearing costs grow, many families settle for fewer children (Date and Shimizutani 2007, 21–24). The low fertility rate, in turn, worsens economic stability as it creates a labor shortage (Clark et al. 2010).

The gendered division of labor – that sees men prioritize work over childrearing and women perform parenthood alone – also exacerbates the demographic, economic, and social problems stated above (Dasgupta 2012; Hidaka 2010; Ishii-Kuntz 2013, 24–26). For instance, a recent white paper produced by the Gender Equality Bureau shows that in 2020, women's time spent on housework and childrearing daily was, on average, about 2 hours, 29 minutes, and 2 hours, 13 minutes, respectively. Contrastingly, fathers, on average, spent 50 minutes on housework and 55 minutes on childcare each day (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office 2021, 13). This reality of the gendered division of labor causes women to postpone marriage and prefer to have fewer children (Nemoto 2008; Raymo, Uchikoshi, and Yoda 2021). This is because women, to a large extent, are still expected to give up their careers once they become pregnant. As many women want to avoid this situation, they postpone marriage. Furthermore, because they perform childrearing alone, they do not wish to increase their burden by having more children. This worsens Japan's demographic problems and economic stability (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office 2020).

As part of its efforts to solve such problems, the Japanese government has sought to resolve the gendered division of labor (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2021). While it aims to tackle gender inequalities, lack of women's representation in politics and management, income gaps, and more, it also aims to increase men's participation in childrearing. As a result, since the 1990s, fathers' importance in childrearing has been 'rediscovered' (Ishii-Kuntz 2013, 27–29). Consequently, the government has been attempting to improve work-life balance by reducing working hours (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office 2017), encouraging fathers to take paternity leaves (Japan Times 2022), and raising public awareness of fathers' importance for childrearing (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016).

In 2010, the government adopted the term *ikumen,* and established 'The Ikumen Project.' This was the start of so-called the '*ikumen* phenomenon' (Ishii-Kuntz 2013; Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016; Vassallo 2017). Within the *ikumen* discourse, several players – the government, NPOs, scholars, activists, artists, and media have used the term *ikumen* to promote fathers' participation

in childrearing. Hence, many scholars have studied the *ikumen* discourse to understand how Japanese fatherhood and masculinity are changing. They correctly argue that the *ikumen* phenomenon indicates that fatherhood and masculinity in Japan are changing – albeit slowly (Goldstein-Gidoni 2019; Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016; Vassallo 2017). However, despite the government's promotion of *ikumen*, they are still far from the norm. This is because, in contemporary Japanese society, 'hegemonic masculinity' still dictates men to be 'salarymen' who prioritize work over home. Hence, to understand possible changes in Japan's gendered division of labor, looking at fathers' representation in the *ikumen* discourse is valuable (Dasgupta 2003; Hidaka 2010; Dasgupta 2017).

2. The *ikumen* phenomenon

The term *ikumen* was coined in 2006 by Maruta Masaya, an art director at Hakuhodo, one of the largest Japanese advertising companies (Ishii-Kuntz 2013, 37; Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017, 149). The word is a neologism consisting of the words *iku* (childrearing) and the English word 'men.' *Ikumen* is also a play on words on the term *ikemen*, which means 'attractive men.' This is done to suggest that men who raise children are similarly 'cool' (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016).

Ikumen remained an obscure concept until 2010, when the former Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW), Nagatsuma Akira, adopted the term and created 'The Ikumen Project' to combat the declining birth rates (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016, 2). Since the government's adoption of ikumen, it has frequently appeared in news magazine articles, media, and popular culture texts. This resulted in *ikumen* being chosen as one of the year's buzzwords in 2010 (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016). In addition, the term has also been widely used in texts produced by the government, scholars, activists, NPOs, and more (Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017, 152). Ishii-Kuntz calls the term popularity as 'the ikumen phenomenon' (Ishii-Kuntz 2013).

Ikumen is not the government's first attempt to promote fathers' involvement in childrearing. What is new, however, is the message. For instance, older campaigns using terms such as *kazoku sabisu* (service for the family) suggested that fathers should be involved because it is their duty, and mostly prompted them only to buy gifts for their family or take them on vacations (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016). In contrast, *ikumen* suggests that fathers should be involved in childrearing because it will make for a healthier family life (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016). Hence, experts such as Andō Tetsuya, the head of the NPO 'Fathering Japan,' argue that terms like *kazoku sabisu* are outdated (Goldstein-Gidoni 2019; Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016).

Despite its widespread adoption by the media, *ikumen* remains obscure to the general public. For instance, in interviews conducted by Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky (2016, 12–13), interviewees remarked that *ikumen*'s meaning was unclear, and they did not use the term voluntarily

when discussing childcare or parenting-related aspirations (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016, 12). Thus, I agree with Vassallo (2017, 39–43, 47), who argues that *ikumen* is a 'floating signifier' that simultaneously holds various ambiguous meanings, and therefore, it allows different actors to use the term for different purposes. For instance, 'The *Ikumen* Project' shows *ikumen* as 'heroes' who can save society, while consumer magazines like *Father Quarterly Japan* (*FQJ*) show *ikumen* as fashionable father-consumers.

