Gender-Stratified Labor Market, Heterosexual Marriage Expectation, and LGBQ Young Adults’ Career Plans in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract
Previous U.S. studies showed that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) young adults hold optimistic views about their occupational careers, despite their risk for facing labor market disadvantages as LGBQ workers. The present study uses Japan as a comparison case and illustrates how young LGBQ people plan their careers in a different national context. Analysis of in-depth interviews shows that many LGBQ young adults in Japan anticipate financial insecurity and consequently prioritize stability over pursuit of personal interests in their career planning. Their career concerns vary by gender and represent their responses to high levels of occupational gender segregation and earnings inequality as well as strong social expectations for heterosexual marriage and gendered division of household responsibilities. Overall, the study endorses ongoing efforts to understand occupational and economic disparities across sexuality groups from global perspectives by paying close attention to macro conditions.

Keywords
sexualities, LGBTQ people, occupations, work, qualitative methods

Past U.S. research has examined whether and how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) youth differ from straight youth in their career planning experiences. Although some scholars have argued that social marginalization may undermine these youth’s career planning process (Schmidt et al. 2011; Schneider and Dimito 2010), many LGBQ youth develop optimistic views about their future careers: they feel unconstrained about career choices and confident in their career achievement (Adams, Cahill, and Ackerlind 2005; Harris 2014; Ueno et al. 2018). Furthermore, these studies do not show strong gender differences. Although the lack of gender differences may merely indicate the researchers’ lack of attention to the issue, it may also reflect structural and discursive conditions of the U.S. context. Specifically, the lack of gender differences may be a result of the milder level of gender inequality in the U.S. labor market relative to other countries (Estévez-Abe 2013; World Economic Forum 2019), which reduces young LBQ women’s concerns about career attainment. The results may also suggest that LGBQ people, including women, men, and nonbinary people, develop hopeful views about their careers by drawing on the American dream discourse, which emphasizes that people can achieve economic success by working hard, regardless of their background.

How do young LGBQ people plan their careers in the absence of these labor market and discursive conditions? I seek to answer this question by focusing on Japan as a national context. Japan represents a theoretically important case because it shows high levels of gender occupational

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segregation and earnings inequality compared with most other developed countries (Estévez-Abe 2013; World Economic Forum 2019). These labor market conditions are intertwined with strong social expectations in the country that people marry opposite-sex partners and divide household responsibilities by gender (Estévez-Abe 2013; Nemoto 2016). Japan also differs from the United States in discursive conditions. Many Japanese people view stability as the most important aspect of one’s career and a determinant of good life (“stability discourse” hereafter; Brinton 2011; Miyamoto 2011), and their emphasis on stability contrasts with the American dream discourse, which encourages ambitious plans (Hochschild 1995).

Japan is also a timely site for this study because Japanese people’s gender expectations about work-life balance and household division of labor have been changing in recent years, partly because of social policies that aim to improve the country’s declining birth rate (Lambert 2020). Furthermore, public media and policy makers have increased their attention to sexual diversity (McLelland and Suganuma 2009), and more people have come to express their support for LGBQ people (Ishihara 2012). In the present study I examine LGBQ young adults’ career plans in this changing social climate for LGBQ people.

I analyze data from in-depth interviews with 43 LGBQ young adults in Japan who were in the process of transitioning to the labor market or who had recently made the transition. The analysis shows that LBQ young women’s anticipation of not marrying a man increases their uncertainty about future finance because of women’s earnings disadvantage in the Japanese labor market. Consequently, they prioritize stability over pursuit of personal interests when planning their careers. GBQ men vary in their responses to their lowered chance of heterosexual marriage, but many of them do not necessarily feel unconstrained about career choices, despite their reduced financial responsibilities relative to straight men. Instead, they seek stable careers to compensate for their risk for workplace discrimination and to prepare for a lack of caretakers in their later life stages. LBQ women’s and GBQ men’s emphasis on career stability partly represents their rational responses to financial challenges set by the labor market conditions and their anticipation of not marrying heterosexually, but their narratives highlight a cultural component of their career planning: they draw on the stability discourse to assess their financial opportunities and risks and set their career goals. Overall, the study underscores the importance of labor market and discursive conditions for understanding LGQ women’s and GBQ men’s career plans, and it adds to researchers’ ongoing efforts to understand economic and occupational disparities across sexuality groups from global perspectives while paying special attention to macro contexts (Badgett, Waaldijk, and van der Meulen Rodgers 2019). Below, I first discuss past research on occupational gender inequality in Japan and then consider its implications for LGBQ workers’ career plans.

