



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR
SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

PUBLIC OPINION ON THE CONCEPT OF *IKUMEN*

A discourse analysis of contributions made on a
Japanese bulletin board

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Uppsats/Examensarbete: 15 hp
Program och/eller kurs: JP1520
Nivå: Grundnivå
Termin/år: HT 2016
Handledare: Yasuko Nagano Madsen
Examinator:
Rapport nr:

Abstract

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Keywords: Japanese hegemonic masculinity, ikumen, discourse analysis, gender equality, parental leave, childcare

Aim: The aim of this thesis has been to find out what opinions can be found about *ikumen* on the internet bulletin board *Hatsugen Komachi* and how these opinions relate to the government policies (Ikumen Project) encouraging men's involvement in childcare.

Theory and method: Discourse analysis has been used as both theory and method in this study. Words that were frequently used together with *ikumen* were identified and analyzed in order to understand how contributors regard the term *ikumen* and if their views are similar to or differ from the aim of the Ikumen Project.

Result: It was found that there is a discrepancy between how *ikumen* is thought of and promoted by the Ikumen Project and how it is thought of by the contributors of *Hatsugen Komachi*. Furthermore, there was no consensus among the contributors as to what an *ikumen* actually is.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since 1990, the declining birthrate has been a heavily discussed issue. The perceived causes for why Japanese women are not having children have been many and varied. One prominent argument in recent years is that Japanese women are not having children because of the expectations put on them to handle both housework and wage work (Huen, 2007, p. 365). The argument that it is too difficult for women to have both a family and a career resulted in the Ikumen Project being founded in the year 2010, with the aim of making fathers take a larger responsibility in child rearing by cutting working hours and taking out paternity leave (Ikumen Project, n.d.-c). The aim of this project is not gender equality per se, instead gender equality is regarded as a tool to enable women to keep their jobs and in the longer run also boost birthrates (Huen, 2007, p. 365; Ikumen Project, n.d.-c).

Traditional gender norms in Japan have long had a clear-cut distinction between the salaried work of men and the unpaid domestic work of women. While things seem to have started to change, the labor division is still obvious and men's part in childrearing very limited, especially when it comes to taking out paternity leave. As shown by the numbers from 2015, only 2.65% of fathers took out any paternity leave at all (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2016), and the Ikumen Project thus has a long way to go in order to help reach the goal of having 13% of fathers taking time off in 2020 (Ikumen Project, n.d-b).

These numbers suggest that even though there is political will and drive to change the current situation, the public might not have fully grasped and accepted the idea yet.

1.2 Problem and aim

The aim of this study is to find out how ordinary Japanese people have been receiving the new Ikumen Project, and how they are responding to these new ideas of manliness, men's involvement in childcare and housework and the idea of taking paternal leave.

1.3 Research questions

The questions that will be answered are the following:

- In what contexts is the word *ikumen* used by contributors on *Hatsugen Komachi*?

- What different kinds of opinions can be found among the contributors?
- How well do these opinions respond to the original aim of the Ikumen project?

2. Previous research

2.1 Salaryman masculinity and change

While the Ikumen Project in itself does not discuss masculinity on a more abstract level, it is important to understand the current cultural setting in which the project is being implemented. Therefore, a short introduction will be made about what has long been said to be the hegemonic masculinity of Japan for several decades, the *salaryman* (サラリーマン) masculinity.

At the end of the Second World War, Japan had to be built up again, and from the 1950's into the 1980's the country experienced a rapid economic growth. At the end of the 1980's, a speculative bubble had developed and eventually burst, and the country experienced a deep depression during the 1990's and into the early 2000's (Dasgupta, 2009, p. 79-80).

This rapid economic growth has often been attributed to the salarymen (sometimes called *kigyō senshi*, or corporate warriors) who worked in the big corporations during these years. In return for their loyalty to their companies they would receive lifetime employment and promotion based on the numbers of years served. The idea of men as the main breadwinner of the family and women as primary caregivers and in charge of household chores (*senryō shufu*, or housewife) was also promoted during this time. Men should generally not be involved in household chores, because it was regarded as women's work (ibid., p. 90).

Recently, things have gradually started changing, and the gendered divide between fulltime employment for men and fulltime homemaking for women is not as clear cut anymore (ibid., p. 91).