Aside from *ikumen*'s ambiguousness, it seems unpopular among the public. For instance, in 2019, the *Asahi* newspaper featured a poll surveying 1446 people (595 men and 797 women) about *ikumen* (Asahi Shimbun Digital 2019). To the question 'what do you feel about the word *ikumen*,' only 1.9% (28 responses) said 'I love it.' Opposingly, 31.3% (452 responses) and 44.4% (642 responses) replied, 'I somewhat hate it' and 'I hate it,' respectively. One common argument against *ikumen* is that fathers' childrearing should be the norm, and fathers' too-limited parenting activities are wrongly praised (Ishii-Kuntz 2013; Vassallo 2017, 26). In reference to the contradictions between the public's largely negative opinion of ikumen and the term's positive media image, Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher (2017, 152) argue that some elements in the media create a hype around *ikumen* – a hype not shared by the public.

Despite those negative opinions towards *ikumen*, it seems that fathers' perception of fatherhood is changing. For instance, a survey made by the Japanese Cabinet Office in 2012 shows that men who agree with the idea that men's role is to work and women's to raise children fell from 60.1% in 1992 to 51.6% in the year 2012 (Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017, 152). Furthermore, another survey made by the NPO 'Tadaima!' regarding the sharing of household responsibilities shows that most Japanese males agree that husbands and wives must share unpaid domestic work (Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017, 152). Additionally, the percentage of fathers taking paternity leave has risen from 7.5% in 2019 to 12.65% in 2020 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan 2021, 18).

Despite these positive changes, it seems that the Japanese working culture prevents fathers from being more involved. For instance, many fathers report that 'the workplace atmosphere' prevents them from taking paternity leave (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan 2012, 223). Additionally, Japan's notoriously long working hours keep fathers away from home (Nemoto 2013; Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017). As a result, promoters of the *ikumen* discourse have encouraged corporations to adopt father-friendly policies. This can be seen by the annual *Ikumen Kigyō* award given to companies that have displayed policies that support fathers since 2013 (Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017, 153).

As the discourse regarding fatherhood has risen, commercial bodies have used the term *ikumen* to tap into a new consumer market – fathers (Ishii-Kuntz 2013; Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017; Vassallo 2017). Most men's magazines, up to 2005, discussed business, sport, and various 'male' hobbies. However, since 2010, magazines such as *FQJ*, *Men's LEE*, and *Nikkei Kids+*, have started to address

fatherhood. Due to space limitations, I do not discuss this historical shift in detail, but it is worth noting that while providing parenting tips, most such magazines revolve around consumerism. For instance, although they may recommend that fathers catch bugs with their children, they are likely to suggest purchasing the 'right' products for it (Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017, 156–57). Other goods promoted to fathers' in the magazines include taller strollers with unisex, manly, or at least not *kawaii* (cute) designs (Ishii-Kuntz 2013, 55–59; Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017, 157).

Like men's magazines, popular culture has also started to ride *ikumen*'s 'popularity.' Some examples are the dramas *Anazāfeisu Keiji Sōmuka Ōtomo Tetsu* (Ishii-Kuntz 2013, 59) and *Zenkai Gāru*, or the manga *Ikumen!* (Vassallo 2017). While these works represent involved fathers who are, in some cases, single fathers, they do not reflect the typical father's reality. In such stories, fathers become *ikumen* due to various circumstances (Ishii-Kuntz 2013, 60). For instance, the manga *Usagi Drop* (2005-2011), which received anime and film adaptations in 2011, provides a typical example. Daikichi, the main character, and his family learn at Daikichi's grandfather's funeral about Rin, the late grandfather's secret illegitimate six-year-old daughter. She was abandoned by her mother, who was hired as the grandfather's caretaker. While discussing Rin's fate, all the extended family members refuse to take care of Rin. Upon hearing their reluctance, Daikichi, a salaryman in his 30s, abruptly decides to adopt Rin.

While the academic literature on *ikumen* is insightful, studies regarding *ikumen* overlook how typical fathers – not *ikumen* – are represented in the *ikumen* discourse produced by experts. Such representations are significant for three main reasons. First, the notions of *ikumen* are far from the normative notions regarding masculinity in Japan. This is because many people still believe that fathers should prioritize work and women should prioritize childrearing (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2012). Furthermore, many people still follow Japan's gendered division of labor (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2021, 13). Second, looking at fathers' representations in *ikumen*-related texts can tell us how experts and the government perceive masculinity and fatherhood in Japan. Such perceptions might influence future gender equality-related policies. Third, the *ikumen* discourse compares the typical father with *ikumen* – showing *ikumen* as better for Japan. Therefore, such representations can hint at the changes the government and experts are trying to implement regarding masculinity.

