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Exploring the Construction of Adulthood and Gender Identity Among Single Childfree People in Mexico and Japan

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Abstract

This article presents the analysis of personal narratives of Mexican and Japanese single and childfree cisgender heterosexual individuals to explore how people who do not comply with heteronormative gender roles related to marriage and parenthood build their gender identities as adults. It draws on in-depth interviews with 24 informants who were raised and lived in these two countries, amid hegemonic discourses on adulthood, masculinity and femininity that emphasize some form of heterosexual partnership and reproduction. It is found that, men interviewed from both countries were able to narratively defend their adulthood and gender identity through other attributes that are part of hegemonic masculinity. On the contrary, women had difficulties constructing themselves congruently; they recurred to external traits of hegemonic femininity to defend their womanhood, but to personality and lifestyle qualities related to hegemonic masculinity to construct their adulthood.

Keywords

adulthood, gender identity, childfree, singlehood, Mexico, Japan

Introduction

In this article, I present the results of a study focused on the personal narratives of Mexican and Japanese single and childfree[1] cisgender heterosexual individuals. The objective was to explore the ways in which people who do not comply with traditional gender roles related to marriage and parenthood make sense of themselves and build their identities amid social pressure to fulfill them to be considered *complete* adult men or women. I chose to examine cases in these two societies, because their hegemonic discourses of adulthood, masculinity and femininity are intrinsically related and emphasize some form of heterosexual partnership and reproduction; however, their ideological backgrounds are different—one is related to religious discourses and the other to national duties. Also, while in Mexico single and childfree people in their 30s, 40s, and older are a marginal portion of population, in Japan, the phenomenon has been a social and political concern for at least two decades, as the proportion of single childfree adults increases rapidly. Thus, I aimed to expand the discussions about singlehood and childfree literature, by presenting a comparative study stressing similarities and differences on the experiences and perspectives of men and women across two different cultural settings.

The phenomenon of single and childfree adults can be analyzed along with the changes in the patterns and duration of transition to adulthood seen in industrial and postindustrial societies since the end of the 20th century. Although adulthood depends on different parameters in each society, in legal terms, there is an age established to grant an individual the full status of an adult—for example, in Mexico it is 18 years and in Japan, it is 20 years. However, in social and cultural practices, a person who has reached or surpassed that age may still be considered and treated as a youngster, as someone who is yet to assume full independence and responsibility for himself/herself—and possibly others—hence, as someone who still needs to mature. Thus, socially, adulthood is not only connected to age or biological attributes, but also to the fulfillment of diverse expectations related to attitudes, behaviors, and roles that align with the norm of the adult world in each society. Across heteronormative societies, the transition of an individual from being single and childfree to get into a committed heterosexual partnership involving cohabitation and becoming a parent have been two of the

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most prevalent rites of passage to adulthood (Arnett, 2001; Montesinos, 2002; Schlegel & Barry, 1991; Spence & Helmreich, 1980). Consequently, individuals who do not comply with the roles of husband/wife and parent, may be perceived by their society as immature, or as *incomplete* men and women. Usually, this situation is socially accepted if they are *young*—loosely meaning until their 20s—but becomes cause of constant pressure and questioning when people reach and surpass their 30s, an age when it is expected for them to have assumed all normative roles (Arnett, 2001; Coelho & Estramiana, 2014; Newman, 2008; Rausky, 2014).

Nevertheless, since the late 20th century, in many industrial and postindustrial societies, an increasing number of people has been delaying getting married and having children, surpassing the socially expected age for full transition into normative adulthood-related gender roles (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Coelho & Estramiana, 2014; Crocetti et al., 2015; Newman, 2008; Rosenberger, 2007; Song, 2010; Xie, Sen, & Foster, 2014; Yeung & Alipio, 2013). Some authors argue that the delay in going through those traditional rites of passage suggests that those individuals, having the legal freedom of an adult, are taking time to explore and construct their identities as they wish (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Coelho & Estramiana, 2014). However, in societies where normative adulthood and gender identities continue to be closely linked to the traditional gender roles of being a parent and wife or husband, cisgender heterosexual people who have not fulfilled those social expectations may find themselves infantilized or stigmatized by family, peers, and society, and, consequently, struggle to construct positive identities as adult men or women (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Daniluk, 1999; Gillespie, 2003; Mandujano-Salazar, 2017; (Newman, 2008; Nishi & Kan, 2006; Rausky, 2014; Salyakhieva & Saveleva, 2017; Silva, 2012; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975; Xie et al., 2014).

Aiming to expand this debate and to understand the ways in which individuals negotiate with hegemonic discourses of adulthood and gender in patriarchal societies and pronatalist cultures, I explore how 24 cisgender heterosexual single and childfree Mexican and Japanese people construct their gender identities as adults. Based on in-depth and semistructured interviews, I unveil some of the narratives they employ to define themselves as being adult men and adult women, as well as similarities and differences between countries and genders.