**Occupational Gender Inequality in Japan**

Risman (2004) argued that gender inequality operates at multiple levels, including institutional/organizational, interactional, and individual levels, and this conceptualization is useful for understanding occupational gender inequality in Japan. At the institutional level, the Japanese labor market remains strongly stratified by gender. Women tend to work in lower-earning industries such as service industries, and men are overrepresented in higher-earning industries such as management and engineering (Hori 2009; Uchikoshi, Mugiyama, and Komatsu 2020). Although similar patterns exist in other developed countries, Japan shows a stronger pattern than most of them (World Economic Forum 2019). Women and men are also segregated within work organizations because employers assign men workers to career tracks that provide a series of promotion opportunities while assigning women to peripheral positions with limited opportunities to move up (Lambert 2020; Mun 2010). This vertical segregation between women and men workers is closely linked with a heteronormative expectation of marriage: after getting married to an opposite-sex partner, men become the primary breadwinners, and women concentrate on housework while staying home or working part time (Brinton 2007; Roberts 2020). At the interactional level, these gendered expectations create bias in employers’ and colleagues’ assessments about worker performance and behaviors and stigmatize those who deviate from the expectations. Furthermore, before the transition to the labor force, teachers, parents, and peers encourage young women and men to pursue different careers by imposing gendered career expectations (Brinton 2007, 2011; Terasaki 2007). Young people act on gendered expectations to avoid questioning from these interaction partners and sustain their gender identities (i.e., “doing gender”; West and Zimmerman 1987).

At the individual level, young Japanese people reproduce occupational gender inequality by internalizing gendered, heteronormative expectations and making their career plans accordingly (Mathews 2004; Yokota 2016). Expecting to become the primary breadwinner, young men seek careers in large, established firms or governments that will provide sufficient income for their future households, and they expect to stay with the same employers for a long duration of time, possibly until their retirement (Brinton 2011; Yamashita 2017). This is partly because many employers use seniority within firms as the primary criterion for promotions and salary increases. However, these jobs are competitive, and once they miss the initial chance after school or college graduation, their chance of entering a stable career path substantially shrinks (Fong and Tsutsui 2016). Young men’s pursuit of stable careers is further encouraged by the stability discourse mentioned above: many Japanese people believe that stable careers are necessary to ensure their work satisfaction and life quality (Brinton 2011; Hazama 2019). The discourse emphasizes the comfort of not having to worry about future
employment and finance as well as the ability to develop a sense of community by building close, long-term relationships with colleagues (Nakashima 2013; Yamashita 2017).

In contrast to men, women in Japan are expected to leave work or reduce work effort after marriage (Nemoto 2016). Therefore, many young women seek careers that require less effort and allow flexible hours, even if those careers provide small wage growth (e.g., less specialized office clerk or service worker jobs) (Mathews 2004; Yokota 2016). In other words, they are expected to increase their life stability through supporting their husbands’ careers and keeping their houses in order. There are an increasing number of young women who aspire to enter and stay in high-earning career paths as they get married and raise children (Yokota 2016), but their aspirations are curbed by gender-based employer practices such as assignments of women workers to peripheral positions as mentioned above.

**LGBQ Workers in Japan**

Same-sex sexuality has an ambivalent history in Japan. Unlike many other countries, Japan has not imposed any legal or religious sanctions on same-sex sexuality (Murray 2002), but some level of resistance has always existed (Furukawa 2001; Kazama 2015) and increased after the introduction of Western sexology, which spread the idea that same-sex sexuality is pathological (Furukawa 2001). Moreover, LGBQ civil rights movements have been only mildly successful in Japan. For example, same-sex couples cannot legally marry in Japan, although some local governments recognize same-sex partnerships. Today, 68 percent of Japanese people say that homosexuality should be accepted by society, which is slightly lower than in the United States (72 percent) (Poushter and Kent 2020).

Although only a small number of studies have been conducted to examine the work experiences of LGBQ people in Japan, those studies have consistently highlighted serious challenges they face in their workplaces. For example, they report lower wages and lower work satisfaction than straight workers, and these patterns apply to both women and men (Hiramori forthcoming; Nijiiro Diversity 2020). Past research also documented pervasive heteronormativity in Japanese workplaces, which manifests as discriminatory comments about LGBQ people and an assumption that everyone is heterosexual (MHLW 2020; Nijiiro Diversity 2020). Only a small number of employers provide LGBQ resources such as antidiscrimination policy, and a large majority of LGBQ workers keep their sexual identities secret from their colleagues and employers to reduce the risk for harassment and unfair treatments (MHLW 2020).

However, concealment does not necessarily solve LGBQ workers’ challenges in Japan, where people hold strong expectations for heterosexual marriage. The number of Japanese people who stay single has increased in recent years partly because economic downturns have shrunk the pool of men who are considered financially eligible for marriage (Brinton 2011). Despite the trend, many Japanese people, including single people themselves, continue to believe that marriage is an important part of life course (Nemoto, Fuwa, and Ishiguro 2012). In Japanese workplaces, single men experience delays in promotions because they are seen as lacking leadership skills and unfit for managerial positions (Murata 2000). Single women also get stuck in their career development in their 30s, when they are expected to get married and quit or reduce work effort (Nemoto 2016). National and local governments and some employers have implemented policies to reduce the gender inequality in workplaces, but those policies have been effective only to limited degrees (Lambert 2020).