2.2 Ikumen

The term *ikumen* was first coined in 2006, made from the term *ikuji* (育児) meaning childcare and *men* as an English loanword. The word also shares a resemblance with *ikemen*, a word that means a cool and good-looking man. The closeness to the term *ikemen* has been a way to make *ikumen* have a positive connotation as well, an effort to make childrearing men become something trendy and modern (Oyama, 2014, p. 35, 82). In 2010, the Ikumen Project was started by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, leading to the term becoming more

publicly recognized (ibid., p. 60). This rise in popularity for the term also inevitably led to new studies being made. However, with the concept being quite new, the amount of research done on the *ikumen* concept is still limited.

What can be said when looking at the studies that have been made is that while the term *ikumen* is frequently used in media and in governmental projects, it is not as readily accepted by the broader public. Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky (2016) show how fathers themselves, even though they are somehow helping out with raising the children, do not want to see themselves as *ikumen*, they found the term redundant and considered fathers' involvement in childcare to be natural. While helping out was seen as something that all fathers already did, actually taking paternal leave was not generally seen as a viable option, showing how the greater part of taking care of the children is still considered the mother's responsibility. In this study, the type of *ikumen* that will help out but not take out paternity leave is classified as aspiring to a weak *ikumen* image, while taking out paternity leave is classified as part of a strong *ikumen* image (Mizukoshi et al., 2016, p. 224-225).

Katagiri (2016) comes to a similar conclusion in her study of mothers who are either fulltime housewives or part-time workers. She found that even though their husbands do take some responsibility for the children such as helping out with studies, after school activities and sports, or by scolding, the biggest part of childrearing is still handled by the mother. Katagiri goes on to recommend that if things really going to change, more awareness-raising and education is needed, as well as an improvement in men's working conditions (Katagiri, 2016, p. 140-143).

Oyama (2014) in her doctoral thesis also find the tendency to see men as the secondary caregiver, and that even though the former picture of the "father as an authority" is not as prevalent anymore and is giving way to a new way of looking at "fathers as caregivers", there is still a gendered divide between men's childrearing and women's childrearing. Oyama states that this divide, and the appropriation of manliness in the discourses of childrearing and fatherhood was necessary in order to motivate men's engagement in childrearing (Oyama, 2014, p. 290-291, 413).

There are some similarities to be found in the results of these studies. While *ikumen* has received a lot of attention recently, there is a discrepancy between the positive views of the media and government and how ordinary families are relating to the concept. It is with this background that this study has been conducted.

3. The Ikumen Project

3.1 Declining birthrate in Japan

Called 少子化 (shoushika) in Japan, the up until recently steadily declining birthrate was first identified as an issue in 1990 and has since then been heavily discussed (Coleman,. In 2015, Japan had a birthrate of 1.4 children per woman, and 26% of the population was over 65 years old (The World Bank, 2016a, 2016b).

The declining birthrate, along with a stagnating economy has made men's involvement in housework and childcare a big subject of discussion, and in order to solve the problem eyes were turned to the West and countries such as Sweden that had retained a relatively high birthrate, and found that the lack of gender equality and parental leave policies was prohibiting Japan from raising birthrates (Coleman, 2008, p. 191-199). While there has been some resistance from conservative forces (ibid., p. 200), Japanese institutions are now promoting gender equality as a way to raise birthrates. The Japanese Cabinet Office, for example, presents the paternal leave as one of its measures towards a higher birthrate (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, n.d.) and the Ikumen Project, which will be described in detail below, presents fathers' active involvement in child raising as a way of making the society grow and become more abundant: “そして社会全体も、もっと豊かに成長していくはず
です [And so, the society as a whole will grow and become more abundant]” (Ikumen Project, n.d.-d).

3.2 The Ikumen Project

The Ikumen Project appropriated the term *ikumen* in 2010 and making it increasingly popular (Oyama, 2014, p. 82-83). Established under the Ministry for Health, Labour and Welfare, the Ikumen Project is raising awareness for the term *ikumen* and works to engage men in childcare.

3.2.1 Goals and strategies

The overall aim of the Ikumen Project is to make Japanese society a better place for all parties, men, women and children. It is thought that through men's involvement in childrearing and housework, it will create a better environment for women to stay at work, men will start spending more time with their children and this will benefit society as a whole (Ikumen Project, n.d.-d).