Changes in Transitions to Adulthood

The definition and duration of youth, as well as the border that exists between it and adulthood, have never been as vague as they are for recent generations in industrial and postindustrial societies. Arnett (1997, 2000, 2001, 2004) suggests that some individuals are experiencing a stage before complete adulthood, which he calls *emerging adulthood.* He finds that people who experience this stage have already surpassed the legal restrictions of adolescence, but they do not assume the roles of husband/wife and parents for a while, so they can focus on themselves. They experiment with multiple options of professional activities, places and forms of residence, and interpersonal relationships, as they continue constructing their identity well into their late 20s. In his studies, he has found that individuals who are in this stage are ambiguous in defining themselves as adults, because they consider that adulthood is related to the acceptance of full responsibility for themselves, as well as financial independence, and not because they have not completed the normative transitions into marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 1997, 2001). He says that emerging adulthood is not universal, but it is more commonly found among middle classes in urbanized sectors and cultures where beliefs and values are not intrinsically linked to the formation of a family (Arnett, 2000, 2004).

On the contrary, some scholars have approached the phenomenon calling it *extended youth* or *delayed adulthood*, stressing how some people are taking longer than their peers or previous generations to reach adulthood (Coelho & Estramiana, 2014; Newman, 2008). According to this approach, people who experience this extended period do it empowered and they eventually complete their transit to adulthood either by taking the expected adult roles, or by rejecting them and redefining adulthood for themselves (Crocetti et al., 2015; Ishida, 2013; Rosenberger, 2007; Silva, 2012; Song, 2010). However, researchers have also found that not all individuals who linger more than the socially expected time in *youth* do it by choice. Structural lack of opportunities to enter the adult world—i.e., stable employment, adequate salary, professional growth prospects—and uncertainty about gender expectations amid contradictory discourses on desired masculinity and femininity in contemporary societies may leave people unable to construct healthy identities (Coelho & Estramiana, 2014; Newman, 2008; Rausky, 2014; Silva, 2012; Xie et al., 2014).

Singlehood, *Childfreeness*, and Gender Identities

It is undeniable that, if dominant ideologies and academic discourses continue to put marriage (or some sort of heterosexual partnership) and parenthood as *natural* transitions to adulthood, people who do not follow such life trajectories may struggle to construct themselves in a positive way not only as adults, but also as men or women. As Daniluk (1999) says, "women and men necessarily turn to prevailing discourses to understand what is expected of them, what is normal, and to make sense of their feelings and behaviours" (p. 83). This is gender hegemony, which is produced and reproduced within societies, justifying and reinforcing itself in most cultural activities, and spreading dogmas about what makes someone a man or a woman—the dichotomic categories that are recognized as natural by heteronormativity

(Vázquez Martínez, 1999). Regardless of the existence of diverse versions of masculinity and femininity, gender hegemony is embedded within identities, imposing normative social practices for male and female individuals, naturalizing myths and values that serve as maps for people to locate themselves (Bonino, 2002).

Thus, particularly for cisgender heterosexual individuals in patriarchal societies where hegemonic discourses on masculinity and femininity are essentially linked to heterosexual coupling and parenthood, not fulfilling those expectations can have an impact on their self-perception and identity construction.

As the phenomena of extended singlehood and childfreeness expand in contemporary societies, a growing body of research has appeared aiming to address these issues. In studies focusing on societies where they usually present together—e.g., Japan and South Korea—the discussion tends to revolve around singlehood, whereas childfreeness is analyzed only as a consequence (Dales, 2014, 2015; Mandujano-Salazar, 2017; Nishi & Kan, 2006; Rosenberger, 2007; Song, 2010; Yamada, 2000). On the contrary, researchers studying societies where parenthood and marriage are less related—for example, the United States—they tend to focus on people who reject parenthood, regardless of the relationship status of their subjects (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Daniluk, 1999; Gillespie, 2003; Ireland, 1993; Laurent-Simpson, 2017; McCabe & Sumerau, 2018; Salyakhieva & Saveleva, 2017).

Something that these studies have consistently found is that extended singlehood and/or childfreeness are relatively more common among individuals who have a higher education and/or a relatively affluent living situation, regardless of the society analyzed. Certainly, these people may have the means to actively choose their life trajectories and remaining single and/or childfree for longer than their peers—or permanently—may be expressions of their agency.

Nevertheless, in patriarchal societies with a highly pronatalist culture, people who do not comply with the social expectations of being in a heterosexual couple and becoming a parent are still prone to suffer social backlash, despite educational, professional, economic, or other personal achievements. They may be perceived as losers for their assumed incapability of finding a partner or having a child (Dales, 2014, 2015; Ireland, 1993; Mandujano-Salazar, 2017; Song, 2010); or, they may be stigmatized for their decisions and perceived as a threat to society, triggering moral outrage for their assumed egocentrism (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Salyakhieva & Saveleva, 2017; Yamada, 2000). But, they also have their ways to negotiate with social expectations and hegemonic discourses. Sometimes, they may reject them and try to create positive alternative identities; other times, they may justify their deviations from the norm and try to compensate in other ways.