Relative to the amount of existing knowledge on Japanese LGBQ people’s work experiences, little is known about their career plans in Japan. With regard to their current occupations, a recent survey showed that LBQ women are more likely than straight women to work in technical and blue-collar industries and that GBQ men are more likely than straight men to work in service and sales industries (Hiramori forthcoming). However, these results may not necessarily reflect sexuality differences in career plans because people do not always attain the occupations on which they plan. Furthermore, even if these patterns reflect LGBQ workers’ career plans to some extent, little is known about how they decide to enter these occupations. The aim of the present study is to overcome this limitation by directly examining LGBQ young adults’ narratives about their ongoing or recent career planning process.

As I examine how LGBQ young adults respond to the gendered career expectations in Japan, I discuss how and to what extent they “do” and “undo” gender in their career planning process. Instead of doing gender and reproducing gender inequality, one may undo gender and help reduce gender inequality by resisting gender expectations (Deutsch 2007; Kelan 2010). LGBQ people may undo gender as they seek to navigate heteronormative social institutions that also impose rigid gender expectations (Padavic and Butterfield 2011; Rupp et al. 2014). Regarding career planning process, U.S. studies showed that LGBQ people undo gender by resisting gender expectations about occupational interests and career commitment (Adams et al. 2005; Goldberg 2013). For example, LBQ women may decide to become the primary breadwinners and enter male-dominated occupations. These results are consistent with the aforementioned pattern of LGBQ young adults’ career plans in the United States: they believe that their social background will not constrain their career achievements. I discuss the extent to which these results apply to LGBQ young adults in Japan.

**Methods**

In designing the present study, I sought to replicate Ueno et al.’s (2018) U.S. study as much as possible to facilitate a
I recruited Japanese participants in two locations: (1) the Kanto region, which includes major cities such as Tokyo and Yokohama, and (2) the Kansai region, which includes Osaka and Kyoto. In each region, some participants lived in major cities, and others lived in less populated cities. I recruited participants through social media, LGBTQ organizations, and referrals. Participation criteria were specified as follows: (1) identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual or have attraction to people of the same gender; (2) age between 18 and 25 years old; and (3) live in the Kanto or Kansai region. Among people who showed interest in the study, I selected those who helped diversify the sample in terms of gender identity, sexual identity, education levels, and career interests. In total, 43 people participated. The sample size was relatively small because the study focused on a narrow age group within a relatively small population (i.e., LGBTQ people). Many participants had part-time jobs while attending college or vocational school, and the remaining participants had graduated and started to work in full-time jobs. Table 1 summarizes participants’ attributes.

I conducted semistructured interviews using a Japanese version of the interview guide adopted from the U.S. study (Ueno et al. 2018). The interview covered a wide range of topics, including sexual development, school and college experiences, work history, and career plans, but in this article I focus on participants’ responses to several key questions. The main set of questions asked, “How did you become interested in Occupation X? Did being gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer have any impact on your decision? If yes, how?” I also asked, “Do you think being gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer will affect your chance of achieving your goal? If yes, how? If not, why not?”

I analyzed interview transcripts by using the “flexible coding” method (Deterding and Waters 2018), which consisted of index coding, memoing, and application of theoretical codes. The method allowed me to take advantage of semistructured format of the interviews and my familiarity with the literature prior to analysis. I conducted the first round of coding by identifying interview segments that indicated participants’ perceptions and explanations about whether and how their sexuality affected their career plans (i.e., “index coding”; Deterding and Waters 2018). In this step, memos were taken with regard to what aspects of sexuality participants focused on (identity, partner gender, etc.) and what career decisions they made. This process revealed that many participants sought stable careers because they anticipated that they would stay single or have same-sex partners, instead of marrying heterosexually. Furthermore, their responses varied by their gender. Thus, in the next round of coding, I sought to identify patterns within each gender category, as I explain in the “Results” section.

### Results

Career plans varied across participants. The most common plan was to become kaishain (company employees) or komuin (government employees), and 14 of 43 participants planned to enter those occupations. These participants had preferences for certain industries, but they did not specify their plans any further, because many employers in Japan make final decisions about employees’ assignments to specific positions. Other participants were pursuing careers as psychological counselors, teachers, and social workers. Participants mentioned that their hobbies and schoolwork contributed to their choices of these occupations, but many of them also emphasized career stability: they believed that those occupations would provide continuous employment as full-time workers and opportunities for steady promotions and salary increases. Their emphasis on stability represented their responses to labor immobility in Japan; because of a lack of opportunities to move to better jobs in later career stages, they sought to enter stable career paths as young workers. I have presented these patterns elsewhere (Ueno 2021), and in the present article, I focus on how participants linked their emphasis on career stability to their anticipation of having same-sex partners or staying single instead of marrying opposite-sex partners, how they responded to institutional aspects of occupational gender inequality (occupational segregation and earnings disparity) and an interactional aspect of occupational gender inequality (gendered career expectations), how narratives differed across women, men, and nonbinary participants, and to what degrees they “did” or “undid” gender in their career planning process.
**LBQ Women’s Career Plans**

Many female participants emphasized their need for high-earning careers because they anticipated that they would live with female partners or stay single, which would lower their future household incomes relative to heterosexually married women. Thus, these career decisions represented their responses to women’s earnings penalty in the Japanese labor market. This result strongly contrasted with findings from previous U.S. studies (Adams et al. 2005; Harris 2014), including Ueno et al.’s (2018) study based on an equivalent design, which highlighted LBQ women’s (and men’s) optimism about their career success and their unconstrained career choices.

