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Salarymen Doing Queer:
Gay Men and the Heterosexual Public Sphere in Japan

Mark McLelland

Introduction

As various chapters in this collection show, many Japanese people have adopted a wide range of sex and gender identities and space has always existed for the performance of non-hegemonic sex and gender roles in Japanese society. Yet, as Murata's chapter in particular shows, hegemonic notions of how men and women *should* behave have been and remain strong in Japan. Much earlier work on Japanese gender has focused on the particular constraints felt by women in Japan, for, as Vera Mackie has observed "[Japanese] models of citizenship implicitly privilege the male, white-collar 'citizen in a suit'" (2000: 246). Indeed, for many western people the image conjured up during talk about Japanese people is often that of the dutiful, suited and bespectacled salaryman - hard working and dour - rather like the character of Tachibana in the recent movie *Japanese Story*. Although the lives of women in Japan have been well researched it is only recently that sustained attention has been paid to the lives of men and sexual minorities. The focus of this chapter is therefore on the gay salaryman - how does he negotiate his relationship with mainstream norms and expectations of how men should be?

While the salaryman often functions as a synecdoche for Japanese men in general, there are many more varied lifestyle patterns available, although they are not accorded the same status. As Connell's (2000, 1995) work has shown, "masculinities" are always plural, constructed as they are through forces such as class, generation, education, race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. Central to Connell's argument is the idea that "masculinity" has a history and it is not only expressed differently in various societies and eras but is expressed in many different ways within one society - that masculinity is, in fact, plural, albeit certain forms of masculinity become established as particularly privileged - the dominant paradigm being referred to as "hegemonic masculinity." Despite the privileging of one mode of masculinity over others, Connell argues that "the hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity,

let alone the most comfortable" (2000: 11). This observation is as relevant for the situation in Japan as in Australia where the bulk of Connell's research was undertaken.

This chapter outlines some of the features of the hegemonic masculine ideal of the salaryman, focusing particularly upon the roles he is expected to play in the workplace and at home. One component of hegemonic masculinity in Japan, as elsewhere, has been heterosexuality. As Murata (this volume) illustrates, the *shakaijin* (literally "social person") is expected to be both *productive* in the workplace and *reproductive* at home, since Japanese religious and cultural factors place a higher premium on the continuation of the family line than is apparent in Anglophone societies. As Roberson and Suzuki point out, becoming a *daikokubashira* (that is the large black pillar that is the main support for a traditional Japanese house) - an image which assumes a man will be both father and provider - is still an important index of mature manhood in Japan (2003: 8).

Yet, as Taga and Itō (this volume) point out, the hegemonic ideal of the heterosexually married and gainfully employed salaryman is under attack from a variety of forces. Some of these are economic as Japanese companies find that they can no longer guarantee the incentives of the boom years, resulting in widespread restructuring, early retirements and layoffs. Consequently, as men's role as the sole breadwinner becomes less feasible, more women are deciding to stay in the workforce after marriage and childbirth, resulting in a rapid rise in the number of dual-income families (Ishii-Kuntz 2003: 200). Other factors are social as a new post-boom generation of men (and women) begins to question the values and sacrifices that made Japan's postwar reconstruction possible. In this uncertain environment Japanese gay men are becoming increasingly vocal and organized in expressing their discontent with the status quo (McLelland 2003).

The number of gay men who have made a conscious decision not to conform to society's demands by getting married is growing and gay media, particularly on the Internet, are increasingly giving voice to the need to create and validate lifestyle choices outside the traditional heterosexual family (McLelland 2001, 2003). One important forum in which the need for new gay lifestyles has been debated was the

magazine *Queer Japan,* edited by prominent gay critic and author Fushimi Noriaki.[1] *Queer Japan,* which, like other lifestyle-oriented gay publications in Japan, has unfortunately gone under (McLelland 2003: 65-66), saw five editions between 1999 and 2002. Unlike other gay magazines, *Queer Japan* eschewed pornography and was sold alongside regular publications (in one bookstore I visited it was in the "hobbies" section!) and reached a wider audience than regular gay publications. Issue two was dedicated to "salarymen doing queer" (*hentai suru sarariiman*) and contained several articles, a round-table discussion and a questionnaire survey on problems that gay men face in the workplace.

