Is It Possible to Raise Fertility to Replacement Level through Policy Efforts? The Case of Japan

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[Abstract]

Japan is now entering a new era of population policy. The government has recently expressed a TFR (total fertility rate) target of 1.8 in the short term and 2.1 in the long term. This is epoch-making, because the government had previously been cautious in explicitly showing its pro-natal stance, although the TFR has been below 1.5 since 1995. However, from the demographic viewpoint, we are skeptical about whether realization of the targets is possible. In this paper, we discuss five points and conclude that it is very difficult to increase the TFR to the target level of 2.1, or even 1.8, by policy efforts alone. The five reasons for this are as follows: (1) As Japan is a democratic state, the government is not allowed to carry out direct population policies; therefore, only limited options are available. (2) The main mechanism of low fertility in Japan is later or fewer marriages, and marriage-promoting measures are difficult to put into practice. (3) There appears to be historical and cultural background factors that have impacted the very low fertility and later/fewer marriages. (4) When both old and new types of partnership and reproduction patterns are mixed together, adoption of some policy measures may tend to lower fertility temporally or transitionally. (5) There are no models of the country of replacement level fertility among advanced industrial countries under the modern socioeconomic system. In this paper, we highlight the particular situation of Japan, which probably differs from that of Western countries. We indicate the limitations of pro-natal policies in Japan, and the necessity to consider adaptation policies that take into account population decline and hyper-aging.

1. Introduction

The total fertility rate (TFR) has continuously dropped in Japan since the mid-1970s, hitting an all-time low of 1.26 in 2005, after which it has been languishing at around 1.4 (Figure 1). Since the beginning of the 2000s, strong concern has been focused on population decline and hyper-aging (Figure 2). In 2014, the government introduced a long-term TFR target of 2.1, and in 2015 it announced another short-term TFR target of 1.8. This is epoch-making, because the government had previously been cautious in explicitly showing its pro-natal stance, although the TFR has been below 1.5 since 1995. We can say that Japan is now entering a new era of population policy.

However, from the demographic viewpoint, we are skeptical about whether realization of the targets is possible.

In this paper, we discuss the following five questions to examine whether it is possible to increase the TFR to the target level of 2.1, or at least 1.8, by policy efforts alone. (1) As Japan is a democratic state, is the government allowed to carry out direct population policies? (2) Since the main mechanism of low fertility in Japan is later or fewer marriages, what measures would effectively promote marriage? (3) Is the historical and cultural background important as an indirect cause of Japan's very low fertility? (4) When both old and new types of partnership and reproduction patterns are mixed together, does adoption of certain policy measures tend to lower fertility temporarily or transitionally? (5) Are there any models of replacement-level fertility among advanced industrial countries? We focus on the particular situation of Japan, which probably differs from that of Western countries.

2. Population policies in a democratic state

Since Japan is a democratic state, it is quite right that the government should not directly interfere with individuals' private lives and reproductive choices.[1] Instead, the government should implement public policies to promote people's welfare. The public policies that may affect fertility include (1) policies to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights,[2,3] (2) family policies,[4] (3) labor policies,[5] and (4) gender policies.[6] We have no choice but to expect side benefits (or windfalls) arising from such public policies, which were not originally intended to address population issues.

Among the many background explanations given for low fertility in Japan, four major factors have been often referred to: (1) the economic burdens of childrearing,[7] (2) the conflict between continuing work and childrearing for women due to the excessive opportunity cost,[8] (3) gender inequality (a remarkable example is the extremely short time spent by husbands on household work),[9] and (4) the growing risk of unemployment among young people.[10] Government policy measures have been primarily aimed at these situations, for instance, mitigating work and childrearing demands through initiatives such as increasing nursing facilities,[11] establishing childcare leave,[12] improving the employment system, and other measures to assist parents who work while raising children. Recently, the government has been working on the employment issues faced by young people, recognizing that unstable employment is an obstacle to single persons getting married.

These policy measures can be seen, practically speaking, as having been based on family, labor, and gender policies. However, there are no signs of a recovery in fertility yet. Some people suggest that the government's efforts in these measures are insufficient.[13] However, we doubt the effectiveness of these family, labor, or gender policies. These policies may be too indirect to substantially raise fertility. A democratic state has only limited options to raise fertility.