It is in this context that I locate the present study, bringing to the debate of transition to adulthood a focus on gender identity construction when the normative gender and adult roles of parents and being in a romantic heterosexual relationship are not fulfilled. Japan and Mexico are two patriarchal societies and pronatalist cultures where adulthood and hegemonic masculinity and femininity continue to be strongly linked to roles derived from a traditional family model, involving heterosexual cohabitation and procreation. The general objective of this study is to explore how cisgender heterosexual single and childfree legally adult Japanese and Mexicans construct their adult and gender identities amid the prevalent social expectations toward adult men and women in their countries. It is not intended to produce generalizing statements, but to begin to understand how individuals make sense of themselves when they are outside normative adult/gender roles, how they deal with hegemonic discourses, and which differences exist between sexes and cultures in these regards.

Method

Hammack (2008) says that identity is "ideology cognized through the individual engagement with discourse, made manifest in a personal narrative constructed and reconstructed across the life course and scripted in and through social interaction and social practices" (p. 230). Following his proposal of studying identity by means of personal narratives, "master narratives"—or hegemonic discourses—and social practices, I analyzed the personal narratives and observed individuals of interest in their interactions with other adults to understand how they negotiate their past and current life choices with hegemonic adulthood and gender discourses.

I relied on documental research to define the hegemonic discourses on gender and adulthood of Japan and Mexico. Diverse studies dealing with what adulthood, masculinity, and femininity meant in those societies were revised, and then contrasted with the opinions of informants to find whether the characteristics stressed in the documental sources were also perceived as socially expected by them.

Because this was a qualitative and exploratory study with limited resources available, it was decided to follow a critical case sampling. A small number of cases that were considered to provide relevant information to answer the research questions were selected to help find logical generalizations (Suri, 2011). In this case, 24 informants aged 25 years to 49 yaers, evenly distributed by sex and nationality, were chosen and contacted through acquaintances. At the time of the research, all informants declared to be cisgender and heterosexual. They also stated never had been married, not being cohabitating with a romantic partner and, by choice, not having children yet. I focused only on cisgender heterosexual people because my interest was to understand how individuals who considered themselves part of the norm in terms of gender identity, but not complied with relevant gender roles, negotiated their adult and gender identities. Gender identity construction in LGBTQIA people implied many more

psychological and sociocultural elements to be analyzed, falling beyond the scope of this research.

Informants were residents of urban areas in Mexico or Japan, were economically self-sufficient, and self-defined as belonging to the middle class of their country. I chose to focus on urban middle-class people, because it is where previous studies had found that remaining single and childfree for longer is more common (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Dales, 2014, 2015; Salyakhieva & Saveleva, 2017); and, I intended to compare my findings to previous studies focused on such strata.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish and Japanese—according to the informant's native language—either in person or using *Skype/Whatsapp/Line's* video call features,[2] between December of 2017 and June of 2018. Sound was recorded with the permission of the informants and field notes were taken. Transcripts from the interviews were produced for analysis. The excerpts from interviews used in this article were translated by the author.

Field observations were performed in urban contexts in both countries, between March 2017 and June 2018. I accompanied informants to at least one social and/or family gathering to observe their interactions with other adults and find out if—and how—the topic of their singleness and childlessness was brought to the table.

National/God-Sent Duties: Hegemonic Gender Discourses in Japan and Mexico

Japan entered modernity in the second-half of the 19th century and, as part of the ideology to build a national identity, the government promoted—through education, laws, and practices—ethics, morals, and gender models, and discourses based on Neo-Confucianism. Consequently, roles and duties for men and women were clearly delimited in aims of creating a prosperous nation: Men's place was the public sphere, where they had to work in the productive areas to build—and defend—the nation; women's place was the private sphere and they had to be good wives and wise mothers (*ryōsai kenbo*; Ashikari, 2003; Uno, 1993). During the first half of the 20th century, Japanese men had to enlist and go to war, so many women had to work outside their homes, but their ultimate duties continued to be good wives and mothers. Then, in postwar Japan, as the government set the goal to turn the country into an economic power, men and women dedicated their energies to rebuild the nation. Their arduous effort paid off and the country entered rapid industrialization. From between the 1960s and the 1980s, the prosperous economy set the context for a cultural nationalist movement that promoted the homogeneity of Japanese society and turned the middle-class nuclear family, the white-collar employee—*salary man*—and the full-time housewife—*sengyōshufu*—into social ideals (Befu, 2001; Nakane, 1973; Vogel, 1971).

The *salary man* embodied the leading male figure of Japanese economic miracle and, as such, became a national archetype of postwar masculinity (Dasgupta, 2003; Hidaka, 2010). These men were part of an economic structure and corporate culture that allowed them to complete their transition to adulthood by their mid-20s. A typical life trajectory for a *salary man* was as follows: By his early 20s, he finished university and was recruited by a major national corporation, getting the financial freedom to leave his parental home and the economic stability to begin looking for a wife; by his late 20s, he got married and had his first child, elements that completed his transition into a respectable and socially responsible adult man; he left the raising of the children and the housework to his wife, who could dedicate to these shores because of the security of his job and his good salary; and, he worked for the same company until his retirement (Vogel, 1971).