While Murata's chapter in this volume uses insights from feminist geography to show how an individual's experience of public space is, in part, determined by gender, Fushimi, in "salarymen doing queer," employs the notion of a "heterosexual code" (*iseiaisha no kōdo*) in arguing that certain spaces, in this instance the workplace, are also imbricated in largely invisible (to hetersosexual people) structures of (hetero)sexuality. As work by Bell (1995), McDowell (1995) and others has also shown in the case of Anglophone societies, sexuality, whether of a hetero or homo inflection, is defined as a "private" issue and yet in effect heterosexuality is allowed a level of visibility in the public sphere that is forbidden to homosexuality. Japan is much the same, and this chapter looks at the constraints some Japanese gay men experience in relation to the heterosexual public sphere as well as at attempts they are making to negotiate a role as full "sexual citizens" in a changing Japan.

The road to maturity: becoming *shakaijin*

As discussed by Taga, Dasgupta and Murata (this volume), Japanese notions of masculinity have been closely tied up with the roles men play in marriage and the workplace. A man's transition from the status of student (*gakusei*) to "social person" (*shakaijin*) does not take place at his coming-of-age ceremony held, along with his peers, on *seijin no hi* (Adults' Day) in the year of his twentieth birthday, but when he starts his first full-time job. The process is only finally completed when he marries, and just as importantly, fathers a child. A married man who does not work, for instance staying home to mind the children, would be considered odd by many

Japanese people. As Allison, citing a Japanese sociologist, points out, "A husband who doesn't work has 'no meaning' in Japan" (1994: 91).

Sawazaki points out how, when faced with pressure from colleagues at work, many gay men choose to conform and get married since "Japanese society dictates that those who do not marry and have children are failing to do their part in society" (1997: S48). To an extent, this has been an easier choice for gay men in Japan than in Anglophone societies since romantic love has not traditionally been regarded as a necessary component of the marriage relationship and many marriage introductions are still arranged by intermediaries (McLelland 2000: 90-98). Indeed, as Lunsing (1995) points out, *Barazoku*, Japan's oldest gay magazine, has long had a "marriage corner" where gay men advertise for female partners. Work and marriage thus remain fundamental sites for both social- and self-definition for a vast majority of Japanese men.

Furthermore, a job is not just a job. The literature on corporate masculinity in Japan stresses how workers are "crafted" (Dasgupta 2000: 193) through a variety of disciplinary techniques that include dress and hair-style regulations, learning correct politeness levels, how to bow, what to read and even what to eat. For the salaryman, the workplace is not a venue in which to demonstrate individuality, flair or creativity but a situation in which individual desires and aptitudes should be suppressed - at work a man becomes a *kaisha no ningen*, or a "company person" (Allison 1994: 98-101). Smith (1987: 3) points out how this process of crafting males to fit in with the salaryman discourse actually starts in boyhood when, as students, boys are disciplined to study hard so as to be able to compete in the "examination war." If they succeed in this system, which stresses mastery of vast amounts of information rather than creative thinking, entrance to elite universities and the top jobs will be made easier for them. Girls, too, are frequently pressured to work hard at school but it is often assumed that a woman's role is to devote herself to family life and not a career. As Roberson argues "work remains a more permanent source of social identification [for Japanese men] than it typically does for Japanese women, for whom eventual roles as wives and mothers generally provide more central sources of social and self definition" (1995: 293).

Once a fresh graduate enters a company, he is subjected to a new disciplinary regime. This disciplining is enabled by the fact that most new recruits join at the same time, in the April after their graduation. At this time, depending on the size and prestige of the company, they can be subjected to "almost military-like training practices" (Dasgupta 2000: 195) so as to transform them from students to ideal workers who are both responsible social persons (*shakaijin*) and respectable representatives of the company (*kaisha no kanban*). Even male staff recruited straight from high school (and thereby excluded from the promotion track), are required to engage with the discourse of social personhood. Roberson (1995: 307), for instance, notes that in the metal-parts factory where he conducted his fieldwork, new recruits had to write essays on such topics as "My thoughts on becoming a *shakaijin*" as part of the interview procedure.