For example, Kaho (18, woman with no sexual label) said,

> When I was in middle school, I didn’t know I was lesbian, so I didn’t study very hard. But when I found out in high school, I started to think about my future more seriously and studied harder. I want to live with a woman in the future, but it will be difficult for two women to make enough money for the household.

When I asked her about her current plan, she said,

> I want to become a clinical psychologist, but I recently learned that the pay isn’t great. So, I am thinking that I should pursue a different career that will pay more. When I get older, more cities will have legalized same-sex partnerships, but same-sex couples still won’t get the same benefits as married straight couples. So, I am worried about my future finance.

Thus, as she became aware of her nonheterosexual orientation, she started to anticipate financial challenges in adulthood, which motivated her to study harder. Like other young people, Kaho was making career decisions using a limited amount of information about how much money she could earn in a given career and how much money she would need for living. Therefore, it is unclear whether working as a clinical psychologist would not provide sufficient income for women in same-sex relationships as she claimed. Nonetheless, the quotation reveals that she made her early career decision as she assumed that she would need a well-paid job to live with a woman, rather than marrying a man, because of women’s substantial earnings disadvantage in the Japanese labor market. In this sense, her career decision represented a rational response to the labor market condition. At the same time, she seemed to be making the decision by drawing on the stability discourse, as indicated by her strong emphasis on financial well-being in later life stages over pursuit of personal interests.

Among female participants, those without college degrees expressed particularly strong desires for stable careers because they anticipated substantial risks for financial challenges. For example, Junko (21, pansexual woman) explained how her concern about future finance had affected her career goal:

> I have always wanted to be an office clerk because I need a stable job. I heard from older lesbian friends that we won’t be able to claim a female partner as a dependent to receive tax breaks and employer benefits. My lesbian friends are furita like me, and we all agree that we need stable full-time jobs.

As she implied in the comment, office clerks tend to work full time in Japan (MIC 2017). Some people may not consider those jobs as particularly desirable, but they were for Junko, whose career options were limited because of her lack of a college degree. A series of recent economic downturns have reduced employment opportunities for many workers, but young women without college degrees were most affected (Sakaguchi 2018). Some young people, including Junko, had to become furita, or “freeters”: nonstudent, non-homemaker workers who make their living through nonstandard jobs. Junko had been working in part-time jobs in cafes, and she wished to find a full-time office clerk job to increase her financial stability.

In this quotation, Junko referred to a common policy among Japanese employers that provides allowances for employees who have spouses and children as a part of their salaries. However, same-sex partners do not qualify as dependents in many cases, as Junko pointed out. In this sense, LBQ women’s strong desire for stable careers represented their response to a lack of employer support for same-sex couples as well as a lack of legal recognition for same-sex couples, which prevented them from receiving tax benefits. Scholars have pointed out that government and employer policies in Japan tend to target married people and overlook single people (Osawa, Kim, and Kingston 2103), but the present results show that policies also ignore the needs of women in same-sex relationships.

Although women with college degrees did not anticipate the same levels of financial challenges as those without college degrees, they still believed that they would face greater financial needs than straight women. Eriko (21, lesbian woman) made comments that illustrate the point. She was a college senior and had received job offers from four companies as a result of shukatsu (an annual, structured job-search process for new graduates that lasts several months). After comparing those offers from different industries, she decided to work for a real estate company. She explained, “Because I am lesbian, I have to make money on my own. I decided to take the real estate job because it would pay more than the other jobs.” Thus, like Junko and Kaho above, Eriko based her career decision on her anticipation that she would need a higher-paying job to support herself financially in the absence of a male spouse in her future household.

For another college-educated participant, Kyoko (22), being a lesbian woman endorsed her decision to pursue a financially stable career rather than a riskier one that matched
her interests. Specifically, she initially wanted to become a chef but decided to pursue a career as a nutritionist. She explained,

My parents and my teacher said that I would struggle as a chef because it’s men’s field, and they suggested a nutritionist as an alternative career. At that time, I had a girlfriend, and we were thinking about moving in together after graduation. So, it was important for me to go into an industry that would provide stable income for female workers.

Thus, Kyoko decided to seek a female-typical career as a nutritionist, rather than pursuing her personal interest in a male-typical career, partly because of her teacher’s and parents’ suggestions. Imposition of gendered career expectations from parents and teachers represents an interactional process of gender inequality reproduction (Risman 2004), and young women (and men) in Japan experience it, regardless of their sexual orientation (Terasaki 2007). Therefore, straight women may have made career decisions similar to Kyoko. Nonetheless, she linked the decision to her sexuality: she was planning to live with her girlfriend, instead of marrying a higher-earning man, and could not run the risk of failing in her career. In the gender-stratified Japanese labor market, it may have made more sense to go into a male-dominated occupation to increase future earnings, but to ensure career success and continuous employment as a woman worker, Kyoko decided to go into a female-dominated occupation.