Young women, on the contrary, continued to be raised to be wives and mothers. The hegemonic discourses on femininity dictated that "women should fulfil their social and national duty in the private realm, supporting their husbands and nurturing the next generation of Japanese citizens" (Mandujano-Salazar, 2017, p. 528). Therefore, they were pressured by society and corporations to retire from their jobs after marriage to become *sengyōshufu.* Thus, the typical life trajectory for a middle-class woman was this: By her late teens or early 20s, she finished high school or university and, while still living with her parents, she entered the labor force doing some secretarial or auxiliary low-paying job, and searched for a husband, either by herself or with the help of acquaintances; she did her best to get married no later than 25 years—or she risked to be called "Christmas cake";[3] after marrying, she left her job and had her first child during her 20s; after her children entered university, she could return to the labor force with a part-time job, but only if she did not have to take care of elderly parents or parents in-law (Uno, 1993; Yu, 2009).

Thus, until the 1980s, normative adulthood, masculinity and femininity were "intrinsically related to heterosexual marriage, reproduction and the gendered division of labour" (Mandujano-Salazar, 2017, p. 528). And, the ideological sustain for this was national duty. Marriage and parenthood in Japan have historically been promoted in terms of their social value for the reproduction of the nation.

However, by the beginning of the 1990s, Japan suffered an economic crisis followed by two decades of stagnation. This affected the employment opportunities for young people entering the labor force. The unemployment rates for age groups 15 to 24 years and 25 to 34 years were 4.1 and 2.5, respectively, in January 1990; but, by March 2003, these rates had reached 10.8 and 6.3, correspondingly; it was until 2015, when the trend reversed, and unemployment rates for both age groups began to decrease steadily, getting below 4 by January 2018 (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018b). But, unemployment is

not the only structural problem faced by people below-40 years in Japan. During the first trimester of 2018, a 28.8% of 15- to 24-year-olds and 25.7% of 25- to 34-year-olds who had a formal job were nonregular employees (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018a). These statistics show that a high portion of generations raised or coming to age since the 1990s have found it difficult to achieve financial independence and economic stability at the time previous generations did. These factors may have affected their decisions regarding leaving the parental home, getting married, or having children.

In fact, although the birthrate in Japan had been slowly declining since the mid-1970s, it was from the late 1990s that it began to be linked to an increasing rate of single people in their 20s and 30s. It became obvious that, in Japan—unlike in other developed countries—marriage and childbearing remained closely linked (Ishida, 2013; Raymo & Iwasawa, 2008; Rosenberger, 2007). As Japanese population pyramid inverted—and the economy has continued struggling—a persistent and pervasive discourse from official, media, and intellectual elites has tried to persuade single people to follow the traditional gender roles. On one hand, academics and the government have been painting a black picture on Japan's future if marriage and birth rates continue dropping, implying the responsibility of single childfree people in that scenario; some opinion leaders openly criticize these people for their selfishness, immaturity, and irresponsibility (Nishi & Kan, 2006; Yamada, 2000). On the other hand, media spread narratives and imagery stressing marriage and parenthood as essential elements of ideal femininity and masculinity, as national duties to fulfill, and as keys for happiness and personal success (Mandujano-Salazar, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). This has created a dominant discourse that intrinsically challenges the adult, gender and national identities of single childfree Japanese.

Mexico, on the contrary, is a society in which morals and values have been greatly influenced by Catholic beliefs since its origins as New Spain. After its independence, leaders continued favoring many aspects of Christian ideology to build the nation. Among them, those that supported patriarchy and the establishment of a sexual division of domestic and remunerated labor. Even today, Mexico is a predominantly Christian country—in 2010, 82% of population declared to be Catholic and almost 10% to belong to other Christian groups (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2011). Consequently, for five centuries, heterosexual marriage/union and procreation have been consistently promoted not only as *natural* rites of passage to adulthood, but also as God's commandments. The only socially accepted escape from them has been in the cases of priests and nuns, who are said to be "married to God"; and even them may find resistance from family when deciding to commit to church.

In this context, regardless of deep class and ethnic differences that exist within the country, traditional gender roles have defined men as fathers, husbands, protectors, providers, and decision makers and women as wives, mothers, educators, and caregivers. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity has been related to physical and mental strength, intelligence, bravery, power, ability to obtain results, aggressivity and homophobia; and hegemonic femininity dictates that women are—or should be—docile, modest, compassioned, and attentive to others' needs (Aguilar Montes de Oca, Medina, González-Arratia López-Fuentes, & González Escobar, 2013; Cardozo-Freeman, 1975; Debler Berentsen, 2014; Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres México, 2007).

