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Japan's urban singles: negotiating alternatives to family households and standard housing pathways

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ABSTRACT

In comparison to other advanced economies, the rise of people living alone in Japan has been late and rapid, with singletons now accounting for almost half of all households in major cities. The normative and structural frameworks surrounding standard family-household formation, however, remain formidable, reducing life-course opportunities for non-family formers. This paper considers the household and housing pathways being negotiated by younger-adults living independently. In addition to various secondary data sources, we draw on qualitative interviews with 35 individuals from 28 Tokyo households in addressing manifestations of, and resistance to, atomisation and individualisation in the Japanese context. Our analysis focuses on meanings and practices of homemaking among renters and buyers in the growing sector of single-person dwellings, as well as the recent emergence of commercial shared housing. This analysis provides a contrast to discourses surrounding the “singles boom” and “the growing appeal of living alone” in Western cities.

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Singles; one-person households; young people; sharing; individualisation

Introduction

Japan's post-war decades were characterised by outstanding economic growth and intensive urbanization featuring the proliferation of standard, male-breadwinner family households. Striving for one's own detached family home became a feature of standardized life-courses and was supported by high marriage rates, and stable education and employment transitions (see Hirayama, 2007; Morioka, 2000; Ochiai, 1997). Nonetheless, with the end of high-speed growth a quarter of a century ago, standard families have started to lose their hold. Changes in life-course transitions and household formation in Japan however, have not manifested in sharp increases in divorce rates, unmarried couples living together or children born outside of marriage, but rather by people not forming conjugal partnerships at all (Ueno, 2009). According to the census, family households comprised of a married couple and child(ren) fell from 44.2 percent in 1980 to 27.9 percent in 2010, and are expected to drop to 21.9 percent by 2030 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications [MIAC], 2015). The advance of people remaining single longer or indefinitely, meanwhile, has been impressive, with

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one-person households (at 32.4 percent of all households) now constituting the most common type. In major cities, moreover, lone dwellers now make up almost half of all households, with most gains in this sector in the 1990s and 2000s driven by younger adult singles.

The particular concern of this paper are the household and housing pathways being pursued by younger, urban individuals who live, or have lived, alone. Institutional frameworks remain strongly focused on standard families, making life-course transitions problematic for singletons. Research has begun to highlight forms of exclusion faced by post-bubble cohorts in context of waning family formation, as well as the limited alternatives to it, both structurally and normatively (Brinton, 2011; Suzuki, Ito, Ishida, Nihei, & Maruyama, 2010; Yamada, 2005). Allison (2012), for example, has emphasised the diminishing sense of home and belonging felt by young people living alone. Ronald and Hirayama (2009), meanwhile, focus on how non-family housing careers have become “conduits of atomization” for younger generations (p. 2836). Little is known however, about these conduits or how younger individuals themselves understand and are negotiating more atomised routes through life, despite their emergence as a dominant form of urban living.

Across developed societies, growing numbers of people living alone have been evident since the 1970s (Baranwal & Ram, 1985; Jamieson & Simpson, 2013). The advance of lone-living has become an increasing concern since the 1990s along with the intensification of younger cohorts staying single for longer (Chandler, Williams, Maconachie, Collett, & Dodgeon, 2004). For example, in the US since 1960, the share of single-person households has more than doubled, accounting for around 27.7 percent of all households by 2014. A more recent intensification in lone-living has also been extant with the absolute number of single-person households increasing between 1999 and 2014 from around 26.6 million to 34.2 million (US Census Bureau, 2015).

While research has looked to delayed adult life-course transitions involving partnering and marriage as an explanation (e.g. Aassve, Iacovou, & Mencarini, 2006; Holdsworth, 2004; Iacovou, 2002), many North American and, to a lesser extent, West European studies have understood advances in single living as liberational (see Galcanova & Vackova, 2016), representative of the freedom to explore alternative social roles and lifestyles that marks late modern individualization. Klinenberg (2012), for example, has specifically celebrated the “collective project of living alone” as “growing out of the culture of modern cities” (p. 20).

Nonetheless, these developments have been uneven suggesting that context matters. Indeed, household transitions show substantial heterogeneity in terms of institutional arrangements (Breen & Buchmann, 2002), cultural norms (Aassve, Arpino, & Billari, 2013; Holdsworth, 2004) and economic conditions (Aassve et al., 2006). Comparative studies of young adult transitions in Europe have shown that regional differences persist with regard to leaving the parental home and living alone as a young unmarried person (Iacovou, 2002, 2010). Southern European countries, for example, have largely sustained higher rates of heteronormative family forming and resisted the rise in younger one-person households, with those not marrying remaining longer in the parental dwelling (Billari, 2004). Meanwhile, in Northern and Western European countries, early emancipation and living alone while pursuing education and early employment

careers have generally been supported through more generous welfare state provisions (Mulder et al., 2002). Japan, while sharing some of these features, is more idiosyncratic. There, the onset of one-person households has been recent and rapid, with singles typically concentrated in small dwelling units in urban areas (Ronald, 2017). Moreover, there has been a distinct shift in partnership and coupling, with single-person housing transitions associated with prolonged or life-long singledom (Ronald & Izuhara, 2016).

Indeed, a 2011 public survey identified that 61.4 percent of single men and 49 percent of single women aged 18-34 were not in a romantic relationship (Institute of Population and Social Security Research [IPSSR], 2011). Findings from the 2016 round of the same survey suggested that 42 percent and 44.2 percent of single men and women in this age range, respectively, had never had sex. Forming a household constituted of a married couple thus appears fundamental to the chances of forming any romantic partnership in this context. The chances of singles producing offspring is also remote, with less than 1.8 percent of children born outside marriage (MIAC, 2015). The rise of lone living in Japan then, appears deeply integrated with declining marriage and fertility rates, and is also distinct in terms of processes and outcomes of living on your own.

While contemporary understandings of the rise of singles and lone dwellers in developed societies have been primarily derived from studies of North European and American contexts (Yeung & Cheung, 2015), Japan demonstrates a less affirmative conception of individualisation and lone-dwelling, with research suggesting extended independence is experienced as frustrated family formation (Ronald & Nakano, 2013). There has been a surge in recent anthropological research focused on the frustrations of younger Japanese in achieving normatively complete adult transitions (e.g. Brinton, 2011) and growing feelings of what Allison (2012, p. 346) refers to as “ordinary refugeism”, especially among singles. Little research however, has addressed the housing and urban contexts within which practices and experiences of living as a single person are being shaped.