Later in the interview, Kyoko made direct comments about differences in how lesbians and straight women made career decisions:

Straight women expect to get married by certain age, and they focus more on finding companies that would require little commitment and allow them to quit easily when they get married. Also, they tend to look for jobs in fashion and other industries that relate to their hobbies. So, they have very different mind-sets than I do.

Kyoko seemed to overlook the diversity among straight women in their approaches to career planning (Yokota 2016). Nonetheless, the quotation highlighted the strong social expectation for women to get married and concentrate on housework, as well as Kyoko’s feeling that she was having to act against the expectations in order to make a living without a higher earning male partner in the gender-stratified labor market.

Careers as kaishain or komuin helped ensure continuous employment and opportunities for promotions for many workers, but LBQ women were unsure about whether they would be able to sustain such careers even if they were able to enter the career paths. Most of these women planned to hide their sexual identities from their future colleagues to avoid harassment and awkward interactions, but they anticipated that their future colleagues would still stigmatize them for staying single. In Japanese workplaces, female workers’ marital status and their timing of marriage are intensively discussed because they were expected to get married and leave work or reduce work effort (Nemoto 2016). Women participants were already concerned about how the marriage expectation might undermine their workplace interactions, although they were still late teenagers or in their early 20s and had limited firsthand experiences in the labor market.

For instance, Mariko (23, lesbian woman) was a college senior and had accepted an offer from a car manufacturer, but she expressed a concern about how the marriage expectation might undermine her experience in the company:

During shukatsu, I met some current employees of the company, and they all talked about which colleagues got married at what age and which ones were still single. I’m sure they’ll ask me a lot of questions about my marriage once I start working there, and it’ll probably get worse when I turn 30 or 35 years old. I think it’ll be stressful….I’ll be working in a daikigyo (large, established company), and they provide partnership benefits for same-sex couples, but my future boss may not accept my sexuality because managers tend to be older and hold strong prejudice against LGBTQ people.

As this quotation indicates, conversations about marriage sometimes started in the recruitment process, highlighting the intensity of the marriage expectation in Japanese workplaces. Mariko anticipated that the marriage expectation would not only create stress but also exacerbate straight colleagues’ resistance to same-sex sexuality and prevent her from coming out and receiving benefits for her same-sex partner. For this reason, LBQ women were concerned about their workplace experiences and their abilities to sustain their careers even when they secured jobs in governments or daikigyo. Previous studies demonstrated how gendered career expectations in Japan perpetuate occupational gender inequality by forcing female workers to get married and reduce work effort (Nemoto 2016), but the present results showed that for LBQ women in particular, the social expectation also lowers confidence in their ability to sustain careers even before their transitions to the labor force.

In short, young LGQ women in Japan prioritized stability in their career planning to compensate for their earnings disadvantage as women and their reduced chance of marrying a higher earning man partner. Thus, these young LBQ women in Japan “undid gender” (Deutsch 2007; Kelan 2010) by making career decisions that were more common among men. However, their decisions did not necessarily reflect their efforts to liberate themselves from the gendered expectations. Instead, their decisions represented their attempts to compensate for their substantial earnings disadvantage as women in the Japanese labor market.

**GBQ Men’s Career Plans**

Compared with female participants, male participants showed greater variations with regard to whether and how
they considered future partner’s gender in their career planning. Two men commented that they prioritized personal interests over stability in their career choices because they anticipated that they would not have financial responsibilities as the primary breadwinner, resonating with scholars’ arguments about gay men’s career strategies (e.g., Black et al. 2003). One of these participants, Toshiki (25, gay man), had recently graduated from college and started to work full-time in a nature school. He reflected on his decision-making process as follows:

If I were straight, I would want children, and I would have tried to find a job in a big company that pays a good salary. But I am gay and won’t have children, so I decided to take a job at a nature school. They don’t pay much, but I’m able to do things that interest me. Being gay was an important reason for choosing the job.

Thus, Toshiki believed that he had greater autonomy to pursue personal interests in his career because of his reduced financial responsibilities relative to straight men. Furthermore, his earnings advantage as a man may have indirectly contributed to this sentiment because he was not concerned about his earnings trajectory, as were many female participants.

These men were minorities, and other male participants felt that they had greater financial needs, instead of lower financial needs, than straight men, and they prioritized stability when making their career plans. Thus, many GBQ young men were pursuing careers that were consistent with the widely held social expectation for men in Japan. Their narratives revealed, however, that they did not necessarily feel compelled to adhere to the expectation or to “do” gender. Instead, their career decisions resulted from their anticipation of financial insecurity linked to their reduced chance of heterosexual marriage.

For example, Hideki (19, gay man) was a college student aspiring to become a political writer, but he also planned to obtain two professional licenses for his backup career. He said,

Since I was a high school student, I have been planning to get administrative and judicial scrivener licenses, and I am studying for them now. I can’t marry a man legally, at least currently, and I probably can’t have children, either. So, when I get old, I may not have anyone who can take care of me. I want to get those licenses because they will directly help me get jobs and secure my finance in case my main career fails. I can only count on myself because I’m gay.