3. The mechanism of very low fertility in Japan

Both a low marriage rate and a low marital fertility rate will cause low fertility. However, in the case of Japan, it is known that the decreasing marriage rate has made a particularly large contribution to the decline in fertility in the last four decades, while the decrease in marital fertility has had only a small impact (Iwasawa, 2015). Since the main mechanism of low fertility in Japan is later or fewer marriages (where "later marriage" refers to the increased average age of the first marriage for women, and "fewer marriages" entails an increase in the proportion of women who have never been married by age 50), the effects of fertility-raising measures that focus on promoting the compatibility between work and childbearing and childrearing among married couples will be very limited. In order to substantially increase the fertility rate, it is necessary to implement marriage-promoting measures. However, for the government, marriage promotion is much harder to carry out than work-childbearing compatibility measures.

Recently, many autonomous (prefectural and city/town) governments in Japan have begun to implement marriage-supporting measures (such as holding matchmaking parties for single men and women). Although the impacts of such efforts on fertility are not expected to be large, we think that they are a necessary reaction to low fertility in local areas. Now that the custom of arranged marriage has died out in Japan, single men and women must search for partners by themselves; yet such efforts by single people themselves appear to be lacking (Sato and Iwasawa, 2015).

4. Historical and cultural background

The historical and cultural background seems to have had an impact on the very low fertility and particularly on the later/fewer marriages in Japan. In previous presentations at BSPS and APA conferences (Sato, Iwasawa, and Beppu, 2014; 2015), we focused on the fact that today's industrialized countries tend to be divided into two groups based on the total fertility level: (1) *very low-fertility* countries in which the TFR is less than 1.5, and (2) *moderately low-fertility* countries with a TFR of more than 1.5 (Figure 3). This trend has been highlighted by Caldwell and Schindlmayr (2003), McDonald (2005; 2009), Suzuki (2013), and other researchers.[14] The two groups show a clear geographic distribution pattern. We suggested that the two groups, *very low-fertility* countries and *moderately low-fertility* countries, correspond to late and early starters of modernization, and we also took a great interest in whether people place emphasis on being in a relationship and whether each country's "couple culture" is weak or strong (Sato, Iwasawa, and Beppu, 2014; 2015). We think that Japan is a typical example of a weak couple culture[15] and that this provides an important background for its very low fertility.

5. Old and new types of partnership and reproduction patterns

We should recognize that old and new types of partnership and reproduction patterns are being mixed together. In analyzing marriage decline and changes in marriage structures in Japan since the 1970s, Iwasawa (2013) indicated that old types of marriage have been decreasing, and new types of marriage increasing. Here the former includes marriages through arranged introductions or through the workplace, marriages with an older husband (age hypergamy), marriages based on traditional breadwinner/housekeeper gender roles, and the patrilineal stem family. The latter includes marriages preceded by cohabitation and marriages to the wife of a professional worker (Iwasawa, 2013). The total number of marriages is the sum of old and new marriage types.

Therefore, adoption of certain policy measures may tend to lower fertility temporarily or transitionally. For instance, in Japan, unemployed and employed but low-salary housewives are able to access certain benefits with regard to tax deductions and public insurance (health insurance and pension).[16] Some specialists have criticized this as a system that inhibits women's participation in the labor market. However, the abolition of this system may lead to lower fertility by decreasing the old marriage type more than by increasing the new marriage type (Figure 4).

6. The lack of a model of replacement-level fertility

There are no models of replacement-level fertility among advanced industrial countries. France and the U.S.A. are often cited as examples of advanced industrial countries with replacement-level fertility. However, as Lesthaeghe (2010) pointed out, we should not overlook factors pertaining to the heterogeneous population composition and the presence of subpopulations that have not yet completed their demographic transitions. In France and the U.S.A., the cohort TFR has not remained constantly above 2.1. The fertility of France and the U.S.A. may have also increased thanks to the existence of diverse groups such as international migrants. Therefore, these countries cannot be seen as models in this regard.

7. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we discussed five questions and concluded that it will be very difficult in the near future for Japan to increase its TFR to the target level of 2.1, or even 1.8, by policy efforts alone. We indicated the limits of pro-natal policies and the need to consider adaptation policies that consider population decline and hyperaging. This adaptation should include a review of policies on international migration.[17]

Endnotes:

[1] This principle was internationally agreed to as “reproductive rights” at the 1994 International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD), which the United Nations hosted in Cairo.

[2] As we view them as public policies, the sexual and reproductive health and rights policies include (1) prevention of sexually transmitted infections, (2) the reaction to and prevention of unintended pregnancies (matters of contraception and induced abortion), (3) prevention of sexual discrimination, coercion, and violence, (4) approaches to the infertility problem (support and regulation), and (5) sex education (or health education on sexuality). In recent Japan, with regard to (3) and (5), respect for diversity in individual sexuality and concern for sexual minorities (LGBT) have been advocated. In health education on sexuality and reproduction, now it has become a sensitive issue to teach at school the scientific fact that the biological ability of a woman to conceive declines gradually as she ages.