Japanese men who, for whatever reason, either fail at or decide not to attempt to reach for the salaryman goal can face a variety of social pressures, not least from family and friends. "Social respectability" (*sekentei*) is, for many men, purchased through putting aside individual desires and conforming to social expectations as this statement from a young Japanese man who failed to enter university makes clear:

> I just hate this word (*sekentei*). You can't do anything when you are stuck with social respectability...I made a mistake in my entrance exams for university…I spent two years trying to pass entrance exams. I was so concerned about my parents' reputation and I thought it would be a shame for my parents if I didn't go to university. I wanted to tell them that I didn't want to go...but I didn't have the guts to say it...Finally I had to betray them...I knew I liked cooking and wanted to become a cook...however my parents expected me to go to a respectable university...I tried to fit in but everything they thought good for me was what the society (*seken*) would think good...I don't buy the idea of social respectability as the only way to make my life meaningful (cited in McLelland 2000: 246, note 5).

The above extract shows how accepting anything "less" than the salaryman ideal can be perceived as a failure that reflects badly not only upon the individual but upon his parents. This extract illustrates the strong social sense of self that many Japanese men experience, a sense of self which is not atomistic but is constructed in relation to a

wide ranging network of obligations and responsibilities. Mathews refers to the "s*hikata ga nai* imperative" (2000: 55) that results in many men in Japan making extreme personal sacrifices so as to conform to society's expectations. *Shikata ga nai* is a commonly heard expression that means "it can't be helped" and expresses the kind of fatalism that many individuals feel when confronted with strong group expectations. Until recently many gay men felt similar resignation toward living as *kakure homo* (Fushimi 2000: 8), that is "hidden homosexuals," a term deriving from *kakure kirishitan*, or "hidden Christians" who secretly maintained their faith for centuries after the prohibition of Christianity in the Tokugawa period (1600-1857).

For many men, then, one way in which to establish their masculine credentials is to persevere and succeed in the workplace, but success at the office alone is not sufficient to establish their status as responsible "social persons." Men must also marry at the "correct marriageable age" (*kekkon tekireiki*) which is generally understood to be between ages 25 and 30. An individual's decision to remain single past the "scheduled" age (Brinton 1992) for marriage is somewhat over determined in Japan since "the failure to [get married] carries the severe implications of immaturity and lack of moral responsibility" (Edwards, 1989: 124).

For readers not familiar with Japanese society, Murata's chapter in this volume points out some of the problems that can arise when a man "fails" to get married at the proper age. To be "single" (*shinguru*) after age 30 can have negative connotations both for the individual concerned and for his family and can result in a sense of alienation from peers, family and workmates. Murata's research is important as it shows the extent to which a great deal of social interaction in Japan is predicated on being part of a heterosexual family unit. Even ostensibly heterosexual single men living in rural areas, where long-standing ties between local families are important, point out how the connotation of immaturity that is attached to single status make it difficult to represent the family in village affairs. A story related by one of Murata's informants (this volume), a single man in his early 50s, highlights the sense of shame that can accompany an individual's "failure" to live up to the hegemonic ideal:

> Until some years ago, I could not go to my parents' home without apologizing. My mother also asked me not to visit her house in the daytime

> when it was still light outside as she is ashamed of having a middle-aged single son. Therefore, I visit their home discretely at night.

As Murata shows, renting a city apartment, too, can be a problem because of the stereotype that single men are incapable of creating and maintaining a home, which will soon become "dirty." It is, however, in the workplace that many middle-aged single men feel out of sync with their colleagues and can be excluded from promotion because of their "suspicious" single status (McLelland 2000: 51). As one of Murata's informants relates, he was informed that a colleague would not be promoted because he was not married. Because of this widespread suspicion of the single status, in some instances, bosses who see themselves as "stakeholders" (Brinton 1990) in their subordinates' careers, may put pressure on them to hurry up and find a bride or even try to act as marriage brokers (McLelland 2001: 109-113; Fushimi 2000: 15).

Gay men in the workplace

Not surprisingly, gay men often report problems in the workplace due to their reluctance to get married. However, because of the largely pornographic interests of Japanese gay media, and the relative lack of community centers for lesbians and gay men, articulating identity and lifestyle issues has been difficult for many gay people who have not had access to forums in which such discussion is encouraged. As one of my informants wrote to me in 1998:

> Recently there seem to be more gay-related books being published than before but still I think there are not yet enough…I can say that books that discuss the issue "Why am I gay?" (*naze jibun ga gei*) are very important to me. Somehow, even with my gay friends I'm not able to discuss questions like "What do you think about being gay?" or "How are you going to live as a gay from now on?" I have no idea what other Japanese gays think about these things (cited in McLelland 2000: 233).