Like many participants, Hideki emphasized his financial needs in his later life stages, thereby echoing the stability discourse. Rather than focusing on the absence of financial responsibilities for a wife and children, he emphasized his lack of caretakers and his need to pay for care services in his later life stages. His anxiety about finance in late adulthood is consistent with the national pattern: according to Pew Research Center (2014), only 32 percent of Japanese people feel confident about having an adequate standard of living in old age, compared to 63 percent in the United States. However, this concern for access to care was exacerbated for LGBQ people such as Hideki because of a lack of legal recognition for same-sex marriage in Japan. As implied in his comment, Japanese people expect to rely on family members for elderly care (Pew Research Center 2014), and it may have further increased Hideki’s sense of deprivation and motivated him to start preparing for his late life stages while still a teenager.

Most of these men anticipated that they would live alone or with men partners, but they did not necessarily feel that they could pursue personal interests in their occupational careers, therefore contradicting Toshiki’s earlier quotation and scholars’ claims (e.g., Black et al. 2003). For example, Ryuji (19, gay man) expected to live in a man in the future and explained how it had affected his career choice by saying, “I want to become a *kōmin* because it would provide stable income for myself and my future partner.” However, seeking a stable career did not necessarily mean that his future partner should reduce work effort and concentrate on housework. When I asked him whether he planned to divide or share household responsibilities with his future partner, he said,

I don’t think dividing responsibilities is a good idea for gay couples. If one person gets fired or laid off, it is difficult to find another job, especially for men. Our chance of getting sick or getting involved in an accident isn’t zero. So, both my partner and I should sustain careers.

Some same-sex couples equally share financial responsibilities to sustain a sense of equality in the relationship (Kamiya 2015), but it was not the main reason why Ryuji thought that both he and his future partner should sustain their careers. Instead, he emphasized the importance of financial stability to prepare for possible job losses, illnesses, and accidents. Kota (24, gay man) expressed a similar sentiment by saying, “If we split, one of us who focuses on housework would have a hard time starting a career again. So, both of us would need to sustain careers.” As they told these narratives of financial risks, they compared themselves with straight men and overlooked their occupational advantages as men. Furthermore, Ryuji was a college student, and Kota was a college graduate, indicating that anticipating or having a college degree did not seem to prevent these concerns, perhaps because these unexpected career disruptions could happen to

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2Administrative and judicial scriveners represent categories of legal professionals in Japan. Administrative scriveners assist clients with document preparation for local and national governments, and judicial scriveners help clients with real estate and commercial registrations and preparation of court documents.
college-educated men. These comments seemed to represent participants’ responses to immobility in the Japanese labor market, which makes job changes difficult especially for full-time workers (Fong and Tsutsui 2016). At the same time, they echoed the stability discourse by emphasizing the importance of their finance in later life stages and describing career disruptions as a major risk.

Like female participants, male participants anticipated that they would experience social pressure to marry when starting to work as full-time employees after completing education. However, whereas female participants were most concerned about interpersonal awkwardness as a consequence of deviating from the marriage expectation, male participants tended to focus more on negative consequences for their promotions and salary increases. For example, Hiroshi (23, gay man) was a college senior and recently accepted an offer for a job as a kaishain. When asked whether and how he thought his sexuality might affect his career in the company, he said,

More people are staying single these days, and it may not be viewed as strange anymore. But there are income penalties. . . . I will be working in a daikigyo, and in those companies, a large majority of employees are married, and those who stay single don’t seem to be treated well. I have been worried about it since I started my job search.

I specifically asked him about the implications of his sexuality, but his answer focused on the impacts of marital status because he planned to hide his sexuality from future colleagues, as did many participants. His comment highlighted the intensity of marriage expectation and the serious consequences of violating the expectation in Japanese workplaces (i.e., a slower pace of salary increases). This was an important disadvantage for men workers who sought employment in daikigyo, like Hiroshi, because their main reason for seeking the career was to receive steady promotions and salary increases.

Kenji (23, bisexual man) explained how such differential treatments of single and married men may operate. He recently graduated from college and started to work as a salesperson. His goal was to become an area manager in the company, but he thought his single status might become a barrier. He explained,

Many people who become managers are married. To be promoted to managers, we will have to demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility not only through work performances but also through family roles. There are many people in the company who believe that men can become real leaders only when they get married and start a family. I have heard from my colleagues that married men get higher priorities in promotions for that reason. It worries me when I think about my future in the company.

Thus, he was afraid that he might be perceived as lacking leadership skills and unfit to be a manager because of his single status. His perception about discrimination against single men is consistent with past research on Japanese workplaces (Dasgupta 2005; Murata 2000) and highlights the sexist and heteronormative idea that men should serve as the head of household and that men who do not take the role are untrustworthy. He mentioned elsewhere in the interview that he was bisexual and had no gender preference for his future partner. Yet he was concerned about the risk for workplace discrimination, indicating that the mere possibility of partnering with a man was sufficient to raise this concern.

These concerns about discrimination may not be unique to gay, bisexual, and queer men but may also apply to single straight men. However, for many straight single men, this stigma emerges around their mid-30s, when a majority of men in the age group have gotten married (Murata 2000). In contrast, GBQ men in the present study were concerned about discrimination in their early 20s, when they were still making decisions about their first full-time jobs. Unlike men participants, female participants did not believe that their single status would delay their promotions because they anticipated that employers would assume that single women were more committed to work than married women. However, they were concerned that they may not be able to get promoted because of their gender, rather than their single status, because women were perceived as unfit for higher positions in many Japanese work organizations (Nemoto 2016).