This paper pays particular attention to both isolation and interaction among singles in a context shaped by a normative framework resistant to household formation, home-making and personal intimacy outside the context of the standard family. It thereby aims to both challenge and enhance current understanding of individualisation and urban transformation, drawing attention to one of the most advanced cities in East Asia. The analysis that follows specifically addresses the emerging housing careers of younger Japanese singles, with a focus on two different routes: forming a one-person household as either an owner-occupier or, more commonly, a renter; and renting a room in one of the growing number of “share houses” in Japan’s major cities. As well as secondary data from public agencies and private real estate companies, we draw upon interviews carried out with 35 people aged 25 to 39 (from 28 households) in the Tokyo area. In doing so we unravel emerging housing conditions and consider shifting experiences and expectations of domestic spaces. We specifically explore transformations in meanings of home and family for Japan’s growing population of singles as well as the challenges to social reproduction that appear to be legacies of post-war housing and urban practices.

The paper proceeds in a number of stages. The following part considers the formation of the post-war housing system, its apparent unravelling since the end of the 1980s

bubble economy, and its contribution to diminishing family formation. Attention then turns to the rise of single-person housing careers and different potential routes through them. After establishing our empirical approach, we go on to examine the interview narratives that reflect on, and provide insight into, the pursuit of a home outside the bounds of the traditional post-war family model. Our conclusions allude to possible alternatives to standard middle-class family life-courses as well as adaptations demonstrated by younger Japanese millennials. We also consider threats to social reproduction posed by the emerging mass of lone-dwellers in Japan, and their ostensible precarity. Ultimately, the paper contributes to on-going debates on socio-demographic transformations in Japan, and in particular the significance of housing and urban conditions as well as the agency of those dealing with them.

The waxing and waning of post-war housing and family systems

Following World War Two, Japanese housing and economic policies supported rapid access for nuclear families to new urban housing. At its core was a three-pillar system established in the early-1950s that transformed Japan from a rental to a homeownership society (Hayakawa, 1990). A main pillar was the government housing loan system, providing families access to long-term low-interest loans. The other two measures meanwhile, sustained government housing construction and a public rental housing sector that were understood to support young families on the way to buying their first home. This process was accompanied by an intense expansion and suburbanization of Japan's cities – spatially planned around a model of nuclear households containing a male breadwinner and a female homemaker (Hirayama, 2007).

The 1946 constitution and new civil code in 1947 asserted a particular ideal of the standard family, which was reinforced by corporate employment practices shaped around a model of “enterprise society” (see Fujita & Shionoya, 1997). In terms of the latter, the employment of male breadwinners with a large company effectively guaranteed lifetime employment (*shūshin koyō*) and age based wage increases (*nenkō joretsu*) as well as access to company benefits including housing loans, that provided a stable framework for family formation and progression up a housing ladder toward home ownership (Honma, 1980). Changes in family law including the Family and Inheritance law of 1948 also supported adaptations in family strategies and the ostensible decline of multi-generational households in favour of nuclear, male breadwinner ones. According to census data, by 1960, 60.2 percent of households consisted of a couple with child (ren) only. Similarly, urban owner-occupation advanced from around 25 percent before the war to around 64 percent by the mid-1960s (see Hayakawa, 1990).

Being single in postwar Japan was largely restricted to the transitional stage between becoming an adult and marriage, or, especially in the case of women, widowhood. In both cases, living alone was rare. Children stayed in their parents' homes until marriage and older people typically lived with one of their adult offspring and his or her family. Of course, there were notable exceptions such as students, migrants moving to major cities for work and employees dispatched to regional offices (*tanshin funin*), most of whom were male. At the end of the 1980s, less than 5 percent of either gender between 45 and 54 years of age had never been married. Moreover, only 3.4 percent to 4.2 percent of the married women of 1927 to 1957 birth cohorts were childless (IPSSR,

2012). Not living with one's family then, was very unusual and normally perceived as an "unhappy" form of living (Kubota, 2009b, p. 108).

As housing policy focused on families, private dormitories and boarding houses (*geshuku*) represented the main housing option for most young single people. In the 1970s and 1980s the first one-room apartments (*wan-rūmu manshon*) were built targeting students and young employees. Growing demand in this sector reflected both improved disposable income and longer waiting time before marriage.¹ In the emerging public rental-housing sector meanwhile, only family households qualified, with low-income, single elderly people being the only eligible category of singles (Ōumi, 2002).

While the trend toward household fragmentation preceded it, the implosion of Japan's economic bubble in the early-1990s constituted a watershed in both housing careers and family formation. The prolonged economic downturn significantly undermined "enterprise society" and the flow of younger Japanese people into marriage. Amendments to the Worker Dispatching Act between 1996 and 2004 eroded lifelong employment by facilitating the casualization of working conditions, especially for younger cohorts. By the mid-2000s, at least one in three Japanese workers aged 35 and under were either under- or unemployed (see Inui, 2009).

In the Japanese context, the destabilisation of employment conditions particularly contributed to a drop in marriage and the formation of new family households (see Yamada, 2005). While 56.8 percent of households included a married couple and their children in 1980, by 2010 this had dropped to 36 percent. As Figure 1 illustrates, nuclear families (of conjugal couples and their children) no longer prevail, with single-person households being the most common type since 2005 (IPSSR, 2012). While a key driver in the increase in one-person households has been growing numbers of elderly, an increasing proportion of which live alone, the formation of couples in general appears to have been undermined. Between 1995 and 2010, the share of unmarried women aged 25-29 advanced from 48.1 percent to 54 percent, and for those aged 30 to 34, from 19.7 percent to 26.6 percent. Among men, equivalent non-marriage rates escalated from 66.8 percent to 69.3 percent and 37.3 percent to 42.9 percent (MIAC, 2015).

Housing practices were also affected by changes in marriage and the economy. Mulder (2006) has identified important links between marriage and home purchase in societies dominated by owner-occupation, with declining flows into the former undermining access to the latter. This seems to have been the case in Japan with, according to the 2013 Housing and Land Survey, home ownership rates among households with a head aged 30-34 falling from 45.7 percent in 1983 to 28.8 percent in 2013 (MLIT, 2013). This trend has been exacerbated by policy interventions in the post-bubble period, and while measures have ostensibly been family facing, they have been characteristically neoliberal and involved state withdrawal from both public rental housing and housing loan sectors (Hirayama, 2010). Critically, government agencies now focus on stimulating urban regeneration, with very few subsidies supporting households, especially non-family ones, despite pressures from the growing mass of singles.

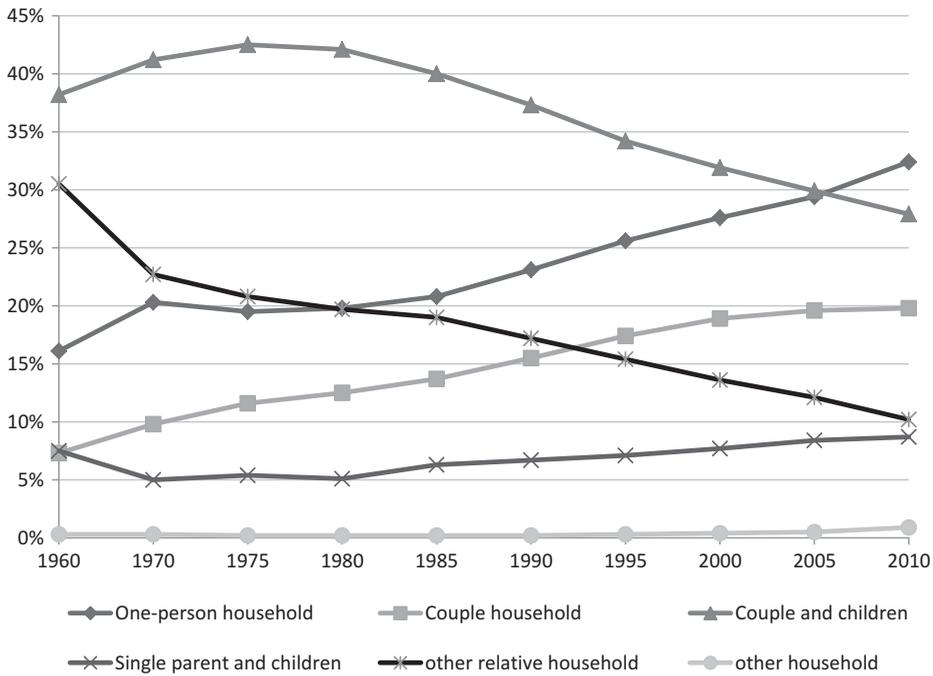


Figure 1. Changing household composition, 1960–2010.

Source: IPSSR (2012) <http://www.ipssr.go.jp/p-info/e/psj2012/PSJ2012.asp> (author's calculations).

Single person housing careers

Despite the proliferation of unmarried people, the ideology of the family remains deeply embedded in the fabric of Japanese social relations. Indeed, the Abe administration (since 2012) has continued to emphasise the family as the basis of welfare provision, with policy discourses harking back to Japanese “welfare society”, built on traditional filial obligations. Nonetheless, post-bubble social transformations arguably represent the arrival of a “second modernity” (Beck & Grande, 2010), accelerated by prolonged economic downturn, the erosion of state agencies and large corporations, and, subsequently, families as mediators of risk. Suzuki et al. (2010) have emphasised however, that unlike other post-industrial societies, Japan, while adopting the objective conditions for individualisation in terms of social fragmentation and individualised social risk, has been slow in adapting “subjective individualisation”. Research has suggested that younger Japanese cohorts, despite declining coupling, still strongly aspire to marriage and the production of children, with increases in single person life-courses and housing careers reflecting adaptation to socioeconomic realities rather than deeply individualistic dispositions (Ronald & Nakano, 2013).

The concern of this paper is how housing and household transitions are being negotiated by younger Japanese singletons faced with the adverse labour, marriage and housing markets that characterise Japan's specific contemporary socio-demographic and urban landscape. Before considering our empirical analysis, it is necessary to establish what options are available to young adults living life as an unmarried person in Japan. Being single, of course, is not the same as living

alone, and our analysis builds upon the assumption that there are a number of specific routes that can be followed if one is unable to, or chooses not to, form a new family.

Perhaps the most obvious of these is to form a partnership, or even a family household outside of marriage. However, this is particularly rare in Japan and despite recent increases, just a few per cent of households fall into this category (Raymo, Iwasawa, & Bumpass, 2009). Moreover, the chances of such relationships producing children are very low, with cohabitation quickly precipitating marriage in such cases (MIAC, 2015).

Adults who do not marry thus have a limited number of options. The first of these is to remain in the natal home and maybe the most common outcome for those with the least social or economic resources. Between 1995 and 2010, shares of unmarried adults staying-on in their parent's homes grew from 18.8 percent to 27.6 percent among 30-34 year olds, at one end of the scale, and from 2.9 percent to 8.6 percent for those aged 50-54, at the other (Hirayama, 2017). Since the 1990s, this phenomenon has become a growing public and academic concern, and while early studies painted those living indefinitely with parents as a "parasitic" or feckless group who had abandoned adult responsibilities, later ones focused on the precarity of those whose housing situation typically reflected labor market disadvantages (see Inui, 2009; Perkins, 2014; Yamada, 2005).

Most young unmarried adults, however, do manage to establish an independent household. In 2013 around 54.2 percent of Japanese households headed by someone less than 35 years-old were lone-dwellers, increasing to 66.8 percent in Tokyo (MIAC, 2015). Indeed, in Tokyo, one-person households make up almost half of all urban households (MLIT, 2013). Among those aged under 35, around 88 percent live in private rented accommodation. Private rental housing for one-person households is largely made up of very small (less than 29m²) units of generally low quality. Moreover, along with growing demand and deteriorating wage conditions, housing in this sector has become less affordable (Hirayama, 2010). Employers have continued to place single workers in company apartments and dormitories. However, this practice is diminishing (MLIT, 2013). Public housing options are also very limited for younger unmarried people (see Hiramaya, 2013).

In Tokyo, only 5.7 percent of one-person households aged 25-34 are owner-occupiers, and even among 35-44 year-olds the rate is just 16.7 percent (compared to a city average of around 48 percent for all households) (MIAC, 2015). A double household income has increasingly been necessary to meet the deposit and loan-to-income criteria of home purchase, especially in cities. According to census data, while 53.6 percent of 25 to 29 year-old and 37 percent of 30-34 year-old independent singles earn less than 3 million yen a year, among young family households the respective shares are 23.0 percent and 13.2 percent (see Hirayama, 2010). In light of shifting demand, there has been a boom in construction of super compact condominiums targeted at better-off lone-dwellers since the late-1990s. For those who can afford them, such properties have provided opportunities to get on the property ladder and accumulate housing assets (Kubo & Yui, 2011). Nonetheless, this market for wealthier singles remains at odds with traditional family household formation and arguably represents an alternative to, rather than a part of the standard Japanese housing ladder.

Being single and independent does not always mean having to live alone. Although the idea of living with friends or strangers was almost unheard of in the late twentieth century, in the last decade or so, the idea of "collective living" or "shared housing" (*share house*) has taken hold in Japan. While shared forms of

housing remain rare and mainly restricted to urban contexts and more educated people, they are now considered a potential solution to the dissolving of family networks and as a space where one can live according to one's own preferences (Kubota, 2009b).

Sharing has taken a number of forms. Informally organized shared-homes are relatively rare. Meanwhile, "share houses" provided by real estate companies or developers, using apartment blocks, general-purpose buildings and former dormitories, which may have from 5 to over 100 inhabitants, are more common. "Share house" contracts are short term (sometimes monthly), rooms are furnished and residents do not usually have to pay "key money", which reduces starting costs. Most houses provide one room per person, but dormitory-rooms used by several people are not unusual. Property managers and other intermediaries usually set house rules and organize functions such as cleaning, although residents may often contribute their own ideas on how the house is organized and furnished (see Jung & Kobayashi, 2008).

It is difficult to estimate the impact of shared forms of housing as it is often counted in official tallies under "independent single living", "non-related shared households" or "other households". Tokyo is most indicative of change with the proportion of non-related shared households increasing from 0.38 percent to 1.28 percent of the total population between 1985 and 2010 (MIAC, 2015). Arguably, figures published by *Hitsuji Fudōsan*, the biggest internet portal for shared housing, provide some deeper insight, although these data only represent a fraction of the total sector (i.e. formal, middle to high-end). According to Hitsuji, in Figure 2, there were nearly 1,300 shared

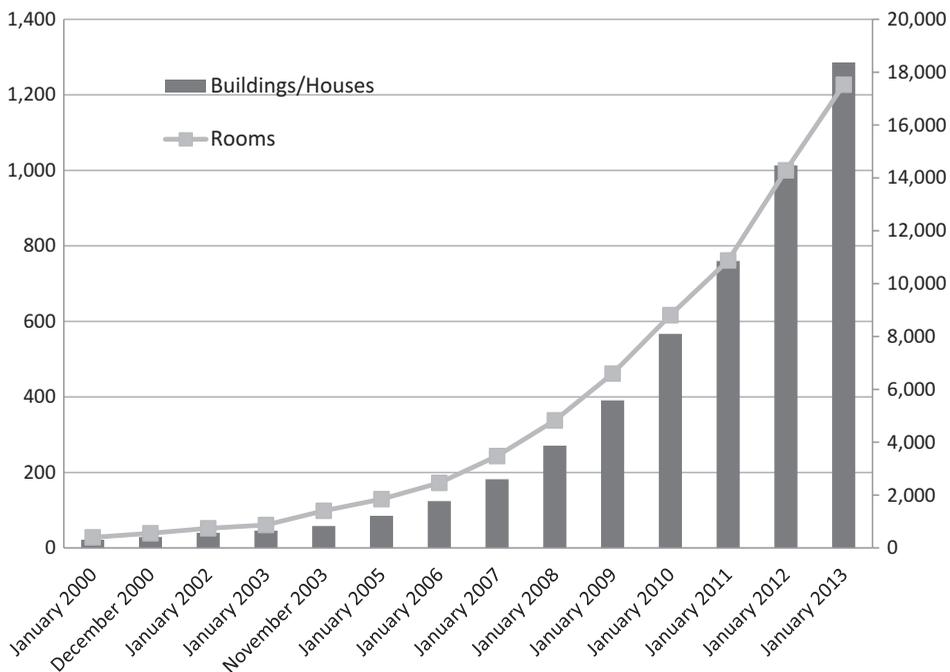


Figure 2. Numbers of share houses and rooms in share houses, 2000 to 2013.

Source: Hitsuji Fudosan (2013) <https://www.hituji.jp/comret/survey/20130418-100000-thanks-report>.

houses it the beginning of 2013, up from 22 houses in 2000. This corresponds with an increase from around 400 to 17,500 rooms. These are mainly concentrated in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Around two-thirds of sharers are women, with many houses being single sex only, although recent increases in men have been observed along with the growth of mixed gender houses. The average tenant is aged 27.8 (Hitsuji Fudosan, 2013).

There are, arguably, three important factors that have supported the growth of shared housing. First are experiments with collective dwelling arrangements and contracts pioneered for elderly people (Jung & Kobayashi, 2008). Second has been growing vacancies in central urban districts associated with post-industrialisation, demographic change and declining average income (especially among younger cohorts). Third are the images of young people living as fictive households derived from Western media, which have also been incorporated into the storylines of many popular Japanese TV dramas in the 2000s.² Responses to the growth in shared housing, co-housing, housing cooperatives etc., over the last ten to fifteen years have, nonetheless, been ambiguous, and while some see it as a solution to Japan's housing problems, others have expressed reservations about this form of living as undermining the family base of society. Critically, however, there have been limited housing choices for many singles, with the options surrounding living alone being mostly expensive, unappealing and often stigmatized.

Approach and methods

The following analysis draws explicitly from a qualitative interview study carried out in the summer of 2014 with 28 younger households living in the metropolitan Tokyo area. It seeks to develop understanding of relationships between housing and urban contexts, dwelling practices and discourses, and individualised life-course transitions. Due to the distinctiveness of homes as social, economic and cultural goods, as well as our concern with the interaction between individual subjects and their material environment, our approach is informed by Bengtsson and Somerville (2002) contextualized rational action approach. This inductive stance seeks to embed material housing objects in broader social relations; especially where, "individual actors are assumed to have some logical consistency in the pursuit of their goals, whereas the nature of these goals (the preferences of the actors, including the norms they adhere to) is open to empirical investigation where social and institutional context is of critical importance" (p.124).

Our study sought to capture a range of household types and housing situations, but with a focus on the experience of singles. Table 1 establishes the characteristics of our sample. Around half of our households included unmarried people, with 10 of our 28 households being comprised of one-person living alone (8 renters and 2 owners), 3 shared housing residents, one cohabiting couple and one living with their parents. While purposive in terms of selection, our sampling approach was largely opportunistic, drawing on a network derived from contacts established from our University base in central Tokyo. As such, our sample can be assumed to demonstrate a bias towards better educated individuals from middle-income backgrounds. Similarly, while academic discussions of Japan's young urban singles focus on the "precariat" (i.e. Allison, 2012), most of our respondents have more secure housing situations, with

Table 1. Characteristics of interview sample.

Total number of interviews	35 people (aged 25–39) from 28 households
Household types (people aged 25–39)	1 interview with single person living with parents 13 interviews with one person households 1 interview with a cohabiting couple 4 interviews with couples (without children) 9 interviews with couples (with children)
Housing situations (people aged 25–39)	1 single co-residing 8 one person renters 3 shared housing 2 single homeowners 2 couple renters 12 couple home owners
Education	The majority of interviewees were university or junior college graduates
Income (yearly net wages)	Between 2 million yen and 10 million yen

single homeowners and upper-end rental market tenants, for example, over-represented. The data thus represent more middle-class concerns.

The age range (25–39 years old) among our respondents reflects our interest in adult individuals who would otherwise, according to Japanese averages, be expected to be partnered, married or even have children. There is a mix of genders and in the case of couples both partners were interviewed. There are marked differences in experiences and expectations of men and women in love, labour and housing markets in Japan, and recent studies have drawn particular attention to divergence in the experiences of single women (e.g. Nakano, 2012; Ronald & Nakano, 2013) and, to lesser extent, single men (see Dasgupta, 2009). In sum, employment careers have been highly gendered, with most women expected to stop work (to become a full time homemaker) on getting married. Indeed, having a child typically indicates the end of a professional career, with any return to employment likely to be part time (Kondo, 2012). As such, the rise of unmarried women living alone represents a marked shift in life-courses and lifestyles (see also Izuhara, 2015), reflecting increasing female aspirations towards education and work. The impact on the housing market for singles, traditionally dominated by men, has also been remarkable with a particular demand among single women for super-compact condominium units (over rentals) and shared housing (see Kubo & Yui, 2011) that provide greater security.

Interviews were carried out in Japanese (in the informant's home where possible) and later transcribed. Coding and analysis was carried out by one of the authors drawing on personal field notes and an inductive interpretation of the transcripts. Although around half of the households included couples, their perspectives not only illustrated those of mainstream social insiders – in contrast to our singleton outsiders – but also reflected past housing pathways navigated as a single.

To this point we have largely used the concepts of housing ladder, career and pathway interchangeably. Nonetheless, we are conceptually more concerned with pathways, which are patterns of interaction regarding the house and home over time and space (Clapham, Mackie, Orford, & Thomas, 2014), and are therefore more complex and socially embedded than “ladders” or “careers”. Indeed, housing pathways of young people in Europe, for example, have recently been shown to be non-linear, even chaotic, reflecting their embeddedness in specific urban contexts (Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015; Druta & Ronald,

2017). The idea of a housing pathway thus lends itself particularly well to examining how young people deal, as a single, with social, institutional and housing market constraints.

Lone dwelling and living alone

In our study, for most of those who lived, or had lived alone, the idea of “home” was not particularly congruous with the experience of being or living as a one-person household. This largely lied with the types of property singles typically occupy, which in most cases were rented one-room apartments. It was apparent in pathway narratives that these dwelling spaces were not at all important to lone dwellers, with as little time as possible spent there. The singleton’s dwelling was often just a place to sleep, with the more meaningful parts of their lives revolving around work (or finding work). In such cases, housing choices were usually justified in terms of price and proximity to work (either actual or commuting proximity). Housing units (the space of the home) were usually referred to as *heya* (room) and not *apato* or *manshon* (apartment or flat), and rarely *uchi*, *ie* or *jitaku* (home). There was no great attachment to, or investment in dwelling units themselves – which were largely seen as interchangeable – and moves were anticipated whenever a periodic contract expired. Indeed, interviewees often asserted that one-person (rental) households were not a proper type of household, with the comfort of the unit compromised by this status.

When I lived in Ginza, every day I would go to work and come back home late at night and really it was not home at all, more like just a place to sleep. I couldn’t relax at all. Really it seemed as if the only things in the house were a *futon* (bed) and a toilet.

(Male, 25, Chef, single)

Another important factor was the temporary nature of perceived situations in life surrounding living alone. Interviews rarely suggested that living alone was a desirable long-term condition, with the formation of a one-person household usually representing something of a stopgap.

I didn’t move here because I wanted to live here. I had a lot of other reasons [being able to help my family financially, being close to work] for moving here. And I kind of always thought it would be for two years. At the end of the two years, I think my situation will have changed, my work and my life in general should be a bit more ‘together’ (*mattomatte iru*) so I can get out of here and actually find a place that is more like... in general more than here.

(Male, 30, Musician/part timer, single)

The *jikka* (the parental or ancestral home) continued to be a point of reference in most cases, regardless of distance, supporting the notion that one-person units continue to be an extension of the family home. Kim and Omi (1994) have proposed that psychological relations continue to be more important than spatial ones in the consolidation of family ties under Japanese modernity. The home and family – conceptually bound together in the very word for house (*ie*) – are thus not necessarily tied to the space where one physically dwells. Indeed, Yūko (2004), as well as Ueno (2009), argue that families in Japan can take on quite unconventional, fragmented forms, but retain a sense of unity. Families, not only Japanese ones, may choose to separate in order to strengthen themselves economically, with bonds and practices adapting to physical

distance. In our interviews, many ostensibly independent singles still connected to their family home, with the meaning, or meaningfulness, of their current residence echoing this.

I: How important is this house to you?

R: Hmm, maybe, actually, it's not all that important.

I: Not that important?

R: For example, if this house were... if for some reason I were no longer able to use it anymore I am sure I will manage somehow. I go just go and sleep in the office. And my home (*jikka*) is in Saitama, so in principle I could go and come back in one day, though it's a little far for that. In other words, because my home (*jikka*) is [emotionally] close, I think this house is not all that important

(Male, 25, graduate student, single)

As discussed earlier, the vast majority of young one-person households are renters, with this sector characterised by self-contained units of less than 29m² (sometimes less than 20m²), of generally low quality. It is perhaps not surprising then that dwelling in these spaces did not really allow singletons to develop a sense of individuality or continuity around the home. According to our informants, visits from friends, parents or other family were unusual, with third spaces like bars and restaurants the focus of social interactions. One-person units were essentially utilitarian and rarely became social spaces, except occasionally when girlfriends or boyfriends stayed over. Experiences of one-room apartments largely reflected and reinforced a traditional image of the lone dweller as someone “not yet” married, whose life revolves around work and building up relationships around the work place that will facilitate a future partnership and family.

Celebrating the “personally-responsible” individual

While in many cases, especially among younger renters, the idea of lone-dwelling was largely un-home like, with single person units representing functional spaces to service the body and keep belongings, there were also positive aspects to living alone. One core factor that came out in interviews was the importance of achieving privacy. Having a non-exposed place to dry your clothes (Female, 25, shop assistant, single) or a washing machine that is not on the hallway (Male, 25, graduate student, single); or having thicker walls so you don't hear the neighbours (Male, 26, Company employee, single); or at the very least investing in curtains (Male, 30, Musician/part timer, single), were important homemaking practices for young singles. In many cases they were aspects missing from the housing alternatives that they had considered when choosing their current dwelling.

Discourses that celebrated living alone as a liberational act were rare, as was evidence of singles explicitly embracing individualism. Nonetheless, some interviewees had begun to invest in their homes and seemed to have reached a point where they wanted their dwelling to mean something more. In these cases, the expression of sophisticated tastes (described as *kodawari*), was of particular relevance. Especially for those who had the means to do so – mostly homeowners or high-end renters – housing choices and accounts of them more closely reflected ideas of lifestyle and recognised the home as

part of enacting that lifestyle. For them, lone dwelling was not so un-homelike and they considered their choices as more informed.

There were a few different things that made me chose this house to live in. I wanted it to be a *tatami*³ floor house with an old feel about it. Like this apartment has this amazing tiled bath tub that you never find in new apartments. And I really wanted a separate room to sleep, with a bed in it. So yeah, actually behind those *shōji* doors is my bedroom.

(Female, 33, TV programme director, in a long-distance relationship)

For those who could afford it, the home was a means to make life more comfortable, or even a space for themselves to enjoy.

I bought this house (had it built) because I thought it would be quite cool. I would surprise all my friends and family. My dad said that I am doing things backwards, first getting a house and then a wife. I didn't tell anyone before I got it, and I had it built to specifications. Like, you see, this cupboard that is like a wine cellar – I ordered that. And downstairs there is a study – where I keep all my *manga* magazines and books. I really wanted to have a study. I made most of the house thinking that I would sell it if ever I get married. . . even then, I thought at least one room should be for my hobbies.

(Male, 33, insurance company employee, single)

Also important was the economic security offered by buying a property, even if it did not suit long terms life-course plans.

I: What made you decide to buy while you are single?

R: There are many people like that. Firstly, the number of single persons is increasing. It doesn't mean that they cannot get married, but don't intend to do it. But we get older. If I get married in five years [from now]. . . well. . . how should I say? I have to live somewhere and pay rent anyway. There is not a big difference between the loan and the rental payment on a house, I thought it's better to pay the loan and sell or rent the house as a side-business after I get married and move to a bigger place. That's my idea.

I: Are there really many people that have this idea around you?

R: Well I don't know any. But my friend who recommended I buy the house says there are more and more of them.

(Male, 28, Accountant, single)

Characteristic of those singletons more invested in their homes, both psychologically and financially, was a sense of purposefulness in their choices and actions, reflecting the contemporary cultural notion of “responsible” individuality. Many were aware that being a long-term single was an increasingly common and enduring way of life, and while most thought that they might find the right person some day, living alone was something they had come to accept. From our interviews with couples, it also became evident that the prolonged period of living alone as a single had implications for those who do partner. There appeared some reticence, especially among wives, about what could be lost. In one instance, the fear of losing a hard won individuality, achieved from years of independence, was clearly at stake in the marriage.

R1: Well we got married recently and we moved here, but we know that we are not going to stay here long [. . .]

- I: Can you tell me a bit about the different rooms in this house and their use.
 R2: Well... this room here, this is my room.
 R1: This is her room.
 R2: Well... I wanted in a way to preserve my own space. Until now I lived alone for a long time, I never lived with someone else before, and I was really worried I would not have a space where I could be by myself... I am acting a bit spoiled but ... I just wanted to have my old room even if in a smaller version. I don't use it very much though.
 (R1 = Male, 34; R2 = Female, 32; social workers; recently married couple)

Shared housing – between precarity and community

The objective of this paper is not only to consider how younger unmarried Japanese are navigating housing pathways alone, but also the emerging alternatives to forming a family household. We formally interviewed a number of people living in shared housing as well as visiting shared houses for dinners and collective social gatherings. While very little is known of this housing “solution” for singles in Japan – almost unheard of until a decade ago – our findings are particularly illustrative of how this form of housing is filling the gaps, both in terms of shelter and ontological needs, for a growing number of people.

In the Tokyo shared houses we visited in our study we found, among others: foreign students in need of short-term accommodation; young adults in precarious employment, but also aspiring to do more with their lives (with many trying to work out an individual 'philosophy of life'); middle aged singles pursuing non-mainstream lifestyles often involving specific interests (for example, movie making, photography or music, each of which require specific facilities that are impossible to find in regular apartments for singles) and, finally, even under-employed middle aged people with family or relationship problems.

A critical part of the appeal of shared houses was their value for money as well as what they offered in contrast to compact rental units. Shared houses were easy to access because of minimal contract requirements (limited or no deposit and short notice periods) and, depending on their facilities and location, quite cheap.⁴ The ones managed by companies that owned more than one property also offered considerable flexibility.

Well, how can I say, the contract is like a user policy. It's more like a service than a real estate business. There is an intermediary company between us and the landowner or the building owner, and that company rents to us. [...] I chose this particular shared housing because I knew the agent that rents it out. I also moved twice in Shinjuku between shared houses. This agent has 60 properties in Tokyo and I can move wherever I want. They offer that kind of service.

(Male, 28, Shop manager, single)

While shared houses are cheaper than independent single rental units, there have been some recent public concerns about quality. The Ministry of Land recently reported an assessment of almost 700 shared properties in metropolitan Tokyo in 2013, identifying numerous deficiencies in terms of, for example, fire protection, and light and ventilation standards in bedrooms. One suggestion has been that many landlords are using the successful branding of “shared housing” to offload poor quality stock with a

considerable number of (young) people seeming to accept inadequate housing (see Miura, 2011). To some extent our informants echoed the idea of shared housing as a basic form of housing reminiscent of old fashioned urban dormitories. Many private rooms were very small and simple, less than 5 *tatami*, and many were not particularly private.

I: How is the room you live in like?

R: Well it's smaller than I expected. There is a desk and a bed. Um, it's like a hospital bed. In Japanese hospital, there is a desk at one's feet covering the bed. It's like that. It's very small. It looks like a business hotel. And there is a key for the door... all doors with keys. But the walls between the rooms are not full. There is small space between where the wall finishes and the ceiling starts. It's called a semi-private room. The floor is *tatami*.

I: Is there any place for storage in your room?

R: A closet? There is hardly any closet. I only have a rack to hang the clothes, shirts or suits. There is also a shelf to put clothes. For things that you don't use all the time there is a common storage on the top floor.

(Male, 28, Shop manager, single)

While it was clear that shared housing choices reflected financial constraints, supporting the notion that this sector caters to a growing population of young precariat who can't afford to rent alone, there were also other important qualities that were appealing. Firstly, many reasonably priced shared residences have been established in inner city areas. Their locations near centres of urban consumption and employment were thus important. Private sector research has suggested that share house dwellers work in a variety of jobs, but with a large proportion employed in IT, the media and advertising (Hitsuji Fudosan, 2013), confirming an image of shared housing as a place of creative people. Although much of the stock derives from converted properties (often making the most of the growing unoccupied urban stock – 13 percent in Tokyo (Building Centre of Japan [BCJ], 2012), many houses have been branded by employing famous architects in the refurbishment process, by including high-end features such as lavish kitchens and spa facilities, and by adapting high-spec houses originally built for the expat market.

There were, however, more fundamental social attractions to shared houses. On the one hand was the idea of the “fun of living together” (see Jung & Kobayashi, 2008). Living in shared housing provided opportunities for encounters with people that occupants might otherwise never meet, as well as a way of getting together with others that shared one's interests. Involvement with hobbies was certainly an explicit aspect of sharing.

I was among the first people to move into this shared house. I am sometimes a running coach (among other things) so they asked me to organize running classes for people in the shared house. I even got a good deal on the room for that. We have classes twice a week. And I also started a Pilates class in the evenings. Other people do other things. Like right here, behind this room there is a music room. I also know a few people moved here because they can practice their instruments without bothering people.

(Female, 30, Freelancer/Part timer, single)

Jung and Kobayashi (2008) have considered emerging social relations around shared housing as a sign that, especially among young people, community is being re-valued. There was certainly evidence of this in our encounters. A more specific issue was the expectation of gaining some sort of emotional or practical support by living with like-minded people. There was also concern with the feeling of safety in shared housing compared to the isolation of living alone.

The marketing of shared housing has embodied many of these ideas about new communities. Indeed, the experience of the informant above (receiving a discount in rent for providing a collective service, for example) suggests explicit measures are being taken to encourage conviviality. Commercial providers seem to be targeting the growing number of people who are deviating from mainstream family and housing careers, but are seeking more than a life alone. Community-oriented cohousing projects suggest the possibility of a “different urban life” that contrasts to individual isolation and counter fears of the “big city”. There are also novel features in the way shared houses are accessed that depart from the traditional practices of commission orientated, real estate agents. Internet communities of people reporting on their experiences have certainly contributed to the growing popularity of sharing and associated websites have made it much easier for individuals to find appropriate shared houses or share mates (Kubota, 2009a). In our research we found that shared houses can be both cool – especially when they are themed shared houses, or if they have interesting facilities (like a *senjo* bath or a climbing wall) – and dismal, especially when they have only the bare minimum of facilities (kitchen, living room with TV and a large shared bathroom).

The idea of shared houses as communities was something that most respondents talked about and thought important, although in reality many were shy or interacted little with others. While the provision of collective facilities was also a factor in this, differences in working schedules also meant that people often had little time to meet with or talk to others.

Actually, everyone says that (that people who share become like a community) in public. However, if you live there... you rarely see others because your schedules are so different. But it also depends on the shared house. Where I live now, we say hello to each other but don't eat or drink together in common space. On the other hand, in some places, I heard residents have a party once a week or go out for a dinner together. The reason is that there is a person like a leader who livens up the community, likes to call people together and have a party. If there is such a person, everyone can begin to have fun together. Otherwise, we can't make friends easily... It makes it difficult to get close.

(Male, 28, Shop manager, single)

The sheer size of some shared units also seemed to inhibit rather than enhance closer human interactions.

This is a really big shared-house. 260 rooms. I think, however, that no more than ten per cent of the people actually use the common spaces and come out and make friends. The majority just come in and go straight to their rooms.

(Female, 30, Freelancer/Part timer, single)

Discussion

The specific concern of this paper has been how contemporary young singletons are seeking to establish a home in a particular urban context featuring an adverse housing market and a social system that primarily administers individuals as members of family households. Another concern was how younger people deal with processes of isolation and individualisation in the Japanese context. Our analysis first explored the embedding of the Japanese post-war housing system and its alignment with social, economic and family forming practices, as well as its unravelling in recent decades. The subsequent rise of one-person households in Japan has run against institutional frameworks orientated around the support of families as the basis of life-courses and social well-being. We have empirically explored this paradox in terms of a number of specific housing pathways open to those following a life-course trajectory as a single in context of Japan's post-bubble economy.

The singles and former singles we talked to expressed an enduring normative attachment to postwar ideals surrounding the standard family life-course and housing pathway, despite growing barriers to it. One-person households were not formed in preference for, but more typically as necessary alternatives to, a couple or nuclear family household. One-person dwellings, especially small, low-end rentals, were rarely considered "home", and were narratively integrated into biographies as temporary stages in a housing pathway that existed in a spatial network emanating from the natal family home and foreshadowed the formation of a possible future family. Indeed, the focus on marriage and family loomed particularly large in the accounts of Japanese lone-dwellers and are at significant odds with the view of contemporary urban singles embracing the "freedoms" of living alone derived from Western contexts (à la Klinenberg, 2012).

Scholars in Japan have largely responded to the rise of singles as a part of "objective" as much as "subjective" individualization (Suzuki et al., 2010), thereby emphasising socioeconomic constraints rather than choice. *Subjective* individualization has been apparent since the 1980s, but remains tempered in social discourse and practice. This seemed evident among our singles and one-person households, and while the more established had begun to associate their homes with urban lifestyles, consumption and achieving economic autonomy, there was little celebration of personal freedom as a primary life goal. At the same time, it was apparent that increasing experience of living alone was also beginning to shape the outlook of those who later formed couples and sought to carve out more space for themselves in the family home.

Western accounts of "reflexive modernisation" have presupposed "reflexive individualization", which has not been so obvious in contemporary Japan (Beck & Grande, 2010). *Objective* individualization related to structural barriers to family formation, such as income insecurity, has been particularly significant, especially in restructuring exposure to risk. *Subjective* individualization has thus appeared a response to, rather than a driver of, shifting conditions and not particularly reflexive or *individualistic* (see Ronald & Izuhara, 2016). Under "reflexive modernity", associated with the rise of singles in western contexts, individuals are often cast as selfish and self-sufficient in regards to their own social, emotional and economic security in line with the disintegration of collective interests and the waning of family. This also involves ontological shifts featuring enhanced self-reflexivity and reflective (do-it-yourself) biographies

(Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In the Japanese case however, while family formation has faded, associational aspirations remain resilient. Recent shifts in housing pathways may, therefore, not only reflect shifting attitudes and expectations among a particular cohort of younger people, but also a historical shift in working and living arrangements that is realigning younger people in terms of home and family.

The recent rise of shared housing, although nascent, has been unexpected due to the centrality of the family in Japanese social life. The close relationship between housing and family in Japan has, for decades, inhibited household diversification in favour of fragmentation. Indeed, resistance to unmarried cohabitation or even living with non-related people has been normatively enduring, contributing to the rapid advance of one-person households as the “back side of the coin” to the family (Kubota, 2009a, p. 139). The recent increase of shared housing therefore hints at transformations underway in the logic of the family and even society at large. While sharing is, or was, alien, it is filling a precise gap in Japanese society. Moreover, Japanese sharing contrasts sharply with modes of sharing evident in developed Western societies (cf. Arundel & Ronald, 2016), and the meaning of sharing a “home” with a stranger (Heath, Davies, Edwards, & Scicluna, 2018).

In context of diminishing family formation and the potential alienation of lone living – as well as the cost and inferior conditions associated with one-person rental units – shared houses have represented an alternative form of (potentially family like) collective living. Indeed, in our Tokyo shared houses, while there were economic advantages, values of togetherness and community were central, although not always practiced. In contrast to houses of multiple occupation where younger adults are typically found living together in western societies – where units are smaller and sharing relations often “cold” (Arundel & Ronald, 2016) – Japanese share houses are sold as places of collective activity where like-minded people with shared interests come together, often in high volume. In many cases, it seemed actual contact was quite limited. Nonetheless, *being alone together* was important, providing a measure of collective mitigation of individual risk. Sharing in this way represent, for many, a new kind of home, suited to the material and ontological needs of the “ordinary refugees” (Allison, 2012) of Japan’s post bubble generation.

A final point to consider is why the contemporary housing pathways of young unmarried Japanese adults appear to be so different from those in other developed societies, but also from their predecessors. Japanese urban and housing environments seem to play an important role alongside social, economic and demographic factors. Postwar housing pathways were largely linear reflecting a stronger integration of standard employment and family careers with movement up a housing ladder and the production of an owner-occupied housing stock (see Hirayama, 2010). Since the 1990s however, the strong alignment between family forming and the housing system has waned. Post-bubble economic and employment conditions seem to have undermined the capacity for Japanese millennials to couple, disrupting their transition through a housing career. Here Japan diverges with Southern Europe in that although there have also been increases in adult children staying on in the natal home, many also leave to form a non-family household alone, with a growing market of super-compact apartment units catering to emerging demand. While this is more reminiscent of Northern European societies, lone singles in Japan are far less likely to go onto form

any other sort of home: such as moving in with friends or a girlfriend/boyfriend, or start a one-parent family. One outcome of inhibited household transitions has been the rise of “never married” people with a recent survey revealing that 23.4 percent of men had never been married by the age of 50 (IPSSR, 2015), up from 20.2 percent from 2010, but in contrast to 1.7 percent in a similar survey from 1970. For women the ratio was 14.1 percent in 2015 compared to 3.6 percent in 1970.

The Japanese case suggests that housing pathways are shaped by a combination of social and material factors, and thus context dependent. On the one hand, expectations of particular marriage and employment careers (albeit, often unfulfilled) seem to restrict the new kinds of households unmarried people want to, or can form. On the other, the housing system provides few options for those who do not marry. Moreover, the structure of the housing market itself tends to funnel singles into small (usually rental) units, with the boom in this sector, in larger cities at least, undermining the production of units suited to couples and larger households (Kubo & Yui, 2011), and thus the long-term supply of homes for more than one-person living alone. Shared houses have begun to change the landscape of urban singledom, with the rapidly growing market matching up vacant stock with the social and emotional needs of those otherwise forced to either live alone or with their parents. The government has also begun to consider the realities of a society featuring more and more people unsupported by a family household. For example, while non-elderly singles qualify for few social benefits, the introduction of a housing allowance accessible to individual tenants has recently been proposed by policy makers. Furthermore, since 2005, households of non-related people have become eligible for public housing in some municipalities. The Urban Renaissance Agency has also experimented with shared housing projects that allow for greater flexibility in household types, especially in the older housing stock (Jung & Kobayashi, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted recent changes in contemporary Japan that illustrate the salience of social, cultural and economic context in the advance of individualisation and how it is manifest in relation to housing, family and urban systems. Young, unmarried Japanese people are becoming a feature of Japanese cities as well as a significant force underlying various transformations that represent a challenge social harmony and continuity. As people who do not get married rarely produce offspring in Japan, their proliferation is exacerbating declines in fertility,⁵ and thus the grip of ageing. Furthermore, as current cohorts of singles age, they will require more welfare assistance in later life. As this is a role families have traditionally filled (and as very few unmarried people produce families of their own), greater pressure is likely to bear on the state to step in, especially as singles become a more powerful electoral caucus. The fact that singles are more likely to be in non-regular work and are less likely to become homeowners, and thereby accumulate individual assets (Hirayama, 2010), also suggests that they will become more vulnerable to social risk.

The growth in single living in Japan contrasts to the parallel Western phenomena as welfare states and social values there have allowed for more flexible household arrangements (particularly the production of children outside marriage) (see Klinenberg, 2012).

The rigidity of the Japanese postwar standard family model, which has shaped housing and public policy around it, has provided particular problems for those who have fallen out of it. Specifically, routes through adult life and even through an adult housing career are constrained for people who live alone. Much more so than among most European societies at least.

The main focus of this paper has been how younger individuals themselves understand and are negotiating more atomised routes through housing pathways and life-courses. Our approach has been exploratory due to both the rapid rate of recent change in the housing conditions of singles in Japan, as well as the qualitative nature of our original empirical data. Nevertheless, approaching both actors and their dwellings as meaningful and interconnected categories has proved particularly insightful in capturing the housing pathways of our informants. It is also illustrative of the usefulness of housing and housing pathways as axes of comparative social research (Bengtsson & Somerville, 2002; Clapham et al., 2014). Our findings suggest that urban singles are perhaps not always as isolated or alienated as the literature has suggested, with family connections looming large in terms of either connections back to the natal home or forward to an imagined future relationship that may generate a new family.

Another critical contribution has been our exploration of urban shared houses as emerging phenomena in Japan. The advance of these in part lies with a matching of supply with significant demand for a low-cost housing alternative for young, unmarried home leavers. At the same time, share houses fulfil far more than just a shelter role. Many seem to respond to (or even play-on) the ontological needs of young urban singles in their search for an alternative to either the family home or one-person apartment as a place to belong and be with others. The risk is that sharing does not really offer a full alternative to family formation as a means to achieve social, welfare and economic security, but merely a stopgap for many younger people. Nonetheless, shared houses may provide a conduit towards a more socially integrated adult world.

Notes

1. In the early 1980s, the mean age of first marriage was below 26 for women and below 29 for men (IPSSR, 2012).
2. For example, *ルームシェアの女* [Room Share Woman] (NHK 2005; *ラスト・フレンズ* [Last Friends] (2008) Fuji TV.
3. Tatami mats are standard fittings in Japanese homes and provide a point of reference for room sizes. One mat (or *jo*) is approximately 180cm by 90cm.
4. According to a Ministry of Land survey, of the reasons for moving into share-houses (with 2 answers possible), 44.6 percent of respondents said because of the low rent, 32.8 percent location and 16.5 percent low starting costs.
5. The total fertility rate in Japan has hovered around 1.3 children per woman since the early 2000s. In context of low immigration, this has meant that the total population has been in decline since 2004 (MIAC, 2015).

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