3. Methodology

To analyze the typical fathers' representations in the *ikumen* discourse, this study examines guidebooks aimed at aspiring *ikumen*. Because such guidebooks are written by experts who advise the government and corporations on policies regarding work-life balance and fatherhood, they can serve as a lens to see how the government and experts perceive contemporary fatherhood and masculinity. This perception is likely to influence future policies regarding the issues of work-life balance and parenthood

in Japan. Furthermore, such books compare typical fathers with *ikumen*. Therefore, these representations can tell how experts and the government plan to change gender roles in Japan.

This research analyzed six guidebooks written by experts in the field, as shown below. Item 1 was written by Atsumi Naoki, a researcher, consultant, and member of the Council to Promote Measures against the Declining Birthrates (*Shōshika taisaku suishin kaigi*) held by the Japanese government. Items 2 to 6 were written by Andō Tetsuya, the head of the most significant NPO within the *ikumen* discourse – Fathering Japan and other writers from that NPO.

1. *Ikumen de ikou! Ikuji mo shigoto mo jūjitsu saseru iki kata* ("Let's go ikumen! A way of life that fulfills both childcare and work"), 2010.
2. *Papa ichinen sei* ("First grader father"), 2012.
3. *Atarashii papa no kyōkasho* ("The textbook for the new father"), 2014.
4. *Papa wa taihen ga omoshiroi ni kawaru hon: "shigoto mo katei mo" sedai no shin jinsei senryaku* ("The book that will turn 'being a father is hard' into 'being a father is fun!': strategies for the new generation's life of "both work and home"), 2017.
5. *Papa to mama no ikuji senryaku* ("Childrearing strategies of mothers and fathers"), 2018.
6. *Kazoku wo egao ni suru papa nyūmon gaido* ("The introductory guide for dads to make their families smile"), 2018.

The analysis of the above guidebooks was done via close reading. Close reading is a way to perform textual analysis by looking at the author, message, and audience to reveal both explicit and concealed or implicit undertones. This is done by looking not only at what is said or presented but also at what is omitted from the text (Ruiz De Castilla 2017).

4. Findings and Discussion

All the analyzed books echo the same overall messages that establish a similar premise. For instance, they give the same reasons for being *ikumen*. More so, all books represent the typical father as a 'salaryman' – men who prioritize work over their personal life and family. Additionally, all guidebooks compare *ikumen* with the stereotypical or typical father. Given this high degree of similarity, therefore, I have been able to make some generalizations in this analysis. This study provides concrete examples from specific books, but it does not mean that those messages were limited only to those books. Instead, they should be read as typical examples of the overall ideas contained in the books.

To provide a theoretical framework for such representations, this study adopts Connell's (2005) theory of masculinity. According to Connell, masculinity is a normative notion that dictates how men

must act. However, in any society, various forms of masculinities exist simultaneously, forming relationships in which some masculinities dominate others. Connell refers to the dominant form of masculinity – which is everchanging – as 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 2005, 36–37, 76). Although 'hegemonic masculinity' dictates how men should act, it serves more as a societal ideal to which men should aspire. This is because most men cannot embody and practice most of these notions (Donaldson 1993, 647). Therefore, this article argues that the typical father's representations in the guidebooks analyzed do not represent Japanese 'hegemonic masculinity.' Instead, such representations show how, according to the authors, most Japanese fathers believe in a pivotal element in Japan's hegemonic masculinity – that they must prioritize work (Hidaka 2010). Through these representations, the authors argue that such practice negatively influences men and their families, and hence should be changed.

4.1. Ikumen as Saviors of Japan

One of the main arguments within the *ikumen* discourse is that *ikumen* can be Japan's saviors. They can achieve that goal by supporting women (wives), children, and their communities. Hence, their contribution will alleviate the acute social problems alluded to in the introduction above: the low birthrate, gender inequality, and labor shortages. Such representations of *ikumen* as saviors reveal a great deal about how the typical father is perceived.

According to these books, *ikumen* fathers can improve gender equality because they participate in childrearing, so mothers can retain their careers and consider having more children (Atsumi 2010; Fathering Japan 2018a). To quote Fathering Japan, "more than women's actions, the ones who need to work hard are men. In order to balance work and home, the husbands' responsibilities in childcare and housework are indispensable." (Fathering Japan 2018b, 15). As a result, these books argue that *ikumen* are attractive to women – especially their wives. For example, in one book, the authors argue that when a couple starts dating, they "are expected to chat about their plans for the future, hobbies, preferences, and more." However, the author argues that "awhile after the couple marries and have children, their conversation turns into dull exchanges, like 'when will you come home?'" As a result, they argue that mothers view their husbands as 'ATMs,' which they explain as "[husbands who are] good enough as long as [the wives] can draw out money from the bank when needed" (Fathering Japan 2018a, 34). This example emphasizes the emotional detachment existing between families and the fathers due to their work. Fathering Japan, Andō and Atsumi, to stress this point, provide a graph made by Atsumi and also used by the Gender Equality Bureau (Andō and Fathering Japan 2017, 22–25; Fathering Japan 2018a, 34; Atsumi 2010, 32; Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2012). The graph is supposed to show how wives' love towards their husbands rapidly declines right after marriage, dropping significantly as the first child is born and reaching almost zero once their first child finishes high school. However, they

