

LUND UNIVERSITY • CENTRE FOR EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIAN STUDIES

# Rainbows and closets

## A study on sexual minorities' experiences in a changing Japanese society

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Master's Programme in Asian Studies

Spring semester 2018



**Abstract**

Sexual minorities have been largely ignored in Japanese politics until very recently. The past couple of years have seen a change where LGBT issues have been brought to attention in both politics and in media. This thesis explored what impact these changes have on the lives of individuals, and the research was a qualitative study based on fieldwork in Japan and secondary sources. The study drew on Butler's Performativity theory, Fraser's theory of Recognition and Foucault's theory of Power. The study found that the local changes in policies contributes to greater awareness, and encourages continued discussion. They do not, however, impact the social expectation and pressure that sexual minorities experience to any significant degree. The study also showed that media influence regarding stereotyping is strong, thus affecting sexual minorities negatively, although later years have seen a progress towards fairer representations with underlying educational and sympathy seeking intentions.

Keywords: LGBT, sexuality, gender norms, Japan

## **Acknowledgements**

First of all, I want to extend my gratitude to Monica Lindberg Falk, my supervisor. Not only have your inputs and advice been invaluable to me, you also kept believing in me when I did not. I am also grateful for the help I received from the other teachers and staff at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies. I also want to extend my thanks to the informants, who allowed me to get a glimpse of their lives and made this study possible.

This thesis would also not have existed were it not for the support from my friends and family. Thank you for taking care of me when I could not manage on my own. To Gabbi and Veronica; thank you for your warm welcome in a cold winter.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

During my first visit to Japan, in the summer of 2013, I had an eye opening experience. As one of my Japanese friends introduced me to another, he chose to reveal my sexuality directly after saying my name, as if he was bragging about a rare find. After that it became more and more clear to me how invisible sexual minorities were. I started to pay more attention to the issue and in 2014 I went back to study at Waseda University for a year. My experiences there made me understand how prominent the gender norms are, and I even received hateful comments from other students when I made a presentation on LGBT rights. These experiences made me even more determined to continue to raise the issue. My time in Japan made me curious to learn more about LGBT individuals' experiences, and I started to think about strategies to raise awareness and support those who are in need. These experiences are what eventually led me to write this thesis.

### 1.1 Background

This section provides a background in order to present an idea of the social context of Japan. The first part deals with the history of sexual minorities and how they have been perceived of, followed by a short outline of important events that has led to the current situation. The second part provides an introduction to the role of marriage and family, and briefly explains the family registry system. Lastly, a brief overview of contemporary laws and policies is presented.

#### 1.1.1 *Historical Background*

Japan has a long history of non-heteronormative practices. McLelland (2000b: 20) states that it dates back at least a thousand years, although it has not traditionally taken the form of a distinct sexuality, but rather as practices that were socially accepted and not excluding attraction towards the opposite sex. There is plenty of documentation about such acts from the Tokugawa period, but much less from the Meiji period. Although it is difficult to state exact reasons as to why this development occurred, it can

be argued that the western discourses on sexology influenced the attitude towards homosexual practices. These western sexological discourses contrasted the understanding of the traditional male eroticism (*nanshoku*) in that homosexuality, as the modern concept of sexuality, was “a deviant and dangerous passion” (McLelland, 2000b: 24).

In the 1990s the group OCCUR was pushing for LGBT rights, “demanding to be consulted by policymakers where gay issues were concerned” (Lunsing, 2005, also outlined in more detail in McLelland, 2000b: 40). In 1997, OCCUR won a lawsuit against Tokyo Metropolitan City in the High Court (The Japan Times, 1997) and Lunsing (2005: 144) writes that this led to “a legal definition of male homosexuality [being] created for the first time in Japan”. The source of inspiration for this definition (of homosexuality in general, not only male homosexuality) was the gay movements in the United States, which refer to homosexuality as a sexual orientation rather than sexual acts. Although the lawsuit was a success for the LGBT community, McLelland (2000b: 40) states that far from all homosexual men he spoke to agreed with OCCUR’s acts, and many saw them as a result of unnecessary provocation and self-disclosure from the members.

In recent times there has been an upsurge in literature dealing with gender equality in Japan. According to Kano (2011: 42), the term “gender” became one of the most visible and hotly contested terms in Japanese political discourse” between 1995-2005. However, this discussion dealt with gender equality between men and women, and much less with non-binary genders. Laws promoting women’s participation in the workforce were implemented, such as parental leave and protection against domestic violence. Although these laws do indeed support and protect women, she raises the question as to whether “the government [is] promoting a particular way of living, heterosexual, married, with kids, both parents employed etc., at the cost of other ways of living” (Kano, 2011: 57). More recently, due to the demographic situation, the Abe administration has attempted to promote women in the workplace. However, some researchers criticise the initiatives for disregarding the strong gender norms and thereby making them rather inefficient (Macnaughtan, 2015).

### 1.1.2 *Marriage and family*

The most central aspect of many Japanese people's lives is the institution of marriage. Traditionally, the marriage in Japan has been more about finding a suitable partner to pass the family name on to children, rather than romantic love. The importance of marriage is still reflected in today's society where the social security benefits often are of greater importance than romance. There is also a general assumption that not being married implies flaws in one's character, rather than a wish not to conform to the system. Thus, many homosexual people experience the pressure to get married and have children despite their same-sex attraction, in order to please their parents and the surrounding society (McLelland, 2000b: 91-93).

Another important aspect of marriage in Japan is the family registration system. The system has roots in Confucianism and Tamagawa states that: "the traditional Japanese family system subjugated women to the will of household heads and denied them legal rights" (Tamagawa, 2016: 172). The system remains largely unchanged still today, and it requires households to register information such as address, marriages, divorces, births, genders and adoptions, among other things. Unless registered in the system, marriages do not become legally effective. It is also important to note that within the family, the relation to the family head is also included (first son etc.) (Tamagawa, 2016: 172). This means that in order to legally change one's legal gender status, other information may need to be altered as well. It is also required that all members of a family shares the same family name. Horie (2010: 49-50, cited in Tamagawa 2016) states that in more than 90% of all marriages, the wife takes the name of the husband, and thereby the notion of the husband as the head of the household becomes reinforced. Thus, Tamagawa argues, "Japan's traditional patriarchal family system is ideologically maintained through the family registration system" (Tamagawa, 2016: 172).