**Nonbinary Participants’ Career Plans**

Among 43 participants, 10 identified as nonbinary or “x-gender.” Many of them planned to present themselves as cisgender in future workplaces, and they described their career plans in ways similar to cisgender participants. Unlike these participants, two participants mentioned that they would have to be open about their nonbinary identities to future colleagues because of their gender-nonconforming presentations. These participants had immediate concerns about how their gender presentations would undermine the chance of attaining their first jobs, in contrast to cisgender participants and other nonbinary participants, who were more concerned about how not marrying an opposite-sex person might undermine their career stability in the long run.

For example, Sora (20, nonbinary, queer person) explained how their gender presentation affected their career decision:

What is most important for my career is to get a job that will pay enough money for living. I wouldn’t be able to work as a kaishain because of how I look. I don’t look like a man or a woman, and I will be perceived as chutohanpa [ambiguous and incomplete]. So, I will have to go into an industry that will accept me for who I am. That’s why I want to go into consulting. Consulting is very ability-focused.

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3“X-gender” is a common term in Japan that refers to nonbinary gender.
Thus, Sora made their career decision by considering the implications of their gender presentation, rather than their queer sexuality, indicating their assumption that their gender presentation would have a greater impact on their career chances. Although Sora made their career decision in a way different from cisgender participants and other nonbinary participants who planned to hide their gender identities, Sora still emphasized career stability in three ways. First, they considered salary as the most important factor in their job search. Second, they first considered becoming a kaishain, the career that other young people consider as most stable, although Sora concluded that they would not be able to pursue the career because of their gender-nonconforming presentation. Third, they planned to work in an industry that focused on worker abilities rather than their looks as a strategy to ensure career stability in their particular situation. Similarly, another nonbinary participant who believed they would not pass as cisgender was pursuing a career as an event host because they believed the career would allow them to use their gender identity as a resource for getting both gigs typical to men and those typical to women.

In short, nonbinary participants’ career decisions depended on whether they believed they would pass as cisgender. For those who believed they would not pass, their gender presentations were a more important factor than their nonheterosexual orientations or their future partner’s earning potential as a woman, man, or nonbinary worker. For this reason, occupational gender segregation and heterosexual marriage expectation did not directly affect their career planning. Although they still valued stability in their career planning, they sought to increase career stability in different ways by going into industries that would make their gender-nonconforming presentations less relevant (consulting) or more advantageous (event host). These participants “undid” gender in a sense that they planned to be open about their nonbinary identities at work, but the decision also limited their career options to industries that already allowed open nonbinary identities. In that sense, their ability to reduce cis-normativity in workplaces may have been limited even if they successfully attained jobs in these industries.

**Discussion**

Past research showed that Japanese straight women’s career choices are constrained by occupational gender inequality, characterized by high levels of occupational segregation and earnings disparity at the institutional level (Estévez-Abe 2013; Nemoto 2016; World Economic Forum 2019) and gendered career expectations at the interactional level (Mathews 2004; Yokota 2016). The present study demonstrated that these conditions also limit career options for many LGBQ people in Japan because the conditions are intertwined with the strong social expectation for heterosexual marriage and create a sense of financial insecurity among LGBQ people who anticipate that they will deviate from the expectation.

Specifically, many LBQ women expected to have female partners or stay single and therefore earn lower household incomes than married heterosexual women because of women’s earnings disadvantage in the Japanese labor market. This anticipation encouraged them to seek higher paying occupations rather than pursuing personal interests, consistent with scholars’ arguments (Black et al. 2003; Kamano 2012). This tendency was reported in early studies (e.g., Seiishiki Chosa Gurupu 1998), and it is notable that the pattern still persists today. These women’s career decisions seemed to represent a rational response to gender earnings inequality in Japan, but their narratives also echoed the stability discourse by showing strong concerns about long-term financial well-being and treating career stability as a determinant of life quality.

LBQ men varied in the ways they responded to their anticipation of having a same-sex partner or staying single, but many of them emphasized the importance of stable careers because they anticipated a lack of caretakers in later life stages and believed that they needed to prepare for unexpected career interruptions. These men’s career decisions partly reflected immobility in the Japanese labor market: they believed that it would be difficult to attain high-paying jobs once they miss their initial chance of attaining such jobs as new graduates. However, they paid a great deal of attention to their financial well-being in later life stages, indicating that they drew on the stability discourse in their career planning, like LBQ women did.

Scholars have argued that LGBQ people “undo” gender in their career planning process (Adams et al. 2005; Goldberg 2013). For the most part, young LBQ workers in Japan did not show such a pattern. LBQ women deviated from gendered career expectations in Japan by pursuing higher earning careers, but they did not necessarily do so to liberate themselves from the expectations. Instead, their disadvantage as women in the Japanese labor market forced them to make such a career choice. Furthermore, these women did not necessarily go into higher earning careers dominated by men. Instead, they sought stable, higher earning careers among choices that were common among women (e.g., Junko, seeking an office clerk job, and Kyoko, expecting to become a nutritionist). Many GBQ men focused on their careers rather than pursuing personal interests, despite their reduced financial responsibilities relative to straight men. They thus reinforced the traditional career expectation for men rather than undoing it. A majority of nonbinary participants planned to hide their gender identities in future workplaces, thus passing on the opportunity to tackle the binary gender expectation. As explained above, these career decisions represented LGBQ young adults’ responses to labor market, workplace, and discursive conditions in Japan, and the results therefore suggested that LGBQ workers’ ability to undo gender in career planning highly depends on these macro conditions.

Inadequacy of social policies also restricted LGBQ young adults’ career plans by causing them to prioritize stability.
LBQ women’s perceived risk for financial insecurity resulted partly from a lack of employer benefits for same-sex partners as well as a lack of legal recognition for same-sex marriage, which denied them tax benefits. Similarly, GBQ men felt that the absence of these policies limited their ability to start a family and ensure their caretakers in late adulthood. At a more fundamental level, LGBQ young adults’ challenges in career planning reflected ineffectiveness of existing government and employer policies to reduce occupational gender inequality and work-family conflicts. That is, LBQ women’s smaller chance of marrying a man resulted in concerns of financial insecurity because of women’s earnings disadvantage in the Japanese labor market and their limited access to career tracks that provide opportunities for promotions in Japanese companies. GBQ men’s anticipation of living with a man resulted in concerns for caretakers in later life stages partly because Japanese employers expected men employees to make full commitment to work, rather than balancing work and caretaking responsibilities. For these reasons, increasing the effectiveness of existing social policies to reduce occupational gender inequality and work-family conflicts would greatly benefit LGBQ workers as well as straight workers. Furthermore, social policies are necessary to improve workplace climates for LGBQ workers, in light of the finding that many participants assumed that they would have to hide their sexual identities in their future workplaces to sustain their employment. Policy interventions are also needed to reduce stigma for single workers in their 30s and older because participants anticipated that they would experience microaggressions from colleagues and discrimination in promotions because of their single status even if they were able to hide their sexual identities from colleagues and employers.

Overall, the results highlight the importance of labor market conditions and social discourses for understanding young LGBQ people’s career plans, and they help reinterpret past findings in other countries by calling attention to the national contexts. Specifically, American LGBQ youth do not seem to be greatly concerned about career consequences of not marrying heterosexually, as found in previous U.S. studies (Adams et al. 2005; Harris 2014) including Ueno et al.’s (2018) study based on an equivalent design. This pattern may have resulted partly from the country’s lesser degrees of gender occupational segregation and wage inequality (Estévez-Abe 2013; World Economic Forum 2019) as well as a higher level of mobility in the labor market (Borghans and Golsteyn 2012). The U.S. results may also reflect the American dream discourse, which emphasizes one’s ability to overcome hardships and achieve economic success through hard work, rather than anticipating challenges (Hochschild 1995). In addition, the “postcloset” discourse may partly account for American LGBQ young adults’ career optimism. The discourse has recently emerged in Western countries, and it celebrates LGBQ people’s integration into heterosexual society (Ghaziani 2011; Seidman 2004). These discourses may take American LGBQ young adults’ attention away from potential career challenges linked to their sexuality.

This study has three important limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, because the study was focused on cisgender and nonbinary LGBQ young adults, the sample did not include transgender young adults, although they are an important part of the LGBTQ population. Nonbinary participants who believed that they would not pass as cisgender because of their gender-nonconforming presentations sought to increase career stability in different ways than other participants. Future research is necessary to examine whether a similar pattern exists among transgender young adults. Second, the present study focused on LGBQ young adults’ career plans before or immediately after their transition to the labor force. Their plans may change as they spend some time (or more time) in the labor market and learn more about the climates of their industries and workplaces. Third, sexuality is not necessarily stable, and some people report changes in sexual attraction, sexual relationships, and sexual identity (Ueno 2010). Future research should examine whether these changes shift their expectations to live with a man, a woman, or a nonbinary individual and lead to adjustments in their career plans.

Conclusions

The present study demonstrated that occupational gender inequality and social expectation for heterosexual marriage limit career options for LGBQ people. By identifying the implications for early stages of LGBQ people’s career planning process, the results extended the existing literature on LGBQ workers in Japan, which has focused on LGBQ workers’ disadvantages in labor outcomes and their challenges in workplaces (Hiramori forthcoming; Nijiiro Diversity 2020; MHLW 2020). LGBQ young adults’ decision to prioritize stability in their career planning represented their rational response to the labor market conditions and the heterosexual marriage expectation, but their narratives also echoed a social discourse in Japan that emphasizes career stability as a determinant of work satisfaction and life quality. These results were in contrast with U.S. studies, which showed that LGBQ young adults, regardless of their gender, felt unconstrained in career choices and optimistic about their career achievements. These cross-national differences endorsed Badgett et al.’s (2019) point that research on economic and occupational disparities across sexuality groups requires global perspectives that pay special attention to macro conditions.

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