In the 1910s, during Mexican Revolution, female figures appeared as active members of the fighting groups. By the 1920s and 1930s, after the civil war ended and Mexican leaders were rebuilding the nation, these women, with their characteristic strength, courage, dominance, and independence, were represented as *marimachas*—mannish and wild women—who were a threat to the nation (Ruiz-Alfaro, 2013). During the 1940s, as Mexico lived a surge of nationalism, *macho* began to be promoted as the alpha Mexican man through cinema and its stars. *Macho* became a notion involving the contradictory elements of violence, excessive drinking, infidelity, bravery, romanticism, and devotion to the nation (Berghegger, 2009). Meanwhile, the government endorsed an image of a "modern woman" that sanctioned traditional femininity by adding elements that were relevant for the economic and political interests of elite groups. Modern Mexican women were not only expected to be mothers and take care of their children and husbands, but also to help the nation and household economy by entering the workforce; motherhood and the self-sacrifice of women to comply with domestic and public roles as a proof of femininity, devotion, and patriotism were stressed in the propaganda of this time (Rankin, 2011).

Since the 1960s, the economic context, the labor market and social and political discourses influenced by world trends—feminist movements and sexual revolution—have forced changes in the traditional family system in urban Mexican society. Women began to have access to higher education and better jobs, giving them some power to negotiate their status with men, who had to adapt their expectations on what a female partner would do for them. As a result, the rate of legal marriages has been decreasing, whereas divorces and free unions have been constantly increasing (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2017).

Regardless of this, patriarchy and heteronormativity persist and spread ideas on how men and women should be. In the case of women, having children still is, according to contemporary Mexican society, God's blessing and what gives sense to a woman's life; consequently, a key aspect for the construction of female identity (Aguilar Montes de Oca et al., 2013). The figure of the mother in Mexican culture is perhaps the most valued and a discourse on the selflessness of Mexican mothers is pervasive (Schell, 2012). Thus, even if women have become more financially independent and can almost escape social stigma for not being legally married, society

still pressures them to become mothers and face the sacrifices that may come with motherhood, as if God's sent. This, along with Christian ideology dominance, has translated into a high proportion of single mothers—widowed, divorced, separated, unmarried, or not cohabitating with the father; in 2014, 33% of women between 15 and 54 years were single mothers (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2018). On the contrary, although Mexican men are no longer expected to be sole providers, they are still expected to demonstrate their manhood by having a female partner, becoming fathers, and be heads of a household (Aguilar Montes de Oca et al., 2013; Gutmann, 2000).

Therefore, albeit Mexican society has certainly changed, men and women continue to be expected to be in a heterosexual union to produce progeny, to play traditional gender roles, and to display traditional gender characteristics. Nevertheless, and despite contradictory tendencies among socioeconomic sectors and across recent generations, signs of a demographic transition have been appearing among middle-class highly educated people, who seem to prioritize professional development over family formation, delaying, or rejecting normative life trajectories (Hernández, Muradás, & Sánchez, 2015; Mejía & Sosa, 2015). They are still a minority and represent a recent phenomenon; as such, their motivations and experiences remain to be fully analyzed by academia. It is in this regard that the present study aims to offer some insights.

Personal Narratives and Construction of Self

As seen in the previous section, contemporary Japan and Mexico are societies that have very different ideological principles, but where being in a heterosexual relationship and procreate are linked to normative adulthood, masculinity, and femininity through discursive connections with higher obligations—national duties in the case of Japan and God's call in the case of Mexico. Certainly, social changes in the last decades have intensified, but people who do not follow normative roles still perceive the pressure of hegemonic discourses, as it was expressed by informants.

Singlehood in Mexico

A 34-year-old female Mexican business administrator stated that she decided to move out from her parents' house, because the questioning from her family on her romantic life was a constant burden that made her lost confidence in herself:

> I don't date much, and I broke up with my last boyfriend like four years ago. My older brother is married, and my younger sister has been living with her boyfriend for a long time. My parents and siblings knew I didn't go out. So, they were always asking why I didn't have a boyfriend and made jokes saying that chubbier and less attractive women had boyfriends, so why didn't I. It was exhausting and made me feel like I a loser for not having a boyfriend. Since I left home, at least I don't have to listen to them as much.[4]

Single unattached men in Mexico, on the contrary, do not escape social questioning. A 41-year-old university professor also has been facing jokes from his colleagues and friends for not having a girlfriend. He expressed that, although there are other nonmarried men in his group of friends, jokes are focused on him and his sexuality. "They ask jokingly if I'm gay. I'm not. I just don't have time for a relationship. I'm working all the time," he stated. However, it seems men are expected to be constantly involved with women to show their virility: "I don't hear jokes like those about the other guys who are single, but have official girlfriends or date different girls," he said, "what is really annoying is that they say that students will begin to ask whether I'm gay for not be dating anyone."

Thus, in Mexico, social pressure for not being in a heterosexual romantic relationship seems to be shared by men and women, and in both cases, they are made feel inadequate and their gender identity and sexuality are put in doubt. Women who are not in a couple are questioned on their abilities to "catch a man," implying a flawed or deficient femininity. As a 26-year-old postgraduate student said, "I'm constantly being told that my personality is too dominant, that I'm not girly, and that I scare guys away." Men who are not in committed relationships, on the contrary, are questioned on their sexual preferences, if they do not comply with the *macho* characteristic of womanizers. A 27-year-old male nurse stated, "I date different nurses at work; if I didn't, people would say I'm gay."