argue that *ikumen* husbands steadily earn back their wives' love to a nearly pre-marriage level once the children need less attention. The last point is directly connected to the low birth rate. Based on the data, Atsumi (2010, 36–37) argues that families of *ikumen* have a greater chance of raising more than two children – something that Japan, with its low birthrate, urgently needs. This is because *ikumen'*s wives, who receive help, retain their love for their husbands, and do not view children as a burden they have to deal with alone or as a roadblock for their careers. Thus, families consider having more children.

The guidebooks also argue that *ikumen* can save Japanese society by being role models for their children and co-workers. By their actions, *ikumen* show the people around them that men can be reliable fathers, efficient workers (see section 4.3), and empathic (see section 4.2). In this way, they help spread *ikumen* values and make a difference in society (Atsumi, 2010, pp. 240–302). For example, Atsumi argues that because *ikumen* take their children outside, they connect with their neighbors, allowing them to be informal carers of the elderly. By doing so, they show younger children that men should also be caretakers of their parents (Atsumi, 2010, pp. 147–164). To quote: "*ikumen* are not only good for children, but they are also good for elderly parents and to your [the father's] future self"(Atsumi 2010, 150). Fathering Japan (2013, 20) calls ikumen's influence on society as "changing society's OS" (Operating System). For example, the promotion *ikuboss* (bosses who support *ikumen*) may change Japan's work culture by, for example, incorporating workers' family circumstances into the office workflow, such as allowing workers to leave early for children's birthdays (Fathering Japan 2014, 12).

From the above points, we can see a major way in which the books represent typical fathers – as rootless individuals who have little connection to their family and their local community aside from their workplace. This implies that men feel alone and emotionally detached, and they are treated with resentment or, at best, apathy by their families. Furthermore, the guidebooks focus on the relationship between typical fathers and their wives. Their depictions of such relationships are bleak. First, they argue that wives feel contempt for their husbands, viewing them only as a source of income. Furthermore, such relationships suffer from a severe lack of basic communication. Hence, the guidebooks argue that unless men become *ikumen*, their relationships with their families will remain bleak.

4.2 Fathers as emotionally stunted and socially inept

As discussed above, typical fathers are described as detached from their families and communities due to their prolonged working hours. This representation serves as a basis for arguing that men are emotionally stunted and socially inept individuals who cannot understand or identify with other people's feelings and perform the most elementary household chores.

Ikumen's relationship with children demonstrates how men are perceived from an emotional perspective. The books divide emotions, in essentialist terms, into female and male (Atsumi 2010, 122;

Fathering Japan 2018a, 62; 2018b, 28). In *Kazoku wo egao ni suru papa nyūmon gaido* argues that "'maternity' is the sensitivity to accept and love children unconditionally. On the other hand, 'paternity' teaches discipline, commitment, promises, duty, effort, and other things that are important for life in society" (Fathering Japan 2018a, 62). While the books argue that both parents can adopt maternal or paternal traits, these sections are used to argue that fathers are indisposable for children's development as only fathers can teach children masculine traits (Fathering Japan 2014, 105–6).

However, the books also argue that men should forsake traditional fathers' behaviors. They call the 'traditional' father figure "*Ganko Kaminari oyaji*" (the stubborn thunder-father), which is derived from the traditional proverb "*jishin*, *kaminari*, *kaji*, *oyaji*," (earthquakes, lightning, fires, and fathers) that points to a (perhaps no longer prevalent) common belief about fathers that children should fear fathers as they fear natural disasters (Fathering Japan 2013, 18–20). This stresses how fathers viewed strictness as the way to educate children. Another representation of the 'traditional' father is that they are distant and silent. Hence, they argue that fathers tend to raise children by having them "look at fathers' backs" (*senaka wo mite*) (Andō & Fathering Japan, 2017, p. 52). This does not imply rejection, but that children learn greatly by observing their parents. While it is not wrong, this phrase suggests that men teach children diligence, self-sacrifice, and toughness, by devoting themselves only to work.

The authors argue against such traditional fatherhood by saying that *ikumen* – the future fathers of Japan – are better for men, their families, and Japan. Therefore, the old thinking of fathers, mainly that they must be 'breadwinners,' should be "uninstalled." Instead, fathers should install the new "OS" that directs them to "protect the family, support mothers, and foster children's smiles" (Fathering Japan 2013, 21). Such fathers, the authors argue, are not only loved by their families (unlike the typical father), but they are also fulfilled individuals with higher emotional intelligence.