Fortunately, the development of the Internet has provided a new interactive space for the discussion of issues surrounding gay identity and lifestyle. In the early 1990s, there existed only a handful of books and a few pages in specialty magazines that

offered information on these topics. Today, only a decade later, there are many thousands of websites[2] that feature links to chat rooms, bulletin boards and special "consultation" spaces where men can discuss such topics as how to "live as [a] gay" (*gei toshite ikiru*) and the meaning of "gay life" (*gei no jinsei*).[3] This plurality is now being reflected in an increased diversity in the number of print media available for gay men and other sexual minorities such as lesbians and transgender individuals (McLelland 2004, 2003). As discussed above, Fushimi's *Queer Japan* is typical of this trend, offering sophisticated essays, analyses and interviews on a variety of topics concerning sexual minorities.

As discussed, a man's single status can cause problems at work. Yet, in addition to problems of remaining single, gay men also experience the added burden of being unable to participate wholeheartedly in the homosocial bonding that underlies Japanese work practices. Allison's (1994) study of a hostess bar, where many salarymen retire with their colleagues after work shows that the "male bonding" that takes place in these contexts is relentlessly heteronormative in nature. Although prostitution is not normally a part of hostessing, the men will bond together through flirting with the hostesses and joking about their own and each other's sexual prowess in a manner that Allison describes as "ritualistic" (1994: 156-164). In exceptional circumstances, sex may be involved and, as Allison points out, among some men there is the belief that "finding sex together would further strengthen their friendship" (1994: 152).

Testimony from gay men supports Allison's findings. For instance, in *Queer Japan,* Raku, a 34-year-old man formerly employed in the information industry, describes how he felt alienated at work because the only topics of discussion were "women, cars and sports" (Fushimi 2000: 14-40). More seriously, however, twice a year after the payment of the half-yearly bonus, he was required to visit a "soapland" with his colleagues.[4] Raku found this ritual to be particularly unpleasant since he had to wait several hours in the parlor while each man, in order of seniority, had sex with the same woman. As Fushimi, who was chairing this discussion put it, "so you had to stick your thing in the same place as your seniors?" As Allison points out, the nature of male bonding that takes place in such situations can be "coercive" (1994: 159) and is frequently orchestrated by the most senior member of the party, whose requests

those more junior cannot refuse without fear of recrimination. While this particularly unpleasant male-bonding ritual may not be very common, situations in which new recruits to university sports clubs as well as junior members in office parties have been taken to strip joints or hostess bars where they have been forced to engage in heterosexual banter and flirtation are commonly reported by gay men (Fushimi 2000: 6).

The relentlessly heteronormative nature of male bonding in which desire for and discussion of women and their attributes is central, is often mentioned as a cause of stress on gay Internet sites. "A.K.," a man in his 20s, writes into gay activist Itō Satoru's *Sukotan* problem page,[5]

> I'm afraid of talking with my straight friends. When the topic of women comes up, I don't know what to reply...It's not just the topic of women but there are people who are extremely prejudiced against gays…of course if I argued against them it would seem suspicious so I go along with it. It's really tormenting me.

As Yanase, fellow activist and Itō's former partner, writes in his reply to A.K.'s concern, "This is a real problem reported by a large number of gay men and there is no easy answer." Yanase mentions that he himself worked in a factory where, apart from the office staff all the employees were young men and the conversation was consequently nothing but "women, women, women."

The constraints felt by Japanese gay men are not, of course, unusual, gay invisibility in Anglophone societies, too, is perpetuated by men who fear they will stand out if they challenge heterosexist or homophobic practices. McDowell, drawing on her research into the UK's finance industry, points out that "a number of male respondents indicated that they had decided to conceal their sexual preference while at work and participate in the construction of an overwhelmingly heterosexist atmosphere" (1995: 84). Yet, while many gay men feel that to come out in such a relentlessly heteronormative sphere as the workplace would have a detrimental effect upon their careers and may even lead to loss of their jobs or worse, an increasing number do seem prepared to at least ponder the consequences of coming out.