The Ikumen Project uses its homepage to promote the active involvement of men in childcare in two different ways. On one hand the page provides information on how much parental leave you are allowed to take out and answers to other practical issues (Ikumen Project, n.d.-b), and on the other hand it is used to promote events and awareness-raising activities such as different symposiums and seminars and helping different areas of Japan to popularize the term *ikumen* (Ikumen, n.d.-c).

The Ikumen Project is promoting a strong *ikumen* image, as defined by Mizukoshi et al (2016). That means that a notable part of the site is dedicated to informing visitors how to take out parental leave and what the laws says about this. It is stated that one of the goals of the project, through a decision made by the government, is to increase the percentage of men taking out leave from the current 2,65% to 13% in 2020 (Ikumen Project, n.d.-c).

4. Theory and method

4.1 Material

The material used in this study all comes from the bulletin board *Hatsugen Komachi* which is hosted and managed by the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. The boards are open for everyone, divided into categories where users can post their opinions and ask for advice on different issues.

Hatsugen Komachi has some regulations regarding what can be posted, and posts are viewed beforehand, the different threads are also moderated in order to make sure that the conversations stay on topic (Hatsugen Komachi, 2016).

Hatsugen Komachi has been chosen because of the way that it is possible to conduct searches within the site, and how discussions are divided by topic and the way in which search results can be sorted by different criteria such as by relevance or in the order they were posted on the website.

It should be noted that using this kind of internet based corpus will bring with it certain problems in representation. As shown clearly just by the ratio of men to women who have posted on the topic of *ikumen* the numbers are quite skewed. Most of the contributors have stated their age as in their 20's or 30's, with a few people who were older than that. Out of the 39 posts that were studied, 33 were made by women and only four were made by men, with two contributors not specifying their gender at all.

This makes generalization outside of the studied population difficult, however it is still thought that it will give some insight into the opinions and thoughts of the people who are most closely influenced by policies regarding childcare and childbirth. However, it should still be said that it is a limited sample, even regarding who can post. A phone or computer and an internet connection is needed, which might still prevent some people from using the internet.

4.1.1 Conducting research on the internet

When it comes to research on the internet, it is still a rather new area of research, and ethical standards are still being developed. A lot of the discussions regarding research ethics on the internet revolve around privacy, personal information, and private and public spaces (Roberts, 2015; Keller & Lee, 2003).

In relation to *Hatsugen Komachi*, it is the discussion of public and private space that is most relevant. The distinction is not clear cut, and while some researchers have regarded even forums that require registration to be public space, it is also evident that many users consider even forums that require no registrations to be private (Roberts, 2015, p. 317).

Hatsugen Komachi requires no registration in order for a person to read the topics, it is also connected to the *Yomiuri Shimbun* which in the rules for posting at the site states that the different posts on the board might be republished or used for research (Hatsugen Komachi, 2016). This has led to the conclusion that *Hatsugen Komachi* can be regarded as a public space, and that the opinions stated on the site can be used without the written consent of the contributors.

In this study, contributors' usernames will not be mentioned, instead they have been numbered from 1 to 40 and will be referred to by these numbers. Apart from that, steps have not been taken to further make the contributors anonymous. Because of the explicit focus on the use of different words, it is not a plausible alternative to make changes to quotes in this study, which is mentioned by Roberts (2015, p. 319) as a method to further ensure the anonymity of the users. This means that the quotes used in this study will be traceable for a person with knowledge of Japanese.

4.2 Theory, method and procedure

4.2.1 Discourse analysis as theory

The method chosen for this study is a discourse analysis. Before going into the details of how such an analysis is carried out, a few things will be noted. Discourse analysis is not only a method for data analysis, instead it is intertwined with certain philosophical assumptions regarding ontology and epistemology, specific theoretical models, methodological guidelines and techniques for analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 4).

Discourse analysis is based on the epistemological understanding of knowledge as socially constructed. This means that knowledge of the world is not and should not be considered to be an objective truth. Knowledge is produced through historically and culturally established categories. These categories are not constant; they could have been different and are always subject to change. Discourse is then understood as a social practice through which knowledge, identities and social relations are produced and reproduced (ibid., p. 6).