[3] On the other hand, some reproductive health specialists think that the improvement of communication skills between men and women is a subject of reproductive health and rights (SRHR) (Kitamura, 2009). As the SRHR essentially has a positive stance to human sexuality and reproduction, its promotion may have fertility-raising effects under some conditions (Sato and Iwasawa, 2008).

[4] Considering their relationship to the issue of low fertility in Japan, Atoh (2005) classified family policies into four areas: (1) family law, (2) reproductive health, (3) economic support to childrearing, (4) gender relations. In the area of family law, Atoh (2005) notices the breadwinner and homemaker model that became widespread after World War Two. Income tax deductions for dependents (wives and children, in many cases), the exemption from paying pension premiums for housewives of regular workers, and the widows’ pensions were systems that were established on the basis of this family model. However, since the 1980s, the situation has changed. Now we can no longer say that the breadwinner and homemaker model is standard.

[5] Two major topics of labor policies related to fertility are a balance between work and reproduction and the countermeasures to growing non-regular employment and numbers of working poor among young people. “Work and life balance” in a broad sense is a subject that embraces these topics. In Japan, the Work and Life Balance Charter was established in 2007 based on an agreement among the government, business leaders, and major labor unions.

[6] Gender policies aim to realize gender equality and gender equity. Internationally, the

adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 was epoch-making. In Japan, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society were enacted in 1985 and in 1999, respectively.

[7] According to the 14th Japanese National Fertility Survey, a nationally representative sample survey conducted in 2010 by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR 2010), 32.7 percent of married couples reported that their anticipated number of children was fewer than their ideal number of children. The most-cited reason couples gave for being unable to realize their ideal number of children (multiple answers) was "too much money is needed for childrearing and education" (60.4 percent). This reason was cited by 83.3 percent of such couples of which the wife's age was under 30 (NIPSSR, 2010, pp. 31–34).

[8] According to the School Basic Survey, which was published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the proportion of women who went to college/university (excluding junior college) remarkably increased from 2.4 percent in 1955 to 12.7 percent in 1975, and it increased again from 15.2 percent in 1990 to 47.6 percent in 2015—the corresponding figure for men was 55.6 percent (NIPSSR, 2016, p. 176).

[9] Based on the National Survey on Population and Family, a nationally representative survey of men and women aged 20–49 conducted in 2009, Tsuya (2016) reported that the average time Japanese husbands spent on household work was 3.4 hours per week while wives averaged 27.4 hours per week. The figures were 2.9 hours (husband) versus 31.8 hours (wife) if a wife did not work outside the home at all, and 4.1 hours (husband) versus 23.2 hours (wife) if a wife worked outside the home more than 48 hours per week (Tsuya, 2016).

[10] In Japan, since the 1990s, the situation of the labor market for young people has changed remarkably. In 2007, more than 31 percent of people aged 15–24 (excluding students) were atypical workers such as part-time workers, fixed-term contract workers, and dispatch workers (Kosaki, 2012). Unemployment and atypical employment of young people seem to have negative impacts on marriage and fertility.

[11] To improve childcare service such as through increasing nursing facilities was included in the Angel Plan, which the government adopted in 1994 as the first package of countermeasures to low fertility (Moriizumi, 2015).

[12] Under the Child Care and Family Care Leave Law, every worker, without regard to sex, has a right to take leave basically until her/his child becomes one year old (1 year

and 6 months, in case the child cannot enter a day nursery). About 80 percent of salary is compensated during the leave.

[13] From the OECD reports, Takahashi (2015) noticed that the proportion of public expenditure on family of the country's GDP was 1.48 percent in Japan in 2009. This figure is very low compared with the average for 33 OECD countries (2.6 percent).

[14] After a detailed examination, Suzuki (2013, p. 21) states that the cultural divide is still valid, but it seems that the boundary of 1.6 instead of 1.5 now divides the two groups.

[15] In this study, we define "couple culture" as a type of culture related to partnerships and sexuality, which is characterized by certain behavioral patterns: (1) single men and women are very active in couple formation; (2) couples always want to be close to each other and share pleasant things; and (3) couples behave in "couple-centered" ways rather than "child-centered" ways. In this sense, we can show Japan as an example of a country demonstrating a weak "couple culture." Now, "dating culture" (as referred to by Atoh, 1998) referring to young single persons is a part of "couple culture." The prom (short for "promenade"), a semi-formal dance or gathering of high school students in the U.S.A., Canada, and the UK typifies dating culture. Japan is at the opposite extreme in this regard.