One main example of how being *ikumen* benefits men themselves is that by being *ikumen,* fathers can overcome their social ineptness. The authors base this claim on the 'fact' that women are 'emotional' while men are 'logical.' These differences, they argue, make men bad communicators because, unlike men, women discuss hardships to receive emotional support and empathy, not necessarily to hear suggestions on how to solve their problems. On the other hand, men discuss problems 'logically' to 'solve problems,' hence they have difficulties identifying with others or feeling empathetic (Atsumi 2010, 84–88; Fathering Japan 2018a, 34–36). This raises problems because when men talk with anyone about non-work-related issues, their inability to relate makes others uncomfortable or angry. The degree to which these books perceive fathers to be socially inept is sometimes striking. For instance, one book discusses "key points on starting a chat with mommy." For example, they explain the difference between telling mommy: "do your best" (*ganbattene*) and "I see you are doing your best" (*ganbatteirune*). The former, they argue, is "an instruction," and the latter is "acknowledgment and empathy." Additionally,

they instruct fathers to ask their wives, "how was your day?" Then they instruct: "once the mother starts talking, listen until the end. If you kindly listen, nod your head, and be empathetic, Mommy could talk pleasantly. Do not interfere [by saying] "what's your point" or "what do you expect of me." (Fathering Japan 2018a, 35). These show how low fathers' emotional intelligence is perceived to be.

The experts argue that by becoming *ikumen,* men can learn to be empathic and improve their communication skills. One reason why *ikumen* are better communicators is that the infants they care for cannot talk, so men must use empathy to understand infants' needs. Furthermore, through childrearing activities, such as taking children to the park, men can speak about topics they seldomly talk about with people they rarely meet outside of work. Atsumi (2010, 78–89) discusses this enhancement of communication skills through an imaginary character named Taichi. After taking paternity leave, Taichi takes his baby to the playground for the first time, something Taichi calls his "playground debut." When trying to talk with other children's mothers (he was depicted as the only male), Taichi realized he could not "play" the "conversation catch ball" with the mothers. This inability to talk with women and mothers made them ignore and avoid him in subsequent days. Atsumi depicts how Taichi slowly learned how to speak with mothers by ditching the "problem-solving" mindset. Instead, Taichi has learned to play "catch ball" by answering quickly to women's remarks by relating to their feelings and showing empathy toward their hardships (Atsumi 2010, 80–86). The imaginary character Taichi remarked that such conversations are "*Idobatakaigi*" (meetings at the well), a sarcastic word used to describe women who are so absorbed in their 'chitchat' that they forget time. Taichi uses a metaphor to explain the role such conversations have for mothers. He says, "*Idobatakaigi* is like a roller that removes furballs one by one from a sweater." Thus, women use "chitchatting" "to remove their daily stress by 'rolling' topics they have in their hearts." In the end, Taichi remarked that while stressful at first, such "mothers' circles" (*mama tomo no wa*) became a source of stress relief for him (Atsumi 2010, 86).

The books also discuss husband-wife relationships and suggest that men should provide mental and physical support to their wives. For that, they must lose their "problem-solving" mentality. They claim that the wives discuss their problems to be understood, not to solve their problems (Fathering Japan 2018a, 38). Furthermore, they argue that husbands' remarks often sound condescending, such as "you had all day to buy food" (Fathering Japan 2018a, 34–40). Instead, they suggest fathers to show appreciation to their wives by saying "thank you" or "good job," so mothers will not feel that their hard work is taken for granted (Fathering Japan 2018a, 35; Andō and Fathering Japan 2012, 96).

Another representation is that fathers are often presented as unable to perform everyday tasks such as cleaning, changing diapers, cooking, and feeding children (Andō and Fathering Japan 2012, 68–73; Atsumi 2010, 96; Fathering Japan 2018a). For instance, in one book, a short comic strip shows a father merrily playing with a baby. Then the mother says to him, "babies are not only cute, you know."

To which the father replies, "I know that much! While you were back in your hometown, I studied properly." [about taking care of babies]. But immediately after that, the baby spits out the milk the father prepared. Then, standing behind him, the mother says, "Wasn't the milk too hot? It is [hot] because the average man's skin temperature is on the high end" (Andō and Fathering Japan 2012, 69–70). Such representations intensify the idea that fathers perform well only at work. In contrast, the books often depict mothers as natural caretakers. For example, in the book *Papa to mama no ikuji senryaku*, they encourage fathers to take paternity leave before the mother returns to work after her maternity leave. They argue that "many couples use this period so fathers can learn from mothers the flow and ways of children's caretaking" (Fathering Japan 2018b, 66–67). In another book, *Papa ichinen sei,* they remark: "even if fathers play with the baby in the room, and mothers are nearby, fathers tend to rely on the mothers. Therefore mothers can't feel relaxed" (Andō and Fathering Japan 2012, 102). Hence, due to the alleged skill gap, mothers are shown as unsatisfied supervisors supervising incompetent fathers (Andō and Fathering Japan 2012, 62–93; 2017, 50–52; Atsumi 2010, 62–76; Fathering Japan 2018a, 94). The books argue that by engaging in unpaid domestic labor, men can learn precious skills for work, for instance, developing empathy. In Atsumi's book, the imaginary character Taichi remarks, "through the experience of raising children…I have become less defiant and quick to anger" (Atsumi 2010, 46–52).