In the field of discourse analysis, language does not directly reflect reality, rather it helps forming it. Discourses are never only constitutive, they are also constituted by external structures, which means that they both influence processes and are themselves influenced by those same processes (Bergström & Boréus, 2012, p. 354-356).

The role of the analyst will with this understanding of discourse and social practice never be to go beyond discourse in trying to find the truth between what people say and do. Rather, the analyst should “work with what has actually been said or written, exploring patterns in and across the statements and identifying the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 21).

4.2.2 Discourse analysis as method

Discourse analysis is a tradition that contains several different orientations. This is because it has been used as a method for analysis within linguistics as well as the social sciences (ibid., p. 354-355). A discourse in the strictest sense would mean just a body of written or spoken language, but this in turn results in the textual analysis only being an analysis of text without any context, which is not what is aimed at in this study. Rather, in accordance with the theory above, a discourse will in this study be regarded as a social practice, the way in which people speak and write (ibid., p. 356).

In order to analyze the posts made on the *Hatsugen Komachi*, this analysis will borrow terms and understandings from Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse. In this field, a term within a language does not have an intrinsic meaning. Instead, the processes that create meaning are of interest here. “Floating signifiers” are elements within a discourse that are exceptionally open to different meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 28). One example relevant to this study would be “manliness”. When looking at how the *ikumen* discourse has been trying to get manliness to mean being active in raising your children, in contrast to the earlier meaning of being an authoritative figure within the family, as exemplified by Oyama (2014), it is obvious that this is a term with a meaning that is currently being debated.

Another concept of interest is that of “logics of equivalence”, and how different elements within a discourse are connected to each other. These connections can be positive or negative (Bergström & Boréus, 2012, p. 366). A simple example could be that of “man” and “housework” that in Japan has had a negative connection, at least until recently. And as a positive connection would be that between “man” and “wage work”.

One last thing to consider is the notion of antagonism. In Laclau and Mouffe's theories, antagonism is a way to describe a "war" over the creation of meaning. Some elements of a discourse will always have several different meanings and the "war" would then be over which meaning should be considered the right one (ibid., p. 369).

4.2.2 Procedure

In order to gather material for this study, a search on *ikumen* was made on *Hatsugen Komachi*. Because of the limits set for this project both in time and size, the decision was made to only include posts with the word *ikumen* in the title, as well as limiting the analysis to the first entry. This means that the discussion threads that follow the main entry has not been analyzed and that any mention of a "post", "contribution" or "entry" in this text will solely refer to the main posts and never to the discussion threads that follow the initial post.

In the study, the analysis has been conducted by looking at words and phrases that turn up together with the word *ikumen* and trying to look at whether these carry a positive or negative connotation, and if the terms seem to show a similar usage of the term *ikumen* as to what was intended by the Ikumen Project or if the usage is different. In a next step, the perceived context behind the different statements has been analyzed in order to see which assumptions the different entries are being based on.

The posts were divided into three categories based on the general content and tone of the contributions, which will be further elaborated on below.

5. Analysis

When making a search on *Hatsugen Komachi*, the first contributions date back to 2010, the year that Ikumen Project started. The most of the posts were made between 2011 and 2015, the amount dropping from eight posts in 2015 to five in 2016. With topics and questions asked differing very much between the posts, it was not possible to find any general trends or changes over time in the contributions.

When analyzing the contributions on *Hatsugen Komachi*, a few different categories were found. These were (1) posts discussing the meaning and degree of being an *ikumen*, (2) generally negative contributions and (3) generally positive contributions.

The majority of posts are found in the first category, dealing with how much a man needs to do in order to be regarded as *ikumen*. The next largest group was that of complaints of different thoughts, with positive comments and remarks being rather few. As mentioned earlier, numbers of male and female contributors were quite skewed with 33 posts made by women and only four made by men.

In the first category, two of the posts made by men can be found, and in common for all the posts are words like 育児[childrearing] and 家事[housework], while the word 育休[parental leave] is only mentioned together with *ikumen* in one post.

In the second category, 自称[self-proclaimed] and ウザイ[irritating] being typical words used. The posts over all report particular incidents related to *ikumen* rather than a displeasure aimed at the whole concept of *ikumen*, meaning that critique is not always directed at the larger concept of *ikumen* but rather the actions of people identified as *ikumen*.