Singlehood in Japan

In Japan, social pressure is apparently perceived more by single women than men, and it is less directed to sexuality and more to fulfilling normative gender roles. A 39-year-old female university staff explained it like this:

> I have been dating different guys. Only my oldest brother is married, my other two brothers don't have girlfriends and are older than me. But, my mom says that I'm the one she is worried about, because I'm getting older and it will be more difficult for me to get a husband. I ask her why she cares so much, and she always says that because older women are not respected unless they are married.

When asked if she felt respected by people around her, she responded, after thinking for a while, "Sometime ago, I knew a coworker was saying that I would accept to have an affair with him, because I was a loser."[5]

In a similar tone, a 43-year-old accountant stated that she usually works longer extra hours than her married female coworkers for "superiors always tell me that I don't have

anybody waiting for me, anyway." She expressed that this working schedule has ruined her past relationships: "My last two boyfriends left me because I was constantly cancelling dates because of extra hours at work." Talking about how she has lost hope on finding a serious partner, she said,

> When I turned 40, I began receiving invitations from a couple of very young co-workers. I liked one of them and we went to have a drink. But he told me he didn't want a committed relationship with me, that he only wanted us to be sex-friends. I agreed, because, well, it's better than nothing.

Single men also feel pressure for not being married, but generally, it is worse if they are the only or the oldest son. A 28-year-old accountant, only child, shared that his mother constantly was telling him to hurry and get married, because "she says that I need to be married, so my superiors at work recognize I'm a responsible and serious man, and promote me." Asked whether he agreed with that statement, he answered, "Maybe. I have five years in the same position. I think there are few chances of promotions in the company, and they usually promote guys who have a family."

A 32-year-old language professor, youngest of two children, also talked about this:

> My older brother is an engineer, and after he graduated from university, he got a good job at Mitsubishi, but he didn't marry his girlfriend for a while. I heard my dad telling him that he had to marry and have children, but he has never said something like that to me. I've had different girlfriends and my parents have never said anything for me not getting married.

Childfreeness in Mexico

Talking about not having children, a 49-year-old university professor stated,

> I don't remember ever wanting to have children, or even liking them. And, at some point, it became a decision. And it has been a problem in previous relationships. Guys I dated when I was in my thirties would say it was impossible for them to think about getting serious with me, if I didn't want children. My family also tried to convince me that I would regret not being a mother. My father accused me of being an extreme feminist, like that was a sin or something. I'm not. When I was younger, my coworkers used to make comments about how I was putting my professional success over my personal life, like I was too greedy. But it is not for greediness, I just never wanted to be a mother.

In Mexico, women who reject motherhood, not only face difficulties in the social context, they also suffer restrictions to choose over their own bodies and reproductive health. A 34-year-old university professor has tried to get a tubal ligation as she was 30 years of age, and health providers from public and private practices have denied her the service until she was 35 years. She expressed with frustration:

> They don't even want to hear my reasons, they just tell me they won't do it. I felt like a child every time I went to a gynecologist and heard him telling me that, someday, I will want to have children and, then I would regret it. But they don't even know me. I've known I don't want children for a long time and I want to enjoy my sexuality without worries. But it's like they think they know better than me what I want. I think it's offensive. I already have the money for my surgery next year, but I'm afraid they will tell me that I must wait until I'm 40, or something.

She stated that she has not shared her plans about getting a permanent form of birth control with her family, because she knows they will not agree, and it will only lead to discussions.

On the contrary, men are given the right to renounce to their reproductive capacities. A 31-year-old freelancer said he went to the public health services to request a vasectomy and he did not face any troubles to get the procedure approved: "They sent me to a social worker or psychologist, I don't remember. She interviewed me a couple of times. I told her why I didn't want children. I signed a paper, something like an authorization. And that was it."

Also, men's lack of interest in becoming fathers does not appear to receive the same reactions. A 42-year-old Mexican mechanic technician stated that his family and friends have never made any comments or questions about the fact that he does not have children: "No, they don't mention anything. My friends ask me about women, but not about kids. Maybe because they know I support my niece and my mom. It would be hard to have a child of my own."

Childfreeness in Japan

In Japan, women who surpass their 30s and had not become mothers are continuously questioned for their circumstance or decision. A 32-year-old office clerk expressed she felt troubled because she had never felt the need to be a mother, and people close to her did not seem to understand it:

> My friends from school are already married and have babies. When we get together, they try to comfort me, like I was sick, and say that if I don't have the maternal feeling, it's because I'm maturing more slowly, but that someday I'll feel it.

Others have a tougher time, like a 39-year-old nurse, who said her father constantly jokes about her being unpatriotic for not wanting children: "My father is a conservative. He thinks I'm one of the reasons of Japan's crisis."

However, men do not perceive such pressure for not having or wanting children. A 26-year-old Japanese part-time employee, who is the second of the three siblings, said,

> I don't think I want children. It's too expensive and problematic. My parents know how I think, and they've never said anything about it. I have mentioned it at work, when someone talks about

> being a parent, and people only laugh and say it's true it is expensive and tiring.