### 1.1.3 *Contemporary laws and policies*

Although same-sex marriage is not recognised in Japan, it is important to note that there are no laws regulating consensual same-sex interactions, and with the exception of a



short period between 1876-1881, homosexuality was never criminalised (McLelland, 2000b: 26). McLelland points out that where the laws do touch upon topics related to sex, they are “constructed on the assumption that it is something that happens between men and women”. The formulation of article 177 in the criminal code is written in such a way that a man can rape a boy without risking a rape sentence, because it falls outside of the law (McLelland, 2000b: 38). This form of loophole is just another example of how issues regarding homosexuality have been largely ignored, and thus puts LGBT people in a more vulnerable position. Tamagawa states that there are no laws protecting same-sex couples, and “their relationships are not officially recognized as common-law marriages” (Tamagawa, 2016: 165).

WHO removed homosexuality from the category of mental disorders in 1990, and Japan followed the directive in 1994, when the Ministry of Health and Welfare removed the mental disorder label and the Ministry of Education removed homosexuality from their list of sexual misconduct (Takao, 2017: 26), but the national government still remains indifferent to issues of sexual minorities (ibid.: 25).

Since 1996 it has been possible to legally perform sex reassignment surgery and the first officially sanctioned one was performed in 1998. Before that, transgendered people did not have access to counselling regarding their situation (Mackie, 2002: 215-216). Additional discrimination occurs when intersexed people seek medical help for issues that are not according to their registered sex. In such cases they were not covered by their medical insurance (Mackie, 2002: 217). The Special Law on Gender Identity Disorder of 2004 allows transgendered people to change their legal gender status. Additionally, the Japanese government announced in 2009 that they would issue eligibility forms “to those who wished to marry foreign partners of the same sex” in “countries where same-sex marriages are legal” (Tamagawa, 2016: 165).

## 1.2 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to better understand how the recent progress towards an LGBT friendly society is reflected in the perceptions of LGBT people themselves, and how they are affected. Considering the broadness of the overall aim, there is a focus on institutional policies, social norms and visibility. By focusing on these aspects, I intend

to examine the partnership certificates, explore how well they are perceived of and what impact they have on LGBT individuals. I also seek to further understand how social norms affect LGBT individuals and examine how they negotiate their identities in relation to those norms. By looking at visibility, I aim to see how sexual minorities are represented and how LGBT individuals reflect upon that representation.

### 1.3 Research questions

This study investigates how LGBT individuals are affected by the progress towards LGBT equality, and what their opinions are. The main research question is:

- How do the recent institutional changes towards LGBT equality impact the life of the individual and their identities?”

The following sub-questions are used in order to answer the main question.

- How are the partnership certificates perceived by LGBT individuals?
- How do LGBT individuals negotiate their identities in relation to the social norms and expectations?
- How can the pressure to conform to the social norms be reduced?
- What impact does media have on sexual minorities’ lives?

### 1.4 Disposition

The thesis consists of six chapters. The first serves as an introduction to the social context of contemporary Japan, and presents the aim of the thesis and the research questions. Chapter 2 gives an overview of existing research in the fields of gender roles, LGBT issues and contemporary laws and policies, all with focus on Japan. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical frameworks used to analyse the findings. There are three parts, where the first covers Judith Butler’s Performativity Theory, the second explores the theory of Recognition as developed by Nancy Fraser, and the last deals with the Foucauldian theory of Power. Chapter 4 covers the methodology employed to conduct the research. Chapter 5 presents the findings and offers a discussion and analysis while

drawing on the theoretical frameworks introduced in chapter 3. Chapter 6 offers a conclusion of the thesis.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to highlight the existing body of research dealing with gender norms, LGBT in Japan, and laws and policies related to LGBT issues.

First, there is a section overviewing the literature on the prominent gender norms in the Japanese society, motivated by their impact on the lives of sexual minorities. Following, there is a section on how LGBT individuals navigate through the social norms and form their identities around them. Finally, there is a section highlighting the discussion regarding sexual minorities in contemporary policy making and their implications.

### 2.1 A gendered society

The topic of gender in Japan has been on the academic agenda for decades, with some of the earlier work dealing with gender inequalities (Smith, R. J., 1987), women's roles as mothers as well as their increased participation in higher education already in the 70's and 80's (Smith, K. C., 1978, Fujimura-Fanselow, 1985).

Historically, Confucian influences impacted the way gender norms developed (Svyatnenko, 2017) and during the early 1900s the Nazi German influences led to further separation (McLelland, 2005: 32). Anan (2012: 69) shows how the how gender norms have historically been prominent even in left leaning circles. She describes how "many women liberationists were actually marginalized within the leftist movement" during the 70's and 80's. While the men were out demonstrating, the women "were expected to take care of chores".

There is a substantial body of literature that deals with gender roles and norms in Japan. In the edited volumes "Asian Masculinities: The meaning and practice of manhood in China and Japan" (Louie & Low eds., 2003) and "Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan" (Roberson & Suzuki eds., 2003) topics of identity formation and sexuality are brought up. Dasgupta (2014) discusses the idea of the white-collar salaryman and how it has been challenged as a symbol for masculinity since the economic stagnation during the 1990s.

Mathias (2014) analyses gendered working patterns and their emergence during the early twentieth century, and Koyama (translated by Mackie, 2014) examines the ‘good wife, wise mother’ discourse in relation to women’s incorporation into the nation-state. These are only a few among the many works that all present ideas of idealised men and women and the roles designated to them.

## 2.2 LGBT in Japan

Although the body of literature on male homosexuality in Japan is considerably large, Hall does not agree with the notion that: “the topic of male homosexuality in Japan has already been done sufficiently” (Hall, 2003: 206).

Much of the Japanese society circulates around the heteronormative family construction, but that is not to say that sexual minorities completely suppress their queer identities. McLelland (2005), who is one of the most prominent researchers in the field, outlines in his book “Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age” how sexual minorities have developed strategies to navigate through society and still, at least to some extent, manage their identities. Suganuma (2007) focuses on identity negotiation and the formation of queer male identities. He has also written on the discourses of *Ni-Chōme*, a neighbourhood in Shinjuku famous for its many gay bars (Suganuma, 2011).