[16] A working man can get the benefit of deductions from his income tax in case the annual income of his wife does not exceed 1.03 million yen (about 10,300 US dollars). Moreover, the wife of a regular employee can be covered by her husband's health insurance and pension system without paying premiums in case her annual income does not exceed 1.3 million yen (about 13,000 US dollars).

[17] The number of registered foreigners in Japan increased from 710,000 in 1970 to 2,079,000 in 2011. However, foreigners' share of the total population was only 1.63 percent in 2011.

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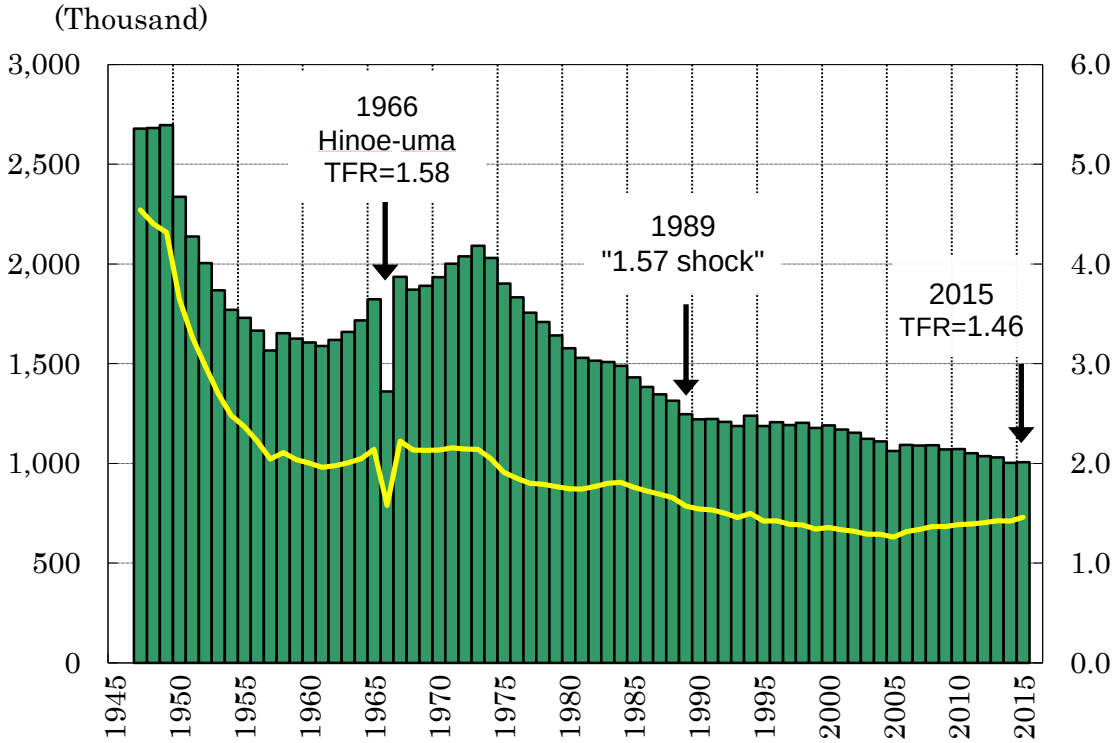
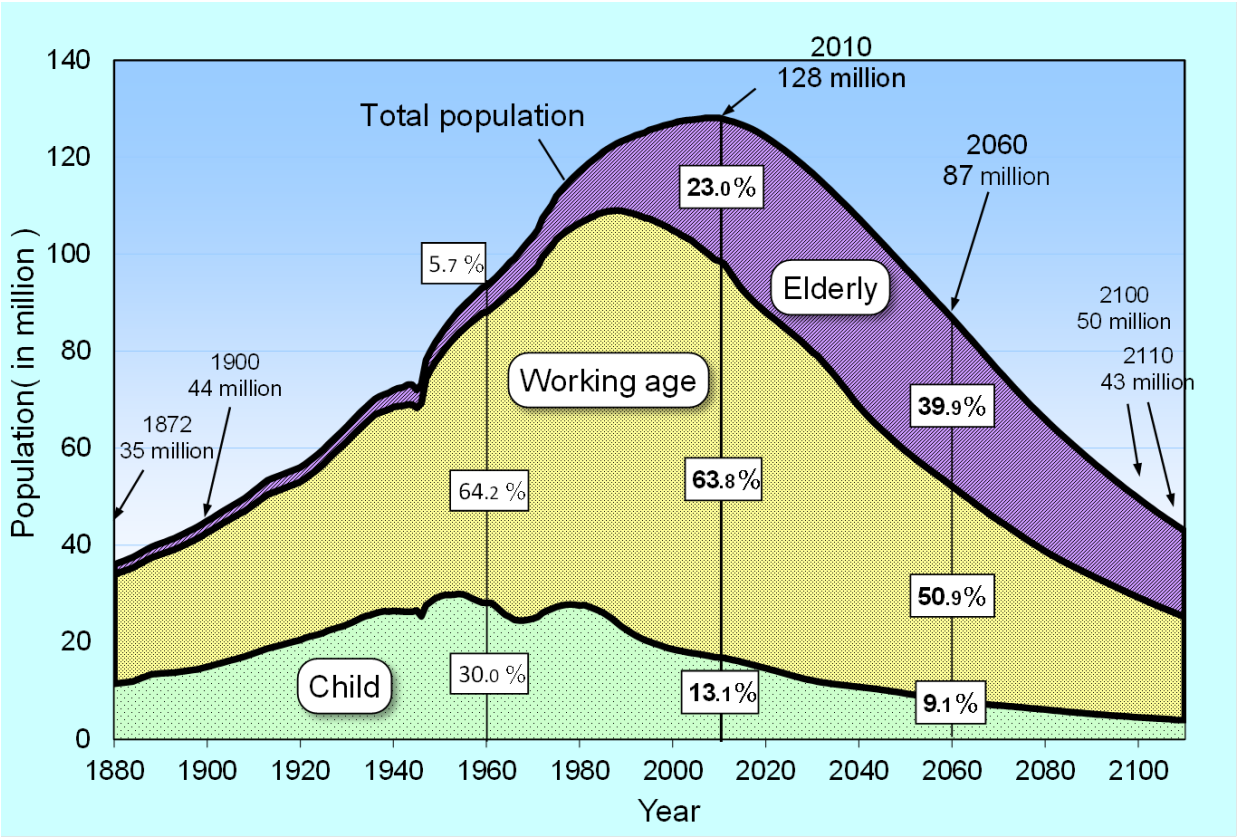
Figure 1. Annual number of births and total fertility rates in Japan: 1947-2015



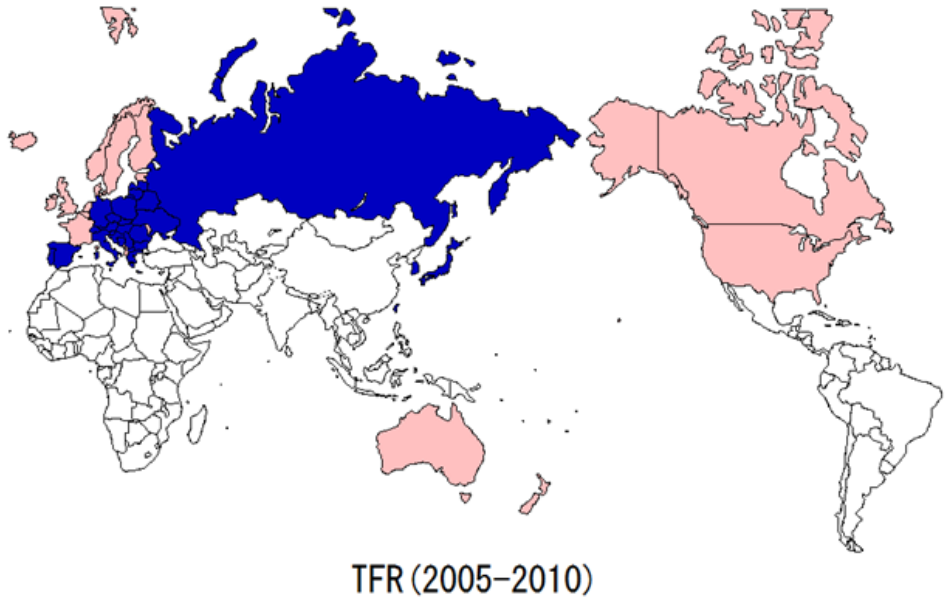
Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Vital Statistics of Japan*

Figure 2. Population growth and decline in Japan: 1880-2110



Data sources : Cabinet Bureau of Statistics, and Bureau of Statistics (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications) *Census*, and *Current Population Estimates;* National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Population Projection for Japan: 2011-2060* (the medium-fertility and medium-mortality variant).

Figure 3. *Very low fertility* countries (areas coloured in blue) and *moderately low fertility* countries (areas coloured in pink)



Data source: United Nations (2011) *World Population Prospects 2010.*

Figure 4. Implementation of certain policy and fertility trends (hypothesis)