Although the topic of whether to come out or not has been widely debated on gay websites and in recent publications such as *Queer Japan*, it has been difficult to get a sense of what regular, heterosexual workers in Japan think about this topic. However, as well as boosting opportunities for contact between gay men, the Internet has also provided a useful forum for the exchange of views between homosexual and heterosexual people. To take just one example, the website *Kaisha no tomo* (Office friend),[6] a site for the discussion of a variety of work-related issues and concerns, provided a forum for the airing of views about homosexuality and the workplace.[7] The views offered by the (supposed) heterosexual majority of posters on this board reveal the blindness that members of the majority have in relation to the problems experienced by subaltern groups. Often, it is only when an individual transgresses the unspoken codes of behavior that the coercive nature of what Lunsing (2001) refers to as "common-sense" values become apparent.

In December 1999 this query was posted to the website's advice column and by January 2004 had received 109 replies:

> I am a 23-year-old new employee. To put it bluntly, I am a homosexual (*dōseiaisha*), or in other words, I'm the kind of guy called gay (*gei'tte yatsu*). I expect that almost all the people reading this will be heterosexuals (*iseiaisha*), but if your colleague or your boss came out (*kamingu auto*) to you (confessed that he was gay) in the workplace, what kind of a reaction would you have? Also, would coming out cause trouble (*meiwaku*) for others? Please let me know. 23 years old. Finance and securities business.[8]

The replies to this young man's query offer a fascinating glimpse into the attitudes held toward homosexuality by a wide range of Japanese workers of both sexes who would otherwise probably not have thought much about the topic. What is particularly interesting (and encouraging) is the very small number of homophobic comments about the young man's dilemma. Only a handful of responses evince negative attitudes toward homosexuality per se and only two are virulently homophobic. Of these one, (no. 90), reproduces a passage from the Bible stating that same-sex love is a sin whereas the other (no. 63) states "Since you are so disgusting why don't you go ahead and take rat poison?" The Bible citation is ignored by other commentators

whereas the rat-poison poster is challenged in the very next post by the retort "I think there are some people who would think the same thing about you." While a few posters speculate as to why the young man should have become gay in the first place or suggest steps that he might take to "recover," most contributors take his dilemma seriously and are frank in their advice. However, lack of homophobic rhetoric does not mean that the majority of posters are sympathetic to the young man's dilemma. As the original poster seems to anticipate in his inquiry, a majority of respondents agree that to come out about one's homosexual preference in the workplace would prove "troublesome" (*meiwaku*) for others.

Most responses are negative about the need to come out as gay in the office and the reasons given are remarkably similar - sexuality, it is stated, is a purely "private" (*puraibēto*) or "personal" (*kōjinteki*) aspect of life which should play no role in "public" spaces such as the workplace. Consequently, to make this kind of personal statement would be seen as spoiled or selfish by others who would find the announcement unwelcome. A few examples will serve to give a flavor of these responses:

> "If you were to come out to your colleagues, I'd just say this 'Well, that's just fine, now just get on with your work'. If you confess that sort of thing, you would be like a spoiled child (*amaete yarō*)…Who on earth says things like 'I like women' in the company. It's got nothing to do with (work)" (no. 6).
>
> "I'm a woman but I don't go out of my way in the workplace to say 'I like men!'" (no. 13).
>
> "It doesn't matter whether you are gay, lesbian or have some other fetish, I'd like you not you bring up that kind of topic in the workplace" (no. 36).
>
> "You ought to distinguish between public (*kō*) and private (*shi*). Since the workplace is a public (*ōyake*) environment I don't think it's necessary for you to come out" (no. 40).

> "Whether you are homosexual or heterosexual, I think either is fine but…so long as you are a new employee, rather than talking about yourself, learning to do the job should come first!" (no. 50).

> "That would be troublesome. I think that for you personally the issue of whether you are gay or whatever is important but to say it in conversation would be extremely troublesome (*chō meiwaku*)…Isn't it the case that there really is no reason to say to other people 'I'm this kind of person'…aren't you seeking to be indulged (*amaeru*)? (no. 55).

These comments, and many others like them, evince a strong feeling of separation between the public space of work (which is assumed to be a neutral space, devoid of issues to do with sexuality) and the private realm where one's "tastes" (*shumi*) can be expressed with one's fellow in-group members. However, in the light of comments made earlier by many gay men who have pointed to the fact that public space is always assumed to be heterosexual, the heterosexual people writing into the list seem totally unaware of the pressures faced by gay men in this environment. Poster number 13, for instance, who says "I'm a woman but I don't go out of my way in the workplace to say 'I like men!'" seems unaware that this confession would be unnecessary since heterosexuality is the assumed default position in the workplace. Consequently, it is primarily gay employees who, as McDowell points out, must respect "implicit rules about sexual identity, or at least its transfer into workplace performances" (1995: 77).