4.3 Ikumen and fathers as workers

All the analyzed guidebooks often discuss strategies for men to become better, more efficient workers. The reason is simple, *ikumen* fathers can avoid overtime by completing the same workload faster. This feat will give men more time to participate in childrearing, and thus women could continue working. Hence, all guidebooks provide tips on time management, prioritizing important tasks, and conducting meetings succinctly. Some books even provide daily schedules that incorporate work, house chores, and child care (Fathering Japan 2014). Other books offer techniques for shortening meetings by regulating correspondences (Atsumi 2010, 210–12). Hence, fathers are depicted as inefficient and unproductive workers who engage in endless meetings.

The books argue that *ikumen* must use their superior communication skills to gain their bosses' and co-workers' support and understanding that, as involved fathers, they need to leave work early – meaning not doing overtime. This intensifies the image of typical fathers as inefficient workers. *Ikumen*, they argue, will improve their companies' "OS" to allow a better work-life balance – which will, in turn, increase the time available to be *ikumen* (Fathering Japan 2014, 31–35).

However, the authors argue that fathers are victims of this inefficient, time-consuming working culture. A typical example is how the hyper-masculine abusive boss often gives last-minute assignments to fathers who are about to leave the office, forcing them to work overtime. In one example, when the

father state that he needs to attend his son's birthday, the boss answers: "son's birthday, you say? When I was young, I never went home early for my daughter's birthday." (Fathering Japan 2014, 10–11). Hence the books argue that bosses in their 40s and 50s have "old values" that reflect "traditional" gender roles. Hence, it shows that such bosses hinder the implementation of a new working culture that better balances work and life (Andō and Fathering Japan 2017, 28). This enables the representation of the toxic 'hegemonic masculinity' that rules Japanese workplaces and how young people are its victims.

4.4 Why are such depictions of fathers used?

The representations of fathers in the analyzed books seem to generalize the typical father into a specific image; that of a bad communicator who is emotionally immature, inefficient at work, and clueless regarding housework and childrearing. While many surveys show that fathers' involvement in unpaid domestic labor is limited and falls far below mothers' contribution, most of the representations found in the guidebooks seem to be exaggerated or extreme. For example, depicting men as unable to perform household chores although, I am sure, many men experience living alone during college or after they start working. Furthermore, since most books depict the parents of a firstborn child, it seems odd that mothers are shown to be experienced parents while men are depicted as clueless. Thus, it seems that the *ikumen* discourse retains many tropes of the traditional gendered division of labor. Furthermore, it seems that the representation of men as bad communicators is also exaggerated. It ignores all the life experiences that men have before becoming 'salarymen.' Do men discuss nothing but work when they are young? Do they not have friends or hobbies? Are they unable to experience and share emotions? Considering such questions, the guidebooks' representations of men seem extreme and unrealistic.

This research hypothesizes that such extreme representations are used to construct a negative image of typical fathers. Once the authors compare this negative image of fathers with *ikumen*, they can elevate *ikumen*'s image and present it as appealing, righteous even, as well as keeping *ikumen* masculine. *Ikumen's* masculinity is depicted as an upgraded version of the 'salaryman' role, something many men can relate to and maybe even desire. As a result, this study argues that such experts do not attempt to destroy men's traditional masculinity but to add another layer of fatherhood practices to the 'salaryman.' Therefore, the overtone suggests that men need to support mothers just enough so they can become 'salary women' but not become equal to them in parenting. This is why guidebooks suggest fathers should support their wives by taking some responsibilities off of them. However, it is important to mention that Atsumi's book does convey the idea that fathers can become equal parents (Atsumi 2010). Aside from that book, all books suggest men should change diapers, give infants milk, or at least burp them, as roles they can *also* perform to decrease mothers' burdens. Additionally, the authors argue that

the only thing fathers can do, which mothers cannot, is to teach children male characteristics such as 'duty' or the knowledge of how society works (Fathering Japan 2014, 105–6).

Hence, this study suggests that the *ikumen* discourse does not radically challenge traditional gendered masculine notions in Japan. It only adds new layers to the 'hegemonic masculinity,' a point Vasallo also raises (Vassallo 2017, 39–43). However, unlike Vasallo's argument, this study shows that the *ikumen*-related texts argue for men's involvement only to the degree of being effective supporters of their wives. This is why I argue that, in essence, the *ikumen* discourse, as reflected in these guidebooks, does not challenge the fundamental assumptions regarding men's roles in society; it just adds to these roles another layer of responsibilities, mainly to support mothers so they can work as well.