Much attention is given to ways in which the Japanese media tends to portray sexual minorities. McLelland (2000b) examines the ways in which homosexual men are portrayed in media directed both towards the general public as well as media directed towards a homosexual audience.

Mackie, another prominent researcher in the field, has also paid attention to the portrayal of sexual minorities in media. She notes that media representations negatively portray homosexuals (Mackie, 2002), and while analysing transgendered narratives in popular media, she argues they are mostly framed in a medical discourse and the strict gender roles are still present, meaning the transgendered characters struggle to conform to the gender roles of their identity (Mackie, 2008). Maree (2017) sheds light on the media reports on two symbolic same-sex weddings that took place in Japan, framing them in a discourse of sexual citizenship.

Lunsing brings up ways in which gay men may be discriminated against. Finding housing is one of those. For Japanese men who want to live together it is considerably more difficult to find a landlord willing to rent them an apartment. Although it is less difficult for women, it still occurs. He also talks about transgendered people and states that MTF are generally facing more discrimination, often similar to that which women face (Lunsing, 2005: 147). Although discrimination systematically occurs, violence against LGBT people is uncommon. Attention has also been brought to the consequences of framing transgenderism within a medical discourse (Itani, 2011). Tamagawa (2016) examines what role the family and households play in maintaining homophobia, and Lusk is one of few who have focused on intersex awareness (Lusk, 2017).

Ito & Yanase (2001) are two activists who have written a book on their coming out story and the struggles that come with being homosexual in Japan, and other scholars have published coming out stories and interviews as well (Takatori, translated by Ofuji, 2007, Motoyama, 2015). Chalmers (2002) brings attention to lesbian lives in Japan in her book, which has been described as the first major work in English language academia that focuses on homosexual women. Kamano & Khor have written on lesbian women's dating and relationship experiences (Kamano & Khor, 2008) and Kamano (2009) on lesbian couples' domestic housework negotiation.

Some researchers claim that the gendered Japanese language norms are heterosexist (Maree, 2008: 67), and that causes difficulties for queer people who do not wish to be associated with one gender. Others argue that the language provides individuals with the possibility of expressing a preferred identity, and that it has more to do with how you identify in a specific context rather than your assigned gender (Abe, 2010, McLelland, 2000a). Kano (2011: 45) clarifies the confusion around the Japanese abbreviation of the term "gender free", and how it has come to mean elimination of gender, while simultaneously being used as being "free from gender bias".

DiStefano's (2008) study indicates that suicidality and self-harm among sexual minorities in Japan is very common. The reasons stated in this study are "homophobic/transphobic environment and the negative consequences of sexual minorities either disclosing their true selves or remaining hidden and silent within such an environment", "various antecedents to poor mental health", and unrelated factors

such as unemployment and economical reasons (DiStefano, 2008: 1429). Studies have suggested that suicide attempt rates are higher among sexual minorities than among heterosexuals (Hidaka *et al.* 2008, cited in Tamagawa 2016: 177).

NGOs have also focused on LGBT issues in Japan, with Human Rights Watch (2016) publishing a report on bullying of LGBT students in Japanese schools, and Amnesty International (2017) publishing another on discrimination against LGBT people.

### 2.3 Laws and policies

“Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through co-operation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis”

(The Constitution of Japan, Article 24)

Although the article leaves room for interpretation, most lawyers in Japan agree that the correct interpretation of “both sexes” is “a man and a woman” (Tamaki, 2011). The vague phrasing of the article, however, does mean that legalising same-sex marriage would not require a change in the constitution, but rather a reinterpretation. “Mutual consent of both sexes” could be interpreted as mutual consent of two male individuals or two female individuals as well.

McLelland (2000b: 39) suggests that the “invisibility of homosexuality before the law reflects the general lack of discussion of homosexuality as a lifestyle choice in Japanese society” and further draws the connection to how the invisibility of lesbians in many western countries could be reflected in the lack of laws against female homosexuality.

Kano (2011: 41) outlines how Japanese politics has gotten more influenced by feminism since the 1990s, but that it has continuously been linked to efforts promoting an increase in birth rates rather than actually promoting equal opportunities between men and women. She also questions whether it has been a process truly aiming for equality. Tamagawa (2016) discusses the possibility of same-sex marriage in Japan and concludes that although Japan is seemingly gay friendly, homophobia permeates the

system upon which the society is built. She pays particular attention to the family registration system and how it privileges heterosexual married couples.

In regards to the implementations of partnership certificates for same-sex couples, Takao (2017) analyses how the issue of sexual minorities became a hot subject on the political agenda and who the key actors were.



### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter provides an overview of theories of gender and identity performance, justice through recognition, and power relations. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides helpful when analysing and seeking to answer how LGBT individuals negotiate their identities in a heteronormative social context. Through Nancy Fraser's theory of justice through recognition I seek to understand what claim sexual minorities have for recognition in the Japanese context and investigate in what ways they are subject to misrecognition through institutionalised norms and policies. Lastly, by applying Foucault's theory of power, I seek to evaluate institutions' as well as media's impact on LGBT life in terms of power relations.

#### 3.1 Performativity theory

As mentioned above, the theory of gender performativity was initially developed by Judith Butler. Abe (2010: 5) describes Butler's notion of gender as "highly abstract". In Abe's study on queer linguistics, she employs Butler's notion of gender and describes it as "not an attribute of a person, but rather a complex and unstable social construct" (Abe, 2010: 5). I share the view of gender as something we negotiate and produce in relation to the social context and norms we navigate through.

The early work on performativity focused largely on the woman and the gender norms associated with her. One of the most important aspects of Butler's conception of gender is that it "is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" where the body is the mean for this stylization (Butler, 1988: 519).

Although the term "perform" might make it seem gender is a solely conscious choice, that is not the case. As Butler (2009: xi-xii) puts it, "when we act [...] it is already within a set of norms that are acting upon us". To a certain extent we can choose how to act and how to produce our gender, but she emphasises that these choices are based on desires that we do not choose. Unable to choose our desires, we may, however, choose how to act upon them. In Butler's own words "[p]erformativity is a

process that implies being acted on in ways we do not always fully understand, and of acting, in politically consequential ways” (Butler, 2009: xii).