Oddly, no-one on the list seems to acknowledge that the workplace is never just about work. Although, given Japan's current economic woes, many gay salarymen may be spared the necessity of after-work socializing on the company account, end of year parties, business trips and company trips to hot springs and other resorts are a common enough experience for many. During these events, it is impossible to avoid discussing the kind of personal details that most posters seem to feel should play no part in office life. But such socializing is also part of the day-to-day routine of office life - during the lunch hour, over coffee breaks and as part of the chit-chat that takes place while working. As Fushimi points out, a person's sexuality is always implicit in any kind of personal conversation, whether the topic be about one's favorite media

personalities, films or television programs, speculation on inter-office romances or discussion of future life plans. He argues that gay men, so long as they remain in the closet, are constantly "having to refract their personal position through a heterosexual code" (2000: 8) and that they do this not simply out of fear of the consequences of coming out but also because of the widespread assumption that "you should not bring up the sort of issues that might prove troublesome (*meiwaku*) for others" (2000: 7).

Hence, the notion that the workplace is a public sphere devoid of personal issues results in gay men's concerns being seen as purely personal and selfish, a "common-sense" notion that many gay men, until recently, also accepted. However, there is a strong sense that this situation is changing rapidly in Japan as new communications media such as the Internet make it possible for a wide variety of gay men to network and organize around issues such as their invisibility in the workplace and, perhaps more importantly, offer a safe space in which to "come out" and communicate with others from the speaking-position of a gay man, a position frequently denied them in their public work lives.

The rise of the *tōjisha*

The early 90s were characterized by what turned out to be hyped-up claims about the revolutionary potential of the Internet for gay men and other minorities but in the case of Japan, there are reasons to suppose that the Internet has indeed had a very significant, one might even argue revolutionary, impact upon gay consciousness. Kadoya, for instance, points out that "For gay people, the most revolutionary event of the twentieth century wasn't Stonewall or the Mardi Gras Parade but…the birth of the Internet" (2003: 65). Writing about the influence of the Internet on gay men in Japan, Sunagawa (2003: 30-31) notes a striking difference in the life stories of gay men under 25 and those, like himself, who are over 30. He finds that compared with more senior men, fewer young men are troubled by their "sexual orientation" (*seiteki shikō*), putting this down to the fact that they came of age during the early 1990s - which saw Japan's so-called "gay boom" - a time when discussion of homosexuality was no longer limited to a niche audience but had become a topic of general interest in the media (McLelland 2000: 32-7). However, he points out that another significant factor has been the manner in which many young men's "debut" on the gay scene occurs not

via the bars but via the Internet, a medium which not only gives access to an unlimited amount of information about the gay world but, equally as important, allows individuals to voice (or, alternatively, construct) their own identities. On the Internet, young men are able to encounter the gay world and begin to communicate with others *as gay men* while still in their teens - something that was almost impossible previously. What the Internet offers, as Miller and Slater point out, is "*expansive potential*" (their emphasis), that is, "the encounter with the expansive connections and possibilities of the Internet may allow one to envisage a quite novel vision of what one could be" (2001: 11) and, importantly, to begin to act on that vision, initially online and then as one's confidence increases, in real life too.

Gay activist and author Ishikawa Taiga reflects on the nature of the Internet on the entrance page of his website.[9]

> How did you come upon this page? Through a search engine? By Net surfing? Or…Anyway, of all the home pages that you could have visited, I'm grateful for this unexpected opportunity to meet you. As you know, countless information exists in the world of the Internet. No doubt there are many people who discover completely fresh and surprising knowledge and information that they previously knew nothing about. I think that the Internet can be spoken of as a place where "new knowledge" can be encountered easily. When one encounters various sites with an open mind, from that point on one's life will doubtless become richer.