5. Conclusion

This study has sought to analyze the *ikumen* discourse to understand better how experts and, to a degree, the government perceive the 'traditional' notion of fatherhood and masculinity in Japan. These notions are significant because they may well be influential in shaping future policies regarding work-life balance and parenthood in Japan. Furthermore, in such discourse, the typical father is often equated with *ikumen*. This contrast can help better understand the changes which the government and experts on work-life balance aim to implement in terms of Japanese gender roles. To achieve this goal, the study analyzed a collection of guidebooks written by experts who advise the Japanese government on work-life balance and fatherhood issues. Such books are written for fathers interested in being *ikumen* and offer many tips and advice on how one can become a more involved father.

Using the methodology of close reading, this study found that all the guidebooks featured generally similar representations of the typical father. First, such fathers are depicted as detached and absent parents who are away at work most of the time. As they are rarely at home, such fathers lose their connection with their communities, families, and especially their wives. Hence, fathers' wives and children give them the cold shoulder. Therefore, they are represented as having lost their place within their homes and communities. Second, fathers are represented as emotionally stunted individuals who cannot feel empathy or identify with others. Hence, the traditional father is depicted as a strict, severe, silent, and scary individual. Additionally, their principal way of 'educating' children is by showing them their devotion, self-sacrifice, and loyalty to their jobs. Furthermore, fathers are shown to be unable to hold a conversation about any topic aside from work. The reason is that men, as argued, think logically and view everything as a problem that needs to be solved. Therefore, when wives or neighbors share their hardships with fathers, the fathers suggest solutions instead of identifying with their feelings and offering emotional support. This, the authors argue, misses the point of the communication and aggravates their female conversational partners. Lastly, the typical father is described as an inefficient

worker who cannot prioritize tasks efficiently and wastes time in endless meetings. Hence, the books offer much guidance on how to work efficiently so that fathers, instead of doing overtime, can go home early to support their wives.

This article argues that the image of the typical masculine father found in these books is too generalized, and exaggerated. Therefore, this article hypothesizes that *ikumen* are represented as a better version of the hegemonic masculine father to make *ikumen* look more appealing to men. In consequence, this keeps the *ikumen* discourse within the tropes of the Japanese gendered division of labor. I argue this because the analysis shows that the guidebooks do not claim that fathers should stop being masculine or 'salarymen,' only that they should also support their wives so that they too can work. I conclude that in these key *ikumen* discourse texts, men and women are not shown to be equal partners in childrearing. Instead, *ikumen* are featured as 'supporters' who can only be helpful to mothers by taking responsibility for activities men can *also* do and teaching children masculine traits such as 'duty,' 'self-sacrifice,' and more. Thus, this study concludes that the *ikumen* discourse does not significantly diverge from traditional gendered notions, only adding new layers to the existing roles assigned to men.

It is important to note that the experts whose guidebooks were examined are not the only actors within the sphere of *ikumen* discourse. Other scholars, artists, and media personnel may well have different notions regarding fatherhood in Japan. However, addressing those voices was beyond the scope of this paper. Hence, this study argues for expanding this analysis to include various other voices within the *ikumen* discourse, particularly those of 'non-experts.' Furthermore, the question of why the experts whose books were analyzed chose to use such representations remains unanswered due to space limitations but is another topic very worthy of future investigation.

6. Bibliography

Andō, Tetsuya, and Fathering Japan. 2012. *Papa Ichinen Sei* [First grader father]. Kanki publishing.

———. 2017. *Papa Wa Taihen Ga Omoshiroi Ni Kawaru Hon: "Shigoto Mo Katei Mo" Sedai No Shin Jinsei Senryaku* [The book that will turn "being a father is hard" into "being a father is fun!": strategies for the new "both work and home" generation's life]. Tokyo: Fusosha Publishing.

Asahi shimbun digital. 2019. "ikumen dou omou?" [what do you think about ikumen?]. *Asahi shimbun digital*. October 19, 2019. https://www.asahi.com/opinion/forum/099/.

Atsumi, Naoki. 2010. *Ikumen de Ikō! Ikuji Mo Shigoto Mo Jūjitsu Saseru Ikikata* [Let's go Ikumen! A way of life that fulfills both childcare and work]. Japan: Nihon Keizai Shinbun Shuppansha.

Cabinet Office, Government of Japan. 2021. "The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality." https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/whitepaper/pdf/5th_bpg.pdf.

Clark, Robert L., Naohiro Ogawa, Makoto Kondo, and Rikiya Matsukura. 2010. “Population Decline, Labor Force Stability, and the Future of the Japanese Economy.” *European Journal of Population/Revue Européenne de Démographie* 26 (2): 207–27.

Connell, Robert William. 2005. *Masculinities*. Polity.

Dasgupta, Romit. 2003. “Creating Corporate Warriors: The" Salaryman" and Masculinity in Japan.” In *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, 118–34. Routledge.

———. 2012. *Re-Reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities*. Routledge.

———. 2017. “Acting Straight? Non-Heterosexual Salarymen Working with Heteronormativity in the Japanese Workplace.” In *East Asian Men*, 31–50. Springer.