Questioning on Maturity

A constant remark common in all informants was regarding how their achievements and their ability to compromise were sometimes put in doubt, because they did not comply with the expectation of being married or becoming parents. As a 26-year-old Mexican female postgraduate student said,

> My parents complain that they don't see me doing something with my life. It's unbelievable. I have a master's degree, I've lived abroad, I live on my own, I have a scholarship, I don't ask them for money. But they still think I'm not doing anything with my life.

Likewise, a 43-year-old Japanese male psychologist expressed that some patients do not go back for consultation after knowing he is not married:

> People ask. Maybe they notice I don't have a ring and I don't have family pictures, I don't know. I've noticed they feel uncomfortable when they know I'm not married. I think for most people it's still difficult to understand that someone my age remains single. Maybe they think I'm not qualified to give them advice.

This constant questioning seems to have an impact on how single and childfree people build their identities as adults. Nevertheless, and although they recognize society may perceive them as incomplete or inadequate, male informants narratively validated their masculinity and maturity by emphasizing personality traits or roles related to normative masculinity, as the previous informant, who said, "Of course I'm a respectable man. I'm a responsible, hard-working, serious man." Similarly, a 41-year-old Mexican professor stated that he was independent and good at his job and expressed, "I make good money. I live on my own and help my mother with some house expenses. I just don't have a partner. That doesn't mean I'm not a good man." A 27-year-old Japanese restaurant manager also defended his normality and masculinity by stating,

> I feel good with myself. I'm a regular guy. I date girls. Actually, I'm quite popular, you know? I don't care if people think I'm being immature for not getting married. I have a lot of responsibilities at work, I think that shows I'm mature. I work really hard. Men have to work hard.

Yet, it appears single childfree women have a harder time to coherently build their adulthood and gender identity. All female informants emphasized external features or abilities related to femininity in the normative discourse when narratively constructing themselves as adult women. "I like to look like a woman. I use make-up, wear heels and pretty clothes," expressed a 43-year-old Japanese accountant, "I'm a career woman who can take care of herself, but that doesn't mean I'm not feminine. That's why I really take care of myself and how I look. I like to feel men looking at me." Similarly, a 25-year-old Mexican business assistant said, "I see myself as a normal woman. I mean, I wear skirts, make-up, I have a feminine voice, I can cook. I just cook for myself, but I do it."

However, a 49-year-old Mexican professor stated,

> I'm a woman. I know that, and I feel like one. I think I'm feminine in some aspects, like my appearance and some of my manners. I mean, I look and move like any other woman. But, I know that I don't think or behave like most women in my country. I have always been focused on my job, I'm self-sufficient, I don't go asking for people's help when I have problems. So, people who know me say I'm tough. In that sense, I think I'm a bit masculine.

In the same tone, a 39-year-old Japanese nurse said she was "a woman with a masculine side." When asked why she described herself like that, she explained,

> I like to feel feminine, so I do my hair and nails, I use nice clothes, I act like women are supposed to act. I smile and make soft gestures. I have women's hobbies, like dancing and yoga. But, I think I'm more self-assured than other women. I've never needed to have a man to feel good or to do things for me. I can take care of myself.

Thus, informants rejected the idea that not complying with all normative gender roles or personality traits diminished their femininity or masculinity and, instead, stressed attributes they know are part of hegemonic gender discourses to validate themselves as men or women. Nevertheless, some female informants expressed their awareness of not fitting in the "typical women" category for they recognized some of their attitudes were "masculine," implicitly agreeing with hegemonic gender discourses; however, they needed those *masculine* traits to validate their adulthood, as they were not assuming the normative adult roles for women—wife and mother.

Social Interactions and Recuperative Strategies

During participant observation, I accompanied informants to social gatherings with their families or close friends. In all cases, I was simply introduced as a female friend. The objective was to identify if there were common discursive elements regarding the single and childfree status of informants that appeared in their interactions with people close to them, and to analyze how they dealt with them.

When I accompanied male informants in Mexico, it was common that the question of whether I was their girlfriend was raised. Friends and family members invariably used the opportunity to express their thoughts on the lifestyle of the

informants, specifically their singlehood. In accordance with what they had told me during interviews, subtle or direct questioning on their sexuality and/or maturity was present in the comments. Most of my informants used the same strategies that they did in interviews to narratively defend their masculinity and adulthood. They responded by stressing they were not in committed relationships because they were busy, but reminded people that they were successful at work, economically independent, or that they contributed to the sustenance of their family. Only one informant used my presence to deal in a different way with the comments of their friends by agreeing that I could be a future girlfriend. After the reunion, he apologized and explained that he felt that their friends would stop questioning his sexual preferences, if they thought we were dating.

On the contrary, when I accompanied Japanese male informants, there were no comments regarding their single or childfree status. Japanese culture tends to prioritize the avoidance of shame to the self and others, so I understood that they did not want to touch sensitive topics that could cause shame to them, although it was different with female informants.

In the case of female informants, both in Mexico and Japan, I found common elements in their interactions with people close to them. During gatherings, I was typically asked if I was married or had children. I decided to give different answers with different people to observe their reactions. I noticed that regardless of what I said, my answers triggered the comments that informants had expressed during interviews. People used the chance to lecture them—and sometimes me—about the benefits of having a romantic relationship with a man, but mostly, about the risks of not having children. They expressed concern about the security and happiness of the informants in a future without a partner and/or a child, but some family members also mentioned the unfulfilled responsibilities of single women.