In the third category, there are a few comments posting encouraging remarks about observed *ikumen* or inquiries about how to find a man who is willing to become an *ikumen*.

5.1 Different *ikumen* images

5.1.1 The strong *ikumen* image

In the coming sections, categories will be made and presented depending on the contents of the posts, but in this first chapter there will be a presentation of some more overarching themes that could be found within the analyzed material.

The first and most important findings correlate well with what has been found in the earlier research presented above. In all posts, regardless of the stance taken against *ikumen*, the kind of *ikumen* that is being discussed. The word 育休 [childcare leave], is only mentioned together with the word *ikumen* in two post out of the 44 posts read.

One of the earliest writers asking about how much a husband needs to do at home in order to be an *ikumen* talks about her own first idea of what an *ikumen* is:

(1)専業主夫の方のブログを見ると「イクメンだなあ」と素直に思うのですが、「男性が育休を取得している」とか「男性が子どものために時短勤務」とかしたら、世間的に「イクメン認定」なのかなあ？と自分でイメージしていたのですが...友人の夫のブログで、よく分からなくなってきました…。 [If I look at the blog of a stay-at-home dad I would honestly think that “he is *ikumen*”, and I imagined “a man taking out parental leave” or “a man who shortens his working hours to be with his children” to be who is officially acknowledged as an *ikumen*, but... looking at the blog of my friend’s husband, I don’t really know anymore.]

This early post, made in the same year as the *Ikumen* project was started, is the only instance found in which the question of actually taking out childcare leave as a prerequisite for being an *ikumen* is discussed. In all later posts, the term *ikumen* is almost exclusively used to talk about some level of involvement from fathers in childcare or housework.

In the one other post where 育休 is mentioned together with *ikumen*, it is implied that wanting to take out paternity leave is to be very much more involved than what is expected:

(2)夫は育児に関心があり、育児情報番組は毎週欠かしません。二人目出産のときは育休を取りたがったほどです(諸事情によりとれませんでした)[My husband is interested in childcare, he never misses the informational program about childcare that is aired every week. When I had our second child he wanted to be as involved as to take out parental leave (but because of various reasons he could not)]

As was stated above, this goes well with what Mizukoshi et al (2016) has called strong and weak *ikumen* images. Among the contributors on *Hatsugen Komachi*, the strong *ikumen* image was almost nonexistent. While some degree of involvement is seen as natural, which will be further discussed below, going as far as taking out parental leave is still not seen as an option.

5.1.2 The weak *ikumen* image

As shown above, almost none of the posts took into consideration the possibility of a man taking out childcare leave or shortening his working hours. Instead, several contributors wondered about how much housework their husbands, or in the rare case of a male contributor, they themselves, needed to do in order to be considered an *ikumen*.

As can be exemplified by topic titles, there are posts with names such as “イクメンとは [What is *ikumen*]”, “誰の事？キング・オブ・イクメンを自称する夫 [Who are you talking about? A husband who is calling himself King of Ikumen]” and “イクメンはどこまでやるべき？ [How much does one have to do to be *ikumen*?]”. In these examples, there is some uncertainty to be found just by the titles. What is *ikumen* exactly? A self-proclaimed King of Ikumen, with the implied meaning that he is most likely not that, or the question of how much is required of a man in order to “qualify” as an *ikumen*.

(3) 夫の家事・育児

平日：保育園の送り、夕食後に娘と30分くらい遊ぶ、早く帰ってきた時は娘の

お風呂、たまに寝かしつけ、遅く帰ってきたときの食器洗い

休日：昼食・夕食作り、買い物（1週間分）、娘と遊ぶ、娘のお風呂、たまに寝かしつけ。

色々投稿を見ていると、ぜんぜん家事育児をやらない方も多いと思います。

こんなに家事・育児をやってくれている事に感謝しています。

でも、キング・オブ・イクメンではないと思っています。

[My husband's part in housework/childrearing

Weekdays: Seeing off to kindergarten, playing with our daughter 30 minutes after dinner, when returning early bathing with our daughter, sometimes putting her to sleep, when returning late washing dishes

Days off: Making lunch and dinner, shopping (what is needed for a week), playing with our daughter, bathing with our daughter and sometimes putting her to sleep.

When looking at other posts, I think that there are men who do not do chores and childrearing at all. I am thankful that he is doing this amount. But I do NOT think that he is King of *Ikumen*.]

When looking at this post, it is easy to see which activities that the contributor regards as enough to earn the husband the title *ikumen*. 寝かしつけ[putting to sleep], 昼食・夕食作り [making lunch/dinner] and 食器洗い[washing dishes] show that this person thinks that these activities are enough for her husband to be an *ikumen*, even though she feels that he is not the most involved *ikumen*.

Other contributors show similar links between the term *ikumen* and ordinary housework. Three of the male contributors had posts with similar themes, discussing what kind of work they could do or what was actually expected of them. One of the few male contributors asked “でも、育児って子供が起きている間だけの事でしょうか？ [But, is childrearing something you can only do when the children are awake?]”, going on to suggest that cleaning and preparations for the next morning and so on can still be done. The other male contributors use similar words to describe their involvement, with one feeling that he is already doing a lot and one wondering if what he is doing should be considered enough to be an *ikumen*.

5.1.3 *Ikumen* is not a necessary term

In a submission from 2016, with the title “イクメンじゃない人っているんですか？ [Is there anyone who is NOT an *ikumen*?]”, the whole necessity of the term *ikumen* is questioned. Following the earlier discussion of a weak *ikumen* image, this contributor asks whether there is actually a need to go to such lengths as to create a new word:

(4) 「イクメン」という言葉がありますが、違和感をおぼえます。単身赴任、多忙、病気などの男性でなければ、育児に関わるのは普通だと思うのです。あえて言葉を作る必要があるのか？と感じます。[...] 幼稚園、保育園の送迎、買い物、料理、掃除、ゴミ出し、子供と遊ぶお父さんを普通に見かけます。[There is a word called “ikumen”, but it gives an uncomfortable feeling. I think that if you are not a man who is transferred to another city, under pressure from work or ill, it is normal to be involved in childcare. [...] Leaving and picking up children at kindergarten or preschool, grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, taking out the trash, playing with the children, I usually see this kind of dad.]

While becoming an *ikumen* in the stronger sense did not seem to be a plausible option in any of the cases studied, the weaker *ikumen* practice could, in the reasoning of this contributor, be seen as natural and something that almost all men were already doing. Following this reasoning, the need to create a new word such as *ikumen* disappears altogether. Mizukoshi et al (2016) had a similar finding in their study, most of the respondents in their study had the idea that helping with housework was natural, and the creation of a word seemed to be unnecessary to them. Many respondents did not feel the need to use the word *ikumen* because of the perceived naturalness of helping out with housework.

In all posts studied in this chapter, it is easy to see how the contributors give *ikumen* a meaning that is closely related to carrying out household chores and some child rearing activities, but not at all related to taking out parental leave. These observations serve to further show that there is a discrepancy between how the Ikumen project has been trying to promote the strong *ikumen* image and how people seem to have understood and adopted it.

5.2 Generally negative about *ikumen*

There are some posts that are more complaints than anything else. While there is no one that says straight out that men should not aim to become *ikumen*, there are several contributors complaining about the behavior of what they perceive to be *ikumen* in public spaces, or voicing their negative feelings about what they feel are self-proclaimed *ikumen* who are not actually *ikumen*. A few contributors who were women working full-time, writing that while they are happy that their husbands are helping out at home, they feel that it is strange for only

their partner to receive praise since they themselves are still taking on most of the housework in addition to professional work.

An example of the first type of complaint is “イクメンさんがウザイでございます [Ikumen are annoying]”. The contributor uses “うっとうしい [irritating]” and “ウザイ [annoying, noisy] to describe how she feels that *ikumen* behave in public spaces. For her, these “*ikumen*” are not doing anything good, they are:

- (5)・ いちいち大声ではしゃぐ (奥様・子供よりウルサイ)
 - ・ 子供には関係ないムダな動き (オーバーリアクション)
 - ・ オシャレなパパでしょお～って感じがうっとうしい (見て見てって感じが)
- [- Messing around with a very loud voice (Noisier than wife and children)
- Doing things unrelated to the children (Overreaction)
- Giving off the annoying feeling of wanting to look like a stylish dad (giving off the feeling of wanting other people to look at them)]

For this contributor, the *ikumen* seen in public spaces are disturbing and loud, not contributing very much but in her view rather trying to make sure they look like good fathers to other people, acting in a way that is over the top and unnecessary, more looking to be approved of by their surroundings than actually helping out with their children.

For contributors who complained about the actions of *ikumen*, “自称 [self-proclaimed]” was used several times. It seems that while they did not really criticize or question the existence of *ikumen*, they felt that many times the man was not a “real” *ikumen*, but rather just making sure to look the part to outsiders. One person writes about how the advice she gets from her *ikumen* co-workers is not very helpful:

- (6)なぜなら、彼らの「育児」のほとんどは専業主婦の奥様方がお膳立てした上に成り立つものだからです [If you ask why, the childrearing that they do is basically things that their full time housewives have already prepared for them].

This person feels that these *ikumen* are more for show and that rather than contributing in any real way at home, they are relying on their wives to do most of the work while still looking like *ikumen* to outsiders because of the way they are still participating in easily visible parts of childrearing.

Another contributor is calling her husband a “自称イクメン[self-proclaimed *ikumen*]”, raising similar complaints. She describes how her husband wakes their son up early and sometimes takes him out to play in a playground before leaving him at preschool. Describing how this is easily noticed by people around them and how she has been told that her husband is *ikumen*, she also feels that he is not really an *ikumen* because what he is doing is not really helping:

(7)私としては、その1時間は息子を寝かせておいて、洗濯や掃除に充てて欲しい！！せっかく早起きしない息子にしたのに（笑）休日も同じ時間に起きるでしょ！！ [From my point of view, I would rather want him to let our son sleep one more hour, and instead take some time to do laundry or cleaning. Even if I went to great length to not have our son wake up so early, now won't he wake up at the same time even on holidays?]

This contributor is not the only one who feels that her husband is getting unduly recognition for doing much less housework than her. Especially in households such as this, where both parts are working full-time, some women feel that even though they are often taking on a bigger burden at home, alongside their work, it is their husbands who get praised when taking on just a little bit of housework.

(8)周りの親戚からも「〇〇さん(夫)は、本当にイクメンね～！えらいわ～！」などと褒められ、祖母(90歳)も「〇〇さんは、育児に積極的でえらい！死んだおじいちゃんなんて、風呂も入れたことがない！」っと。[...]私だって、同じように正社員で働き、年収も変わらず、育児に加えて家事もやっているのに。まったく褒められず、むしろそれが当然のような言い方。[...]別に褒められたいわけでは

ないけれど、未だに世間(というより私の親世代以上?)が「女は、男と同じように仕事をして、家事も育児もするのが当然!!!」とされているようで、モヤモヤしました。[From surrounding relatives he also gets praise: “XX (husband) is actively engaged in childrearing, how great! The late grandfather didn’t even fill up the bathtub” my grandmother said. [...] I work as a full-time employee and earn a yearly income just as my husband, and even adding childrearing and housework I never get praised. Rather it is like saying that this is natural [...] I am not particularly saying that I want to be praised, but it is like being told by society (or rather the generations from my parents and up?) that it is “natural that women do housework and childrearing even if they have a job just like the men!”, and this gives me a discouraged feeling.]

Some other contributors have similar complaints about how their husbands are praised but they themselves are not, showing how men’s work in the household and women’s work in the household are still valued differently. Even in cases where the women themselves are working fulltime, it seems that it is still regarded as normal for women to take on most of the burden at home, while men doing even smaller things will receive much more praise.

This also goes well with what Oyama has found about the work that men do in the household as something special, different from women’s work and how it has been needed to be formulated as something manly and praiseworthy (Oyama, 2014). This kind of thinking can be seen through many of these posts, for example in descriptions of how the suddenly fashionable *ikumens* are perceived as attention seeking rather than as doing something that is actually positive.

5.3 Generally positive about *ikumens*

There are a few contributors who had a less critical view of the *ikumens*, for example one contributor who felt happy seeing an *ikumens* together with a child in a restaurant, thinking back on her own time as a new mother and how her husband was never involved in the same way:

(9) 私が美容院に行く時のみ預かってくれましたが、切ってもらっている最中も何度も電話で呼び出されたり。

あーあ昔の私、かわいそう。これを見てくれた男性の方、どうぞ子供が生まれたら奥様に一人の時間をプレゼントしてあげて下さい。 [(My husband) would only take care of the children when I went to the hairdresser, and would still call me while I was in the middle of getting a haircut. Aah, the old me seems pitiful now. Men who might see this, after your wife has given birth, please give her some alone time as a present.]