Date, Yusuke, and Satoshi Shimizutani. 2007. “Why Has Japan’s Fertility Rate Declined?: An Empirical Literature Survey with an Emphasis on Policy Implications.” *Japanese Economy* 34 (1): 4–45.

Donaldson, Mike. 1993. “What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?” *Theory and Society* 22 (5): 643–57.

Fathering Japan. 2013. *Atarashī Papa No Kyokasho* [The textbook for the new fathers]. Gakkenkyoikushuppan.

———. 2014. *Atarashii Papa No Hatarakikata* [The new fathers’ working style]. Tokyo: Gakken purasu.

———. 2018a. *Kazoku o Egao Ni Suru Papa Nyūmon Gaido* [The guide for dads to make their families smile]. Tokyo: Ikeda Shoten.

———. 2018b. *Papa To Mama No Ikuji Senryaku* [Childrearing strategies for fathers and mothers]. Repicbook.

Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office. 2012. “Kyodo-sankaku Number 50.” July. https://www.gender.go.jp/public/kyodosankaku/2012/201210/pdf/201210.pdf.

———. 2017. “Gender Equality Policy in Japan.” June.
https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/whitepaper/pdf/ewp2017.pdf

———. 2020. “Women and Men in Japan 2020 - Work-Life Balance.”
https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/pr_act/pub/pamphlet/women-and-men20/pdf/1-4.pdf

———. 2021. “The White Paper on Gender Equality 2021.”
https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/whitepaper/pdf/ewp2021.pdf.

Goldstein-Gidoni, Ofra. 2019. “‘Working Fathers’ in Japan: Leading a Change in Gender Relations?” *Gender, Work & Organization* 27 (3): 362–78.

Hidaka, Tomoko. 2010. *Salaryman Masculinity: Continuity and Change in Hegemonic Masculinity in Japan*. BRILL.

Ishii-Kuntz, Masako. 2013. *Ikumen-Gensho No Shakaigaku: Ikuji Kosodate-Sanka He No Kibo Wo Kanaeru Tameni [Sociology of Child-Caring Men: In Seach of Realising Fathers’ Involvement*

in Child-Rearing]. Kyoto: Minerva Shobō.

Japan Times, No. 2022. “Law Amendment Aims to Make Paternity Leave More Accessible in Japan.” The Japan Times. April 4, 2022. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/04/national/social-issues/child-care-leave-law-amendment/.

Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan. 2012. “Heisei 23 Ikuji Kyūgyō Seido Nado Ni Kan Suru Jittai Hāku No Tame No Chōsa Kenkyū Jigyō” [Survey and Research Project to Ascertain the Actual Situation Regarding Support for Balancing Work and Housework in 2015]. https://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/koyoukintou/pdf/h23_0710_3-4.pdf.

———. 2021. “Reiwa 2 nendo koyō kintō kihon chōsa’ kekka o kōhyō shimasu ~josei no kanrishoku wariai ya ikuji kyūgyō shutoku-ritsu nado ni kansuru jōkyō no kōhyō~” [Publication of the results of the Basic Survey on Equal Employment in 2020 – Announcement of the situation regarding the proportion of women in managerial positions and the rate of parental leave taken by women, and more]. https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/dl/71-r02/07.pdf.

Mizukoshi, Kosuke, Florian Kohlbacher, and Christoph Schimkowsky. 2016. “Japan’s Ikumen Discourse: Macro and Micro Perspectives on Modern Fatherhood.” *Japan Forum* 28: 212–32.

Nagase, Nobuko, and Mary C. Brinton. 2017. “The Gender Division of Labor and Second Births: Labor Market Institutions and Fertility in Japan.” *Demographic Research* 36: 339–70.

Nemoto, Kumiko. 2008. “Postponed Marriage: Exploring Women’s Views of Matrimony and Work in Japan.” *Gender & Society* 22 (2): 219–37.

———. 2013. “Long Working Hours and the Corporate Gender Divide in Japan.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 20 (5): 512–27.

Raymo, James M., Fumiya Uchikoshi, and Shohei Yoda. 2021. “Marriage Intentions, Desires, and Pathways to Later and Less Marriage in Japan.” *Demographic Research* S30 (3): 67–98. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2021.44.3.

Ruiz De Castilla, Clariza. 2017. “Close Reading.” Edited by Mike Allen. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, 136–38.

Schimkowsky, Christoph, and Florian Kohlbacher. 2017. “Of Ikumen and Ikuboss: An Inquiry into Japan’s New Fathers as Consumers, Employers and Managers.” *Fathers in Work Organizations: Inequalities and Capabilities, Rationalities and Politics*, 149–70.

Suzuki, Atsuko. 2017. “Mechanisms of Persistence in Gender Inequality: Perspective of Work and Family.” *Japanese Psychological Review* 60 (1): 62–80.

Vassallo, Hannah. 2017. “Ikumen.” In *Cool Japanese Men: Studying New Masculinities at Cambridge*, edited by Brigitte Steger and Koch Angelika (LIT Verlag Münster), 27-83.