Mexican informants, perhaps supported by my presence, focused on defending their maturity as adult women. They were quite aggressive in stressing that they were independent and did not need to be with a man to be happy. All of them mentioned some professional or personal success to sustain their argument. Regarding motherhood, most of them just stated that they did not desire to have children at the moment—or ever.

Japanese informants, on the contrary, focused on justifying their situation saying it was very difficult to find suitable partners and that they preferred to be single that being with someone below their standards, although they also expressed that they enjoyed their careers and freedom. They seemed more apologetic when the gathering was with family members. They tended to listen and make a weak comment on how there were no suitable men.

Thus, when interacting with close people, female informants were not interested in vindicating their femininity, but their life choices as valid for adult women. Male informants—at least Mexican ones—were questioned directly on their masculinity, so they defended it by stressing that they possess hegemonic masculine traits.

Conclusion

Despite the limited scope of the study, the results show that hegemonic gender discourses and traditional gender roles continue to have an impact on how people construct their adult identities as men or women, even if they exercise their agency to delay or to reject such roles. In the cases presented here, informants, who were cisgender heterosexual, narratively reinforced their adulthood, and masculinity or femininity, based on other elements of normative gender qualities.

In urban contexts of the patriarchal societies analyzed here—Japan and Mexico—this process seems to be relatively easy for men who are economically independent. Hegemonic masculinity in both countries is essentially linked to the public role of worker, which implies men are self-sufficient and responsible. Thus, middle-class single childfree men seem to be able to display those qualities and use them to justify both their gender identity and their adulthood. And, even if they do not comply with the role of fathers, informants expressed they gave some economic support to their parents or other relatives, which make them feel close to the traditional role of providers.

However, consistent with previous studies focusing on single or childfree women around the world (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Dales, 2014; Gillespie, 2003; Rosenberger, 2007; Salyakhieva & Saveleva, 2017), Mexican and Japanese female informants seemed to have more difficulties to consistently build their identities. In their societies persists the idea that it is *natural* that when a woman matures, she will feel the need, have the desire, and make everything possible to become a mother, and that not having a child means not only unhappiness and unfulfillment as a woman, but also selfishness and immaturity. Under this logic, women who surpass certain age and do not feel the need, do not want, and do not try to have a child are socially questioned on their *normality*. The fact that hegemonic femininity in Japan and Mexico is deeply related to roles of caregivers—mothers and wives—which imply self-sacrifice and dependence on others' needs and decisions, are incongruent with some personality traits of many single childfree middle-class females who provide for themselves and live on their own. Informants validated their adulthood by means of traditionally masculine attitudes, like independence, self-confidence and professional competence, and built their identity as women based mostly on exterior traits, like appearance and manners. This is similar to the findings of Ezzell (2009); and, as he notes, it only reinforces heterosexism by them putting the emphasis on normative physical expressions of femininity.

Another aspect that was evident for the informants in both cultural contexts was that, as they approached or surpassed

the 30-year-old milestone without being in a committed relationship or having children, they faced increasingly more social pressure or stigma. In the case of female informants in both countries, the stigma was related to be a spinster or a loser. In the case of Mexican males, the increasing pressure went to the questioning of their sexual orientation. Finally, for Japanese men, the questioning was related to their maturity and sense of responsibility.

As stated before, this was an exploratory study. I do not intend to generalize from the limited sample used here. My aim is to add to existent and current research on singlehood and childfreeness. Besides research interests, sampling only cisgender heterosexual middle-class men and women of urban contexts had the purpose to provide a basis to compare results with studies focused on other cultures, while also expanding the analysis to men. However, an intersectional analysis was beyond the scope of the study, as the building of class identity in informants was not explored. As more people in contemporary societies delay or reject traditional gender roles, while hegemonic gender discourses remain closely related to normative adulthood, it becomes more relevant to analyze how they negotiate their adult and gender identities and how dominant discourses affect them, psychologically and socially. The results of this study are just the tip of the iceberg on the matter. Many variables remain to be integrated and considered.

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Notes

1. I use the term “childfree” instead of “childless,” because I focused the study on people who chose not to have children—yet or permanently.
2. *Skype, Whatsapp*, and *Line* are free-access applications that can be used either on smartphones or computers and have features that allow free unlimited video calls among people who have accounts. While *Skype* and *Whatsapp* are popular in Mexico, *Line* is the most used in Japan. For such reason, when in-person interviews were not viable, video calls were made using the applications preferred by the informant.
3. This was a pejorative label used in everyday speech to refer to single women above 25 years, implying that after that age, they became worthless.
4. All interview excerpts have been translated by the author from the original Japanese or Spanish recordings, trying, as possible, to respect the sense of the original expressions.
5. *Makeinu*, literally “loser dog,” is an expression used to refer to single women above 30. See Dales (2014), Mandujano-Salazar (2017).

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