This post is clearly positive about men being more involved with their children. This is illustrated through for example the use of “かわいそう [pitiful]”, showing how it was more difficult for this contributor because of the lack of help from her own husband. While overall a positive and encouraging post, the choice to use “プレゼント [present]” and “あげて下さい [please give]” still suggests an underlying assumption of women as primarily responsible for child rearing, but that men should sometimes consider *giving* some time. What the contributor says is not to actively participate or take over responsibilities from the partner but rather help her by sometimes giving her some free time. Even though the contributor says that some time should be given to mothers by their husbands, it seems that the underlying assumption here is that the woman still has the biggest responsibility for home and children.

Another contributor who could be considered to have a positive view of *ikumen* is contributor 40, who is actively looking for a man who will be able to take up the *ikumen* role later, and is worried that her current boyfriend is not actually going to do that:

私の父は幼い私の面倒を見るところか邪魔者扱いしかしなかったような人です。
私は結婚・出産後も仕事を続けたいので (性格的に専業主婦には向かないと自覚しています)、父のような男性と結婚してしまうかもしれないと思うと恐ろしいです。 [My dad looked at me as if I was a bother and treated me like a nuisance when I

was small. Because I want to continue working after getting married and giving birth (I am feeling that being a housewife does not suit my personality), I am worrying about ending up marrying a man like my father]

This contributor seems to have a view of why her prospective husband would need to be an *ikumen* that more closely resembles that of the Ikumen Project. While nothing is said about how much of an *ikumen* the husband in question should be, the reason behind why such a person is wanted, is more in line with the idea behind the Ikumen Project.

6. Discussion

6.1 The contested meaning of *ikumen*

One of the first conclusions that can be drawn is that there is no consensus on the actual meaning of the term *ikumen*. While the Ikumen Project is trying to establish a chain of equivalence between the word *ikumen* and cutting working hours and taking out paternity leave, this is not the way that any of the contributors view the term.

For most of the contributors, the chain of equivalence would instead be between *ikumen* and carrying out regular housework or by accompanying their children from time to time, with the biggest discussion revolving around to what degree these things should be done in order to be regarded as *ikumen*. For some, *ikumen* seemed to be mostly pretense, maybe those men would do something, but most, it was suggested, would still be done by their wives. Some simply used the word to refer to men who were seen with their children outside the house, mostly these posts were complaints, raising points that these perceived *ikumen* did not actually do anything good, they were either not well mannered enough, or they were simply trying to show off. These are examples of yet another chain of equivalence, the thought that *ikumen* are actually *not* helping out very much, that they are showing off and not well-mannered in the public sphere.

What this shows is that the term is debated and that several different usages of the word are competing to imbue the term with meaning. The different chains of equivalence linked to the word *ikumen* suggest that the word is a floating signifier. That the meaning of the word is uncertain and contested is important to consider when working with the implementation of the Ikumen Project. Even though the word *ikumen* has become more and more widespread, the word has a lot of different connotations other than the one that the Ikumen Project has been trying to promote.

6.2 Changing hegemonic masculinity

When judging from the posts made on *Hatsugen Komachi*, it is still possible to notice what seems to be part of a bigger trend in Japanese society. While the salaryman masculinity with men working full time and women taking care of house and children cannot be said to be

gone, it is weakened at least to the point that a lot of the contributors feel that men participating in housework is considered natural.

Some of the contributors still express their desire to live by the traditional norms and do not seem to feel the need for things to be any different. However, for most of the contributors that touch on the subject of their men as *ikumen*, most still want their husbands to do some things, everything from just helping out to actually share evenly in order to be able to keep working full time as a woman.

While there is no consensus, and a lot of old ideas and norms are still very prevalent throughout the contributions, it is also possible to say that things seem to be slowly changing. While some studies have gone as far as suggest that the salaryman masculinity is not the hegemonic masculinity of Japan any more, the contributions studied in this study seem to suggest that the salaryman masculinity still retains most of its hegemonic status. However, the previously distinct line between men's roles and women's roles in the family seem to be changing slowly as well as getting more diverse.

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