Ishikawa goes on to describe the contents of his site and to talk about his positionality as a *tōjisha* - that is, as a "person [directly] concerned" with the topic of homosexuality. Originally a legal term meaning "concerned party," the notion of the *tōjisha,* that is, an individual who speaks directly from a position of first-hand knowledge and experience, has now emerged as an important speaking position for a variety of minority communities - especially on the Internet. Despite the fact that Japanese media have, since the end of the war, offered a range of information about both male and female homosexuality as well as numerous transgender categories (McLelland 2004), they were never adequate for the lived realities experienced by same-sex desiring or transgender men or women since these images were essentially stereotypes. While stereotypes can be harmful and negative or harmless and positive,

they always function by reducing diverse groups of people into easily communicated and culturally intelligible images, thus stemming the flow of signification and constraining the possibilities for diverse subjective performances. The importance of the Internet lies in the manner in which it allows individuals and communities to challenge the power of the media industries to control representation, particularly the representation of minoritized or abject persons and groups.

One effect of the Internet has been to facilitate the production and dissemination of a particular kind of story telling, that produced by a first-person narrator who, taking his or her most intimate thoughts and experiences as a theme, addresses the reader directly in their own "voice." Given the paternalistic manner with which Japanese authorities have dealt with individuals who did not fit into "normal" society (Stibbe 2004: 22; Nakanishi & Ueno 2003: 13), the notion of listening to the "people concerned" became a focus, particularly among feminist organizations fighting for women's rights and citizens' groups supporting the disabled and the mentally ill in the early 1980s (Stibbe 2004: 22; Nakanishi & Ueno 2003: 23-29). In the 1990s the notion of the *tōjisha* or "person [directly] concerned" emerged as an important authenticating device for stories about personal trauma, victimization, marginalization or disability.

The primacy of the *tōjisha,* that is, the persons directly concerned and not third party "experts" are those who are most informed about their needs (Nakanishi & Ueno 2003: 12), is a point frequently stressed by minority rights' groups. The tenth anniversary meeting of the Asia-Pacific Disabled Persons' Seminar, held in Osaka in 2003, for instance, highlighted how "an important theme of this seminar is to put the viewpoints of disabled persons themselves (*shōgai tōjisha*) first."[10] This might seem an obvious stance to take, but given previous social attitudes in Japan which constructed disability as a "disease" requiring the intervention of both medical and psychiatric experts whose role was to help the sufferer adjust toward a "normal" life (Stibbe 2004: 22), the acknowledgement of the rights of those disabled to speak for themselves was radical. This trend has been gathering pace and in 2003 disabled activist Nakanishi Masamori and influential feminist writer Ueno Chizuko published *Tōjisha shūken* (The sovereignty of the *tōjisha*) outlining the ethical dimensions of interaction with disadvantaged communities and stressing the centrality of individuals' own accounts of their experience and needs. This collection was important in its inclusion of sexual

minorities (*seiteki mainoriti*) as a category of discriminated persons in Japan (Nakanishi & Ueno 2003: 190-91).

The *tōjisha* is now an established speaking position for a variety of narratives about the self, closely inscribed in a discourse of rights, citizenship and belonging. This new association between one's most personal life experiences and one's public persona has helped raise the profile of numerous minority groups and conferred on them greater authority to talk about their experience in their own terms. The effect of this new speaking position can be seen in the founding of such groups as AGP (Association of Gay Professionals) in the late 1990s. AGP is an association for "homosexuals themselves (*dōseiaisha tōjisha*) with professional skills," and includes doctors, social workers, lawyers and teachers. Functions of the organization include representing the concerns of homosexuals working within these professions to the professions' representative bodies as well as offering advice to gay men and lesbians on how to acknowledge their sexuality in the context of their professional lives.

As one participant in an AGP roundtable discussion on current trends affecting minority sexualities commented, the situation in Japan is about 30 years behind the US in terms of professionals helping "general society" (*ippan shakai*) understand the problems facing members of sexual minority groups.[11] This has in large part been due to the reluctance of gay men working in the professions to publicly identify themselves as such. This issue was also highlighted by Fushimi Noriaki who attended a "gay business exhibition" in New York in 1998 where he was struck by the extent to which some mainstream businesses in the US had taken steps to accommodate the specific needs of sexual minorities (such as recognition of their domestic partners on company insurance policies). At the exhibition he met a lesbian lobbyist who worked with US companies to ensure their overseas branches extended the same rights to lesbians and gays in other countries as were guaranteed in the US, but as she pointed out to Fushimi, before she and other activists could do anything in regard to Japan, "Japanese homosexuals themselves must first raise their voices and say that discrimination is a problem" (2000: 10).