### 3.1.1 *Performativity and the aspect of precarity*

In more recent years, Butler has re-examined the concept of gender performativity. The aspect of precarity and how it affects our gender performance, she notes, is “particularly relevant in the sexual policies that are shaped within the nation-states” (Butler, 2009: i). It is important to note that the inclusion of precarity does not affect her stance that gender is performative. Butler still describes it as a form of enactment where the reproduction of one’s gender is prompted by the existing gender norms. Regardless of whether one conforms to the gender norms or not, it is, according to Butler, “always a negotiation with power” (2009: i). The precarity aspect refers to external conditions that impact one’s life. One example of precarity in this sense is social policies that fail to protect certain groups, leading to these groups facing higher risks of being subject to poverty, exposure to violence etc. Similarly, individuals whose gender identity deviates from the constituted gender norms face greater risks of harassment and discrimination. The gender norms determine how we can express ourselves in different contexts, who is protected by laws and policies, and who receives social benefits (Butler, 2009: ii).

### 3.2 Justice through recognition

The second theory to be discussed in this thesis is one of justice through recognition, as developed by Nancy Fraser. This model is her attempt to bring together the philosophy of “justice through distribution” with the traditional interpretation of “justice through recognition”. She does so by reinterpreting the concept of recognition from an ethics based interpretation to a moral based one. This, she argues, enables distribution and recognition to function alongside each other without being mutually exclusive. Although often perceived as being mutually exclusive, “[j]ustice today requires both redistribution and recognition; neither alone is sufficient” (Fraser, 2001: 22).

### 3.2.1 *Status over Identity*

As mentioned above, Fraser's conception of recognition differs from earlier understandings. Traditionally there has been a divide between redistribution and recognition, where the former is associated with morality and the latter with ethics. Through her reinterpretation of recognition, Fraser enables the two to be combined.

In the ethics based model, or the identity model, the object of recognition is the group identity, and "misrecognition consists in the depreciation of [a group-specific cultural] identity by the dominant culture and the consequent damage to group member's sense of self" (Fraser, 2001: 23). Fraser problematizes this model by arguing that: "it emphasizes psychic structure over social institutions and social interaction" (ibid.).

Her solution is the status model. By shifting the object of recognition from group identity to social status, misrecognition takes the form of "social subordination", or prevention from participation in social life on equal terms. Misrecognition, thus, is overcome by "establishing the misrecognized party as full member of society" (ibid.: 24).

"To view recognition as a matter of status is to examine institutionalized patterns of cultural value for their effects on the relative standing of social actors." (Fraser, 2001: 24)

Thus, in my interpretation, this theory illustrates how institutionalised forms of social exclusion are what constitute status inequality. Same-sex marriage becomes, according to the status model, a representative of misrecognition. Similarly, hierarchical status conditions within the family often constructs men as the head of family (as is very much the case in Japan) and thus, women are subordinate and thereby subject to misrecognition, since they do not share the equal status. Racial discrimination also fits the category of when one group suffers from misrecognition due to institutionalised status inequality. It is important to note, however, that the subjects' identity in the marginalized group is not the centre of focus here, but rather their position as one deprived of certain rights or benefits. The aim, Fraser argues, is "to de-institutionalize

patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it” (Fraser, 2001: 25).

### 3.2.2 *Justifying justice claims*

Unlike theories of the identity model of recognition, Fraser argues, the status model makes the theory of recognition one of justice rather than self-fulfilment. In that sense, what makes claims of misrecognition justifiable in terms of social justice is the fact that misrecognition denies “the status of full partners in social interaction” (Fraser, 2001: 26). This, because the social values and institutionalised patterns are constructed in a way in which some individuals or groups are subordinate to others. Misrecognition, therefore, is wrong, not because it negatively impacts the individual’s sense of self, but because “it constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination”, and thereby it is a “serious violation of justice” (ibid.).

But who can claim justice, and how? Fraser (2007) states that up until recently justice disputes took shape in what she refers to as a “Keynesian-Westphalian” frame, by which she means that the nation state is considered a given unit and the subject is the citizens of that particular nation state. She is then critiquing this framework since globalisation blurs nation states’ boundaries and means that the unit or subject is not necessarily given. She gives the example of women’s rights movements, where women struggling for recognition across nations unite under one banner and thus the boundaries between nations are removed. Drawing upon this, Fraser introduces the theory of “post-Westphalian democratic justice” (2007: 19). The same can also be said about the struggle for the rights of sexual minorities. International organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch push for equality across nations, and international pressure and publicity play an important role.

### 3.3 Power is everywhere

By applying Foucault’s theory of power I aim to analyse the ways in which power structures are upheld and how they impact the lives of LGBT individuals. In order to do so, however, it is necessary to look at what defines power.

According to Foucault, power is “an organ of repression” (Foucault in Kelly, 1994: 28). It is important to acknowledge the form in which power takes place. It does not refer to institutional structure that function to repress populations or groups of people. Rather, it is “something that circulates”, or something that can be described as a chain. The power is never in a single position and never exercised from a specific centre. It is in a constant flow, where individuals are “always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising” it (Foucault, 1980: 98 [1978]). It is not to say, however, that distribution of power is in any way equal. It is, as I understand it, the inequality in relations that produces power. It is an unstable process that permeates everything. As Foucault famously puts it; “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1978: 93 [1976]).

Foucault states that in order to analyse something in terms of power, one must see beyond state sovereignty, law or institutions, and understand it in the form of four different instances. Those instances are “the multiplicity of force relations”, “process”, “support” and “strategies” (Foucault, 1978: 92 [1976]). Applying this model on the case of sexual minorities in Japan is a way to illustrate the ways in which power operates. As I understand it, “the multiplicity of force relations” refers to the forces operating within the society. In the case of Japan, examples of such forces are conservative politicians and political parties who want to maintain gender roles, LGBT activists and social expectations. The “process” is that which “transforms, strengthens or reverses” the relations between the operating forces (ibid.). The demographic development could be seen as one such process, and so could globalisation and the growing activism for LGBT equality. The “support” refers to the ways in which the forces support one another, forming or breaking chains of power (ibid.). Such an example could be how media or political parties support or challenge LGBT activism and their framing of it. The last instance is the “strategies”, which refer to the way the forces take effect (ibid.). In this case, that could be the formulation and implementation of the partnership certificates, or even, when negotiating identities, counterfeit marriages, which are discussed in chapter 5. To summarise, one can say that, according to my interpretation, the forces that operate produces subjects (in this case Japanese sexual minorities and allies) who respond to the oppression they suffer and thereby reproduce power by resisting.

### 3.3.1 *Biopolitics through biopower*

The concept of biopolitics is introduced in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978 [1976]) and has been described as “essentially a complement to his earlier formulation of discipline, whereby sovereign rule – the ultimate right to take life – is increasingly overlaid by a new focus on the life processes of the population” (Marks, 2006: 333). According to Foucault, the development of biopolitics as a phenomenon began already in the seventeenth century, where the body and the “mechanics of life” became the focus of “regulatory controls” of the population. These mechanics of life refer to biological processes such as “propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (Foucault, 1978: 139 [1976]). This form of subjugation through politicising the body and thereby steer the direction life takes is what Foucault calls “biopower”.

In Foucault's work “Society must be defended”, it is stated that as capitalism developed and the bourgeoisie became the ruling class, “the human body essentially became a productive force” (Foucault, 2003: 31), and that which was deemed unproductive was “banished, excluded and repressed” (ibid.: 38). This is what created the discourse of discipline. The way I understand it, the disciplinary power, as he refers to it, is what makes the social body conform to the existing laws, not the punishment for breaking them. Discipline becomes a process of normalisation, and that is basically what defines norms. More importantly, those who hold the power are “entitled to define the norm” (ibid.: 61).

While Foucault is discussing state racism, his theory is directly applicable to heteronormativity. The politicalisation of sexuality is a clear example of how biopolitics have shaped today's society. The framing of homosexuality within a medical discourse became a tool to repress and exclude homosexuals from the society. It made heterosexuality the norm, and thus, pressures sexual minorities to fit in with the heterosexual norm in order not to be discriminated against. The set of norms and values that define what a family should be like is also a tool for such exclusion. Additionally, as it is currently in the government's interest to increase the declining birth rate, it is also in their interest to maintain the social norms that stigmatises sexual minorities.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Study design

The method chosen for this research is qualitative. The choice is motivated by the employment of interviews, which according to Bryman is “the most widely employed method in qualitative research” (2012: 469). The data collection was done through fieldwork in Tokyo during a period of one month. This thesis addresses Japan’s move towards a more LGBT equal society and its impact on the lives of sexual minorities. The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow the participants to provide information they considered important, and to give them freedom to share however much they wanted. Furthermore, the semi-structured form of interviewing allows a greater flexibility for the researcher to follow up with questions based on the information the participants provide, and for the participants to lead the interview towards topics that are significant for them (Bryman, 2012: 470). All names are fictive for the purpose of protecting their identities.

Information collected from my previous visits to Japan is also included in this thesis. This information consists of informal talk and participant observation. The study is also based on secondary sources. These consist of academic books, academic journals, social media, TV programs and online surveys. They provide social context, and social media and TV programs in particular are used as examples of how the visibility of LGBT is increasing. The books and academic journals are used to examine how the results from my interviews relate to previous research.

### 4.2 Sampling

A number of different sampling methods were used for this study. The first interview was arranged through the fieldwork course at Waseda University. My mentor contacted the Shibuya City Office’s Shibuya Gender Equality & Diversity Center, IRIS (渋谷男女平等・ダイバーシティセンター) on my behalf, and an interview with Teruki, an employee at the centre, was arranged.

Three interviews were arranged through what Bryman (2012: 201) labels “convenience sampling”. One is a friend of mine (Sayaka) and another (Kazuya) is a co-worker of a friend. The third I got in contact with through a Facebook post, which some friends also shared on their walls (Nana).

Two participants (Ayame and Minami) were found through the Gender and Sexuality Center at Waseda University. The centre shared my flyer and contact information on their official Twitter account and two replies led to the arrangement of two more interviews.

#### 4.3 Interview process

The interview with Teruki was held at the Shibuya Gender Equality & Diversity Center. He was informed of the procedures prior to the interview. This interview also had a separate set of questions dealing more specifically with Shibuya Ward’s policies and work on LGBT equality and less regarding his personal life. The interview was conducted in English.

Four interviews were conducted at cafes in the Tokyo area. All participants were informed of the procedure in advance. They were also sent a written consent form (in either English or Japanese) prior to the interview and before starting, they confirmed either verbally or by signing the form that they agreed to the conditions. The locations were agreed on based on the participants’ preferences so that they would feel comfortable as far as it was possible. Due to unforeseen circumstances, one of these changed and led to that interview being held at another café, which affected the comfort of the participant and thereby the contents of the interview. The final interview was conducted over Skype. One interview was conducted in English, three in Japanese and one in a mix of both English and Japanese. They lasted between 30 to 90 minutes.

#### 4.4 Transcription, translation and analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by me. The quotes that were originally in Japanese are translated by me, and if consultation regarding choice of word arose, a Japanese friend, who is in every other way unrelated to the research, assisted me. The



quotes from interviews that were held in English are written as they were told without any grammatical corrections in order to avoid altering the meanings. The collected material was categorised into themes based on repetition, emphasis, and topics that were common among the interviewees. The themes are social policy, social norms and expectations, discrimination and media. Bryman refers to it as thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012: 580).

#### 4.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to awareness of one's position as a researcher in relation to the subjects of and situations of the research as well as the ways in which one influences or affects them (Bryman, 2012: 393). This explains the importance of considering and reflecting upon my role as a researcher and also, the way my experiences, biases and cultural and social background may impact the outcome of my research. As a pansexual/sexually fluid individual, my values regarding LGBT issues may be close to those of my interviewees, and my personal relationship to the topic has inevitably influenced the research despite conscious efforts to distance myself from my inherent biases. My sexuality has also been a tool for finding participants. Because of a shared identity, it is possible that the participants have felt more comfortable discussing sensitive topics as well as sharing personal stories. However, my identity as a Swedish woman who grew up in Sweden makes me an outsider in the Japanese society. I do not share their experiences, and regarding social expectations, we have little in common. It is not to say, however, that my nationality is an obstacle only. It is possible that the participants felt comfortable providing information I would otherwise not have acquired, had I shared their national identity. It is also important to reflect upon the language barrier. Although I am conversationally fluent in Japanese, I do not know nuances as a native speaker does and thus, misunderstandings may still occur. Similarly, the interviews that were held in English may have affected the participants' ability to express themselves, as well as my own. This taken into account, it must be acknowledged my interpretations of their experiences cannot portray an exact representation of the reality.

#### 4.6 Limitations and demarcations

The information provided by the interview participants, as well as the information from my own experiences, does not represent all of the LGBT people in Japan. However, alongside the existing literature analysed in this thesis, it can provide useful insight in how LGBT individuals negotiate their identities through the process of moving towards a more open and inclusive society. The sample is small and limited in that four participants are in their twenties, one is older and one is younger. Three are university students and two recently became regular company workers, something that also needs to be considered. The purpose of this study, however, is not to represent the whole population but rather to gain a deeper understanding of a few cases.

Another limitation is, again, the language barrier, which inevitably impacted our abilities to communicate. As for the interview that was held online, it is worth noting that we did not use camera. Thus, the conversation was not supplemented by facial expressions and gestures. In addition, the internet connection did occasionally lag, which resulted in instances of interruptions, where we talked over each other. This made it problematic to transcribe due to the difficulty of hearing what the participant said.

#### 4.7 Reliability and validity

The concepts of reliability and validity are measures to assess the quality and generalizability of the research. However, as Bryman explains, these criteria were developed mainly to assess quantitative research, and thus, the measurements cannot be directly transferred to qualitative research. Therefore, some writers (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, in Bryman, 2012: 390) propose alternative criteria of assessing the reliability and validity of qualitative research. The alternative is trustworthiness, which is divided into credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility and transferability parallels validity, whereas dependability corresponds to reliability, and lastly, confirmability means objectivity.

Taking this into account, it makes sense to assess this study in terms of trustworthiness, in addition to criteria for reliability and validity. Employing strategies such as triangulation can ensure the credibility. “Triangulation entails using more than

one method or source of data” (Bryman, 2012: 392). In this study, the interviews have been analysed in relation to secondary sources and observations in order to ensure credibility, which could be seen as a form of triangulation. The theories applied have also been chosen based on their relevance to the study. Transferability means that enough cultural contexts should be provided in order to assess whether the findings can be compared to other studies, something I have tried to accomplish with the background chapter. Validity (or external validity) is not possible to ensure with replicability, since social settings cannot be replicated, but it is ensured through transferability. Dependability is ensured by keeping records of the research process (Bryman, 2012: 290). The information should be reliable since it came from direct interaction between the participants and me, and my translations have been checked by a native Japanese speaker. The last aspect to be considered is confirmability, which means that although complete objectivity is impossible, the researcher should avoid letting personal values “sway the conduct of the research and the findings” (Bryman, 2012: 392-393). By asking questions that are rather open ended and allowed participants to freely elaborate, as well as consciously trying to avoid sharing my personal opinions unless asked, I have tried to ensure some degree of objectivity. However, as stated earlier, my experiences, biases and values have likely affected the interpretations to some degree.

#### 4.8 Ethical considerations.

“It is only if researchers are aware of the issues involved that they can make informed decisions about the implications of certain choices” (Bryman, 2012: 133). This quote illustrates the importance of reflecting over issues that concerns ethics in research. Bryman highlights four aspects that should be considered. These are whether participants can be harmed, if there is informed consent, if the researcher is invading the privacy of the participants and if the participants are deceived (ibid.: 135). Only the three first are relevant to consider in this thesis, since no element of deception has been employed.

According to the guidelines by the Swedish Research Council it is required “that the participants’ identities are protected” (2017: 28). The guidelines also state that one should eliminate “the connection between [...] answers and a certain individual” (ibid.:

40). Therefore, to ensure the anonymity of all informants, personal information that can identify them have been replaced. This is essential to this study since the topic of sexuality is very sensitive and sexual minorities in Japan face risks of discrimination should their sexual orientation or gender identity be revealed. Thus, failure to protect their anonymity could be harmful to them. The consent forms provided served the purpose of informing the participants of the aim of the study as well as information regarding their privacy. It should be noted that the consent form was used only for the interview participants. The participants of informal conversations have not been informed since I have no means by which I can contact them, and at the time the conversations occurred, I did not have the role of a researcher, but that of a friend.

## 5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the information provided by my interview participants is presented. It is complemented by information from my secondary sources. The chapter is divided in thematic sections, each section having a contextual introduction, followed by the presentation of the results. First, the partnerships certificates are discussed. The second section is a bit broader and focuses on social expectations and norms, identity negotiation, and discrimination. The final section focuses on media and how LGBT people are portrayed.

### 5.1 Partnership Certificates

In 2015, Shibuya Ward was the first district to introduce a form of partnership certificate for same-sex couples. The certificates became a hot topic in media, and following the successful implementation and the issuing of the first certificates, other cities and wards soon followed. At the time of writing six local governments have implemented similar certificates and Fukuoka and is in the process of implementing them. Although the certificates are not on the same legal level as a marriage, they provide certain benefits, such as the right to visit their partner at a hospital as family.

The following section examines the Shibuya partnership certificates in more detail and highlights the intents behind the implementation. It also seeks to find whether these certificates have had any impact on LGBT individuals' lives and how LGBT individuals perceive of them.

#### 5.1.1 *Intent and impact*

The requirement to register marriage in the family register is a major problem for cities wanting to include LGBT people in the society on all levels. Unable to alter legislations dealing with social benefits such as succession and insurance, some cities and wards are making efforts to improve the social benefits for LGBT individuals if not throughout the nation, at least within the city or ward itself.

As an employee at the Shibuya City office, as well as a part of the LGBT community, Teruki is openly advocating for LGBT equality. He explained in the interview that the implementation of the partnership certificates was to provide access to social welfare that would otherwise not be granted to same-sex couples, but that is not all there is to it. In Teruki's words "it is more like icon to let broader people understand sexual minority as an issue"<sup>1</sup>. The fact that it is not understood as an issue is directly linked to the lack of serious discussion in media. Scholars (McLelland, 2000b, Abe 2010) agree that sexual minority issues have been largely ignored in Japanese politics as well as in the social sphere. The partnership certificates are a mean to change that.

Teruki also explained that another reason Shibuya Ward passed the ordinance of the partnership certificates was the negative and hateful comments that they received once the ordinance was made public. This increased their sense of urgency and the importance of awareness became clear, and at the time of writing, visibility has become the focus. In fact, Shibuya Ward has made "the city that makes difference their strength" (*chigai wo chikara ni kaeru machi*) their official slogan in order to display their openness towards minorities, and that slogan is going to be valid for another eighteen years. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power, this example illustrates how the forces of pro-LGBT equality and anti-LGBT equality interact with each other. Although the anti-side's intention was to prevent implementation, the Shibuya office used it as a "strategy" to strengthen their own influence on the issue. Takao (2017: 18) suggests this was made possible through the strategic framing of the issue as one of diversity, focusing on the hardships sexual minorities face, rather than pressing the issue in a civil rights discourse.

Furthermore, while discussing the visibility, Teruki stressed the need to focus on inclusion. He explained that the term diversity is often seen in the media but that the general understanding of the word seems to be about allowing minorities to exist rather than including them. According to Teruki: "Japanese people do not properly understand what inclusiveness stands for, since social conformity is the value of the Japanese society and they tend to think that social inclusion means the majority accepting or

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Teruki, Feb, 2018.

allowing minorities”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, a recent attempt to promote a more accurate understanding of inclusion is the construction of non-gendered bathrooms, something that also directly connects to visibility in public spaces.

Shibuya Ward published an evaluation survey regarding the certificate system shortly after the implementation, and there was one aspect that Teruki found particularly surprising. He stated that: “They started to become more interested in society. They started going to the vote or they started listening to what each party is saying during the election period.”<sup>3</sup> He further explained that some of the couples that had gotten the certificates, and thereby acquiring recognition to the point that they could have their relationship acknowledged, had developed a sense of membership in the society. It is important to note that Teruki’s position most likely affected what information from the survey he chose to present.

The sense of membership in the society relates to Mackie’s (2002: 200) ideas of levels of citizenship. She outlines a number of ways in which sexual minorities are subject to marginalisation. She argues that individuals enjoy different levels of citizenship through “the context of the legal and institutional structures which determine who has the right to participate in the political systems”, where the ethnically Japanese, heterosexual, fertile, male white-collar worker forms the archetypal citizen, and those deviating from that model enjoy less benefits. Women are subject to marginalization through the gender roles and a system that makes it more difficult for women to manage both family and a career. Although there are laws such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, the system is built on institutions and policies that do not consider the additional expectations and requirements on women, and thereby making it more difficult for them to participate to the same extent as men. Welfare policies also promote women’s role in the private sphere, for example by taxation concessions given that she does not earn more than a certain amount. A married woman may also be covered by her husband’s health insurance (2002: 205-206). These are also examples where homosexual couples have limited access to benefits that are given only to the heterosexual families. Homosexuals, Mackie argues, “are marginal to the degree that

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Teruki, Feb, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Teruki, Feb, 2018.

they do not meet the expectations of participating in the monogamous heterosexual nuclear family system” (Mackie, 2002: 210). The idea of the archetypical citizen would be, in terms of Fraser’s recognition theory, one who does not suffer from misrecognition. Mackie’s idea of individuals who suffer from lower levels of citizenship does in that sense match that of Fraser’s idea of those who are subject to misrecognition. And although the partnership certificates are increasing the rights of homosexual couples, the fact remains still that they are not on equal terms with heterosexual couples, and thereby still subject to misrecognition.

### 5.1.2 *Attitudes*

The other participants presented more nuanced views on the impact of the partnership certificates. Kazuya pointed out that only implementing these certificates will not change the attitude towards LGBT individuals. Unless there’s no understanding among the people, he does not believe much will change even if similar partnership certificates were implemented throughout the nation. Despite that, he still thinks the certificates are much better than nothing at all. Even so, he emphasises that compared to marriage, he thinks the certificates are rather weak.

Ayame has a more positive attitude towards the certificates. She says that: “it’s great that Shibuya started”<sup>4</sup> issuing them. However, she had wished for more dialogue to arise, even among heterosexuals, following the implementation than she perceives has been the case. Ayame is not alone in seeing the importance of involving heterosexuals in the fight for equality. Teruki also agrees with her. According to him, they are close to advancing to “phase two”, where they would need to encourage non-LGBT people to take interest in this issue. It is common belief among the participants that advocating for LGBT rights needs to be done on all levels. Sayaka, on the other hand, only focused on the positive aspects, and in her view, the partnership certificates can enhance the sense of being actual partners by getting some kind of recognition, even if it does not mean they can officially marry.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ayame, Feb, 2018



Although focusing on gender equality, Kano states that depending on whether you interpret the progressive politics of gender as a domestic progress or due to international pressure, one can use it to support conservative agendas. If one does not acknowledge that the progress took place domestically at grassroots levels, it is easy to argue that it is a “western idea” that is not according to the traditional Japanese values, and thereby defending the strong gender roles that are prevalent to this day through nationalism. In my view, this is applicable to the LGBT rights movement as well.

Although the certificates can indeed be perceived as weak compared to marriage, there is also strength in the weakness. Teruki explained that among the couples that considered applying for the partnership certificates, it was a common concern whether or not there would be any mark in their family register, as is mandatory to make one’s marriage official. Since individual districts do not have the power to implement such changes on their own, it would not be visible there, and that is something most couples are relieved to hear. A mark in the family register could expose them to both family and employers who wish to see their registers. They would thereby face the risks of being exposed against their will and that could lead to discrimination as a consequence. Tamagawa (2016) argues that unless the family register system changes, same-sex marriage implementation is highly unlikely. Should there, however, be a legislation that recognise same-sex marriage, it would, in Tamagawa’s words “lead Japanese society to redefine the Japanese family, thus creating a more inclusive atmosphere for sexual minorities” (Tamagawa, 2016: 182).

## 5.2 Social expectations and discrimination

This section deals with the social expectations LGBT individuals have from the family and the society. It is already clear that the Japanese society is constructed around heteronormative ideals. Here I look into how LGBT identities are negotiated in order to navigate through heteronormativity and avoid being subject to discrimination.

### 5.2.1 *The nail that sticks out*

“The nail that sticks out gets hammered down”. This is a Japanese proverb that very well describes the society. If you are different from the group, the group is likely to exclude you. That is a point Nana made during our conversation. She would not tell anyone about her sexuality unless she needed to, and her fear of social exclusion is not unreasonable.

Minami, who is bisexual, came out to her mother and received only an assurance that her mother did not hate her for it, before the mother quickly switched topic. Throughout the interview with Minami, a number of concerns surfaced. She made it clear that she does not want to be treated differently and she is content with people not accepting sexual minorities as long as they do not say it out loud. During the interview she never used any word that would indicate her sexuality even among complete strangers and when it was inevitable, she chose to write it down. As long as she stayed invisible, one of the many, she was fine. Similar experiences are presented in Chalmers (2002: 55). One of her interviewees states that only by keeping silent and never mentioning anything that concerns her sexuality, she can maintain her relationship to her mother. The mother’s primary concern is to maintain the family’s reputation, something that I think is likely in Minami’s case also. In ignoring, or perhaps denying, their daughters’ sexualities, they can maintain the normative family and appear to fit in without risking becoming the subjects of gossip or discrimination. Sayaka was the only exception among the participants. She was openly talking about her sexuality among friends, family and even in public spaces without discomfort. Knowing that many of her homosexual friends could not come out from fear of bullying or discrimination also made her well aware that the majority does not share her comfort with herself, and thus she considers herself to be lucky.

The risk of social exclusion seems to be one of the main reasons many LGBT individuals keep quiet about their sexualities. In all of the interviews, the participants stated that they would be most comfortable expressing their identity in a situation where the people surrounding them were open and knew about their sexuality and fully accepted them. Ayame said that only when she were in the company of those who knew, or at a place that openly caters to LGBT customers, she could speak openly about her

sexuality and be completely comfortable knowing that she would not be judged. At an ordinary café, she still struggles with the fear of revealing herself to the other customers just in case they would be involved in the same work in the future, despite knowing how unlikely that is. Even if the chances for that outcome are next to nothing, she still cannot help thinking that way. Unlike heterosexuals, then, sexual minorities need to negotiate their identities depending on their surroundings in a more conscious way. Drawing on Butler's framework, identity negotiation for sexual minorities includes their sexuality. Of course, sexuality is part of a heterosexual identity also. What makes the difference is the set of social norms that accept heterosexuality as normal, and non-heterosexual as other. The social norms acting upon us impact the way sexual minorities navigate through life, thus forcing us to deliberately choose how much of ourselves to reveal depending on the context we are in. In terms of Foucault, the conforming to these norms and the negotiating of identities is, as I interpret it, the effect of the disciplinary power that creates and recreates these norms. An example of the disciplinary power of maintaining and reinforcing social norms would be how students in Japanese schools have what Human Rights Watch refers to as a shared responsibility. It means that the students monitor each other to ensure they follow the rules, and sometimes it leads to an excuse for bullying, where LGBT students who differ from the norm become subject to student enforced sanctions (Human Rights Watch, 2016: 49), thus forcing them to conform to the social norms. In the bullying prevention policy from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology, social norm conformity is regarded as a bullying prevention measure (Human Rights Watch, 2016: 50).

In order to make a society more open, to change the norms that force sexual minorities to stay closeted, awareness and education were topics that were brought up in a majority of the interviews. The participants agreed that by educating and spreading awareness through events such as the pride festival and informing the broader public, as well as increasing visibility and inviting to discussion in the educational sphere, the society would hopefully become more open and inclusive. This is confirmed by studies that have shown a correlation between educational level and diversity tolerance (Takao, 2017: 18). This line of thought is also reflected in research on LGBT issues in schools, where Schmidt *et al.* (2012) stresses the importance of teachers recognising LGBT injustices, promoting diversity and having an open and inclusive curriculum and

according to Human Rights Watch, such injustices are not properly taken care of in schools in Japan (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In their report from 2016 regarding bullying of LGBT students, it becomes very clear how young LGBT individuals struggle in school, having to either hide their gender identities or sexual orientations from fear of being bullied, or fight for their rights to be themselves in an environment that is often hostile towards them. They specifically criticize teacher's prejudices and lack of knowledge of LGBT issues as key factors for the bullying, where teachers sometimes join in and use degrading language to single out individuals. Again, the gender registered in the family register causes immense struggles for many transgendered students, who are denied treatment according to their identified gender. They present accounts of students who were confronted for speaking up about their rights because it disturbs the harmony of the school. That is another point that is heavily emphasised in the report. Some students experienced school as "an unsafe environment where conformity and harmony were privileged over dignity, security, and free expression" (HRW, 2016: 39), highlighting the need to conform to the social norms to avoid bullying. Although policies have been introduced, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology even issued a guidebook for teachers, the recommendations are not binding (HRW, 2016: 19). Interestingly, although unable to change the curriculum, Teruki explained that Shibuya Ward currently trains teachers in how to deal with issues regarding sexual minorities, indicating an increased awareness of teachers' roles in creating safe environments for LGBT students. Although a step in the right direction, it still does not make it possible for schools to teach about LGBT issues. Even though Nana expressed disapproval with the sexual education she had received, stating that not even once was the topic of sexual minorities brought up, the question remains whether or not the curriculum is likely to change in any near future. McLelland's findings suggest that Japan is increasingly trying to "protect children" from media that can be seen as "harmful" to children and young people. The term 'harmful', however, does leave a lot to interpretation. Although the protection is meant to be against portrayals of sexual acts that would be illegal in real life, there have been attempts to restrict access to Boys Love manga in public libraries (McLelland, 2015: 411). LGBT awareness and inclusion, I would argue, is the opposite of harmful. The unavailability of information is brought up by HRW as well, and in the report, one

interviewee stated that the only mention of homosexuality in his course literature was that it increased the risk for HIV (HRW, 2016: 25). Two of my interviewees, Ayame and Minami, