# Sex Education and the Dynamics of Contemporary Japan: An Appreciation of the Scholarship of Yukari Kawahara

William W. Kelly （Department of Anthropology, Yale University）

Twenty years ago, Yukari Kawahara undertook a major research project on what were then new guidelines for sex education being introduced by the Japanese government into secondary schools in Japan. This was a very focused topic, but it had major ramifications for understanding institutional linkages and pedagogical practices in Japanese education as well as sexual practices and adult aspirations of teenagers. That research formed the basis of her doctoral dissertation at Yale and several subsequent publications (especially Kawahara 2000, 2003, 2006). At the time of her passing, she was preparing a revised and updated version for monograph publication.

Those of us who were privileged to work with her—at Cornell (where she took her M.A. degree with Professor Robert J Smith) and at Yale for her Ph.D.—feel an enormous personal loss. She was deeply committed to her studies but she was also lively and vivacious and generous to others. She was popular with the faculty and her fellow doctoral students. At Waseda, she was always welcoming to visiting Yale students and faculty, and the many Waseda students who passed through her own seminar at Waseda have benefited from her infectious enthusiasm and careful guidance.

But we in Japan studies have also lost a fine scholar—a tireless field worker and a sharp analyst whose work was stimulating to me and many others. In this brief article I want to characterize the direction and findings of her research and offer an appreciation of the continuing significance of her work for understanding state biopower, educational reform, gender dynamics, and the adult life course in 21st-century Japan.

Professor Kawahara has always had a research fascination with formations of gender and sexuality in complex societies, especially Japan. When she was designing her dissertation research, she realized that there was something of a moral panic about these matters in Japan in the early 1990s. The collapse of the speculative bubble had just left the Japanese economy in serious recession, an inexorable demography was trending rapidly towards an aging society, and young people, especially women, were suddenly reluctant to fulfill societal expectations of marriage and parenting. [One of the nation's best-selling non-fiction books in 1992 was Tanimura's "The 'Maybe I Won't Get Married After All'" Syndrome 結婚しないかもしれない症候群.

These developments were raising considerable alarm among state ministries and media commentators, and the government was trying various programs and policies. One of the most discussed was a new curriculum of sex education, designed in the late 1980s and being introduced into secondary schools in the early 1990s. Despite the term, "sex education," the curriculum had broad ambitions to inculcate student awareness and shape attitudes on marriage and family values, gender relations, adolescent sexuality, and what it perceived as an "AIDS crisis."

Kawahara was fascinated by this initiative and her initial key insight was that the national authorities were divided against themselves about the source of the crisis and what they felt to be the necessary response. Officials in the Ministry of Health, for instance, were terrified by the prospects of an HIV/ AIDS epidemic, spread by what they imagined to be an ethos of "permissiveness" and moral laxness (rising teen pregnancies and abortions, increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS cases, etc.). Ministry officials were nervous about any discussion of sex in the schools unless it emphasized abstinence. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education, more concerned about the fast-falling birth rate, was pushing pro-family and pro-natal policies and thus wanted to expand its sex education guidelines and expand the curriculum. Kawahara sensed that this issue was far more

than a single curricular imitative but rather it was a diagnostic point of entry into deep societal anxieties. She took it up as the topic of her dissertation by creatively working on three levels simultaneously.

First, she knew that the very different priorities among the ministries had clear ramifications – and complications – for how the government was actually to create curricular guidelines at several levels of middle schools and high schools. Indeed, it led to acrimonious debates and convoluted compromises at the level of curricular reform and materials, which Kawahara tracked as part of her project. It was an important reminder that the social engineering for which the postwar Japanese state was so known for was not seamless and inevitable. There was no monolithic state interest on most important issues, certainly not in this case.

Secondly, she realized that it was equally critical to study just how such curricular guidelines and materials were actually implemented in the junior high school and high school classrooms— level by level, school by school, and teacher by teacher. Despite a general image of Japanese primary and secondary education as closely coordinated by the national ministry, in fact, socioeconomic class, teacher political orientations, classroom management, and other factors inevitably destabilized predictable management of teenager beliefs and behaviors through their experience in the educational system. We knew from previous classroom ethnography that individual teachers and individual schools exercised leeway in how to transmit national guidelines into day-to-day teaching. Kawahara was certain that this would be particularly true with such a controversial topic that was not shaped by academic examination objectives but by official social and moral ambitions.

And as if this did not introduce sufficient complexity into the research, Kawahara was equally aware of a third level of analysis, in some ways the most difficult: what might be the influence, if any, of this new sex education teaching on the sexual practices of the teenage students of the time and on their future orientations? Again, at the time, there was a general view, both popular and academic, that Japanese teenagers had few opportunities and little experience in sexual activity and that proper sex education could play a formative role in their later values and practices. But actual sexual practices are notoriously difficult to explore responsibly and reliably; most research is based on questionnaires and surveys, which provide only indirect evidence.

In short, Kawahara realized that the push for the new curriculum was a "battlefield" in which "government bureaucrats, school teachers, educators, parents, and adolescents contest and negotiate norms and meanings of gender, sexuality, and family" (1996:3). A proper study of the new sex education guidelines required much more than a simple analysis of the guidelines themselves and interviews with officials and teachers. The research she conducted over 14 months in 1994-1995 involved intensive and creative ethnographic fieldwork in three separate high schools and a middle school, each of which had very distinctive socioeconomic characteristics. She met with administrators and teachers in their offices, she observed teachers and students in their classrooms, and she interacted extensively with teenagers themselves in their social worlds beyond the school.

She was correct in all of her initial surmises. Government officials and national media were in fact divided about the aims of such a curriculum. And there were considerable differences between school administrators and teachers about who was to teach the curriculum in what part of the school schedule and how much time to devote to this. Teachers themselves debated how far they should go in adapting the curriculum guidelines to the particular circumstances of their students. Those in the commercial high school saw the curriculum as a way of providing accurate information about sexuality and pregnancy to their students, who were already sexually active. Those in the private girls' high school were concerned that time spent on the curriculum would interfere with university preparation and was irrelevant to their students. But even among the schools' teaching staffs, there were sharp differences.

There is much for fellow anthropologists to admire in the dissertation and subsequent articles. Perhaps most instructive of all was that part of her research that explored the life experiences of the teenagers themselves. In the final dissertation chapter, for example, she profiles ten students whom she came to know particularly well and whose lives and views she conveys with fulsome quotations. Through the interviews and extended conversations and interactions she had with the students outside of school, we learn of their relationships, their sexual practices, their media habits, and their views on love and marriage, on pregnancy and motherhood. It becomes clear that the students of all levels neither passively absorbed nor completely ignored

the sex education classes. They were selective in their attention, sometimes finding the information to be relevant either to their current practices or to their future imaginings of relationships and family formation. They absorbed the curriculum along with the strong influences of peer socializing and media exposure, recognizing that the messages from the three directions were often contradictory.

One of the important findings of her research was the contrast of the girls from rather privileged backgrounds, attending private high school and destined for university, and the girls from working class families, attending the commercial high school. These working class girls often had rather active sexual lives, but they absorbed a class norm of early marriage and pregnancy and often (and unrealistically) sought to associate sexual relations with a search for a marriage partner. In contrast, the private high school girls had limited dating experience and clearly distinguished between their transient school boyfriends and their eventual husbands. They expressed enough ambition for work careers that Kawahara was skeptical that they were as committed to eventual full-time motherhood as the curriculum emphasized. As she put it,

*These upper-class girls may look like they are conforming to the official government and school ideology that celebrate women's sexual modesty and passivity. Their sexual decisions, however, mainly come from their prospects for multiple choices in the future. They believe that they will have a chance to meet a more promising man or to prepare for a career at university, so that their relationships with their current boyfriends are separate from their hopes for marriage. More important, if these educated girls find alternatives such as careers more attractive than marriage in the future, it is plausible that they will choose to delay marriage or to remain single, which is currently having a negative effect on Japanese government and business groups because of a declining birth rate. These girls may indeed resist and challenge the government's ideology of sex education, in spite of their "docile" outlooks.* (Kawahara 1996: 253）

This was a very prescient and nuanced comparative observation in the mid-1990s!

After taking her doctorate at Yale, she returned to Japan to establish her academic career, eventually at Waseda University as professor of anthropology and gender studies. Developing a program for undergraduates in these two fields, leading a popular research seminar for undergraduate majors, and following other research interests delayed her plans to conduct continuing research into school sex education. When she returned to Yale in 2007 and 2008 as a visiting researcher, she wanted to make final revisions for book publication, but she expressed some anxiety about it. Could the research she conducted in the mid-1990s possibly retain relevance a decade and a half later in the new century?

In fact, it remains highly significant. Japan has experienced much in the two decades since Kawahara began her research, and certainly much of that could not have been predicted at the time. The educational system has undergone major institutional changes, a weak economy and unstable politics that were new conditions of the early 1990s continue to take a toll on individual lives and aggregate prosperity, and the society is badly shaken by the triple disasters of March, 2011. Partly by choice and partly by necessity, work careers have shifted from the secure to the insecure, younger men and women marry later—and less frequently!—and have fewer children, divorce is rising, women—often against structural obstacles—have longer work careers, there is less interest in meeting official expectations of family elder care, and so on. Social scientists along with state authorities and media commentators sharply debate the motivations of these accumulating individual choices and their consequences for society: is Japan becoming more open and diverse in life options or more unequal and vulnerable? What is clear though is that the terms of this debate are profoundly different than those that dominated analyses of Japan back in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the mid-1990s, it was not clear certain whether the economic difficulties and political stasis that had recently come to beset Japan would continue, but indeed they have. It was far from certain what young people would choose in seeking jobs and spouses, in valuing personal freedom or felt obligation, in aspiring to conventional careers and family roles or crafting new adult trajectories. The teenagers whom Kawahara was observing in the sex education classrooms of the mid-1990s and meeting with outside of school are now the 30-something adults of contemporary Japan. It is the choices they have been making in the years since then that have shaped the Japan that we now encounter. Kawahara has given us a crucial baseline of understanding for their subsequent life choices and life chances. Her work has been highly instructive to my own analyses of

early 21<sup>st</sup>-century society (Kelly 2002), and her findings and their implications have been crucial background for other studies as well. Let me cite here only the work of some of her Yale doctoral kohai, although many more could be added. The teenagers of the 1990s are now many of the current freeters forging new notions of work (Smith 2006); they are the younger professional women struggling mightily to balance careers and aspirations for marriage and family (Aronsson 2012); they are the young adults in complicated dialogues with their aging parents about residence and marriage (Nakano 2010); and they are the adult couples facing painful decisions about dissolving the marriages and families that they only recently constructed (Alexy 2010). We can appreciate the novelty and the difficulty of these adult life-conditions of the early 21st century in part through the understanding that Kawahara provided us of the worlds of secondary school teenagers in the 1990s.

Finally, Kawahara's work tells us something highly significant about the place of Japan anthropology within the wider discipline of sociocultural anthropology. As a discipline, we have too often had a backward looking orientation. Anthropologists may conduct their fieldwork in an extended present, but they are frequently searching present practices for survivals and vestiges of a past—the disappearing family or village or rituals that must be recovered and represented before they pass from memory.

This is important and necessary work, but the anthropology of Japan has generally taken a very different orientation. By and large, our perspective connects our ethnographic present to possible futures even more than past conditions. By this, I do not mean that we seek in our intensive field work in local worlds to predict the future of those lifeways, but we presume that that every contemporary moment is an emergent social formation. It is shaped by the past, to be sure, but we are even more drawn to and sensitive to the possibilities of the present for what it might become. That was very much the case with Kawahara's creative research, and it continues to enlighten us about how and why twenty-first century Japan is as dynamic and as troubled as it is.

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