Although not itself a product of Internet communication, the rise in prominence of the subject position of the *tōjisha* can be related to the increased opportunities offered by

this new communications medium for networking among social minorities and the sharing of "personal" experiences which turn out to be common to many. Plummer, in his book *Telling Sexual Stories*, points out that there is a reflexive relationship between social communities and the kinds of stories that are told by and about members of those communities. As he argues:

> Stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story tellings. Stories gather people around them: they have to attract audiences, and these audiences may then start to build a common perception, a common language, a commonality (1995: 174).

This process is clearly taking place in Japan's gay community and gay perspectives, like the perspectives of married men who wish to take a more active role in parenthood and those of single men who want their lifestyle choice to be respected, are part of the on-going renegotiation of masculine roles and values in contemporary Japan.

Conclusion

As my discussion of heterosexual people's comments on sexual identity and the workplace showed, there is still a great deal of blindness in Japan about the needs and requirements of those who do not conform to hegemonic codes of behavior. Yet, there is a discernable movement away from the notion that sexual identity is a purely personal issue, something that can be likened to a hobby, play or fetish, and more toward the notion that sexuality is a fundamental organizing principle which makes an important statement about the kind of person one is. On the whole, gay magazines have not been venues for this kind of self-analysis and expression. Rather, it has been the Internet which has opened up a forum for exploring and narrating new versions of the self. However, despite the important impact that this kind of story telling has had on the way in which gay, lesbian and transgender individuals conceive of themselves and communicate themselves to others, the importance of sexuality or of sharing one's experience of being sexually different is still not widely appreciated in Japanese society.

Yet, despite the fact that hegemonic attitudes and roles remain strong, that a young company employee in such a conservative environment as the finance industry can even *conceive of* the possibility of coming out so early in his career is evidence of a shift in social attitudes. While the responses to his query show that most heterosexual people remain blind to the heteronormativity of the public sphere, there is evidence that this perception is now being challenged. This challenge is not specific to gay men, lesbians or transgender individuals but represents a more widespread social movement in which previously silenced or disregarded groups of people are raising their voices in order to claim their place in society and be regarded as full citizens of Japan.

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Notes

[1] Details of Fushimi's publications and activities can be found on his home page: http://www.pot.co.jp/gay/fushimi/profile.html (3 February 2004).

[2] In February 2004, the site *SindBad bookmarks*, just one of many Japanese links sites had links to over 40,000 Japanese and overseas gay-related sites and was adding new ones at a rate of about 500 per week: Statistics available online: http://www.sindbadbookmarks.com (1 February 2004). LOUD (Lesbians of Undeniable Drive) runs a small drop-in center but also provides opportunities for women to communicate online: http://www.space-loud.org/pc/index.html (1 February 2004).

[3] See, for example the gay information pages on the general lifestyle site *All About Japan* available online: http://allabout.co.jp/relationship/homosexual/closeup/CU20030720A/ (1 February 2004).

[4] Although technically illegal in Japan, prostitution flourishes in various establishments known as soapland, pink salon and health massage parlors where women, often brought in from South-East Asian countries, offer a variety of sexual services at affordable prices.

[5] Available online: http://www.sukotan.com/yukitosatoru/minnade.html (1 February 2004).

[6] Available online: http://www.waw.ne.jp/kaisha/ (1 February 2004).

[7] Another site where issues to do with homosexuality are fiercely debated by people identifying as both homo- and heterosexual is Japan's notorious Channel 2 which is

visited by 5.4 million people every month. On 17 May 2004, a search for the keyword "*gei*" came up with 188 different threads. For more information about this site, see Onishi (2004).

[8] Available online: http://www.waw.ne.jp/cgi-bin/kaisha2/board_r.cgi?type=kaisha_nayami9912 (1 February 2004).

[9] Available online: http://www.taigaweb.jp/hajimete.htm (26 September 2003).

[10] Available online: http://www.jdnet.gr.jp/ (11 November 2003).

[11] See the article "Zadankai: sekusyuarumainoriti no atarashii chōryū" (Roundtable: new trends in sexual minorities) in the *Medical Tribune's* online journal *Sexual Science*, available at: http://www.medical-tribune.co.jp/ss/2001-2-25/ssJan01.htm (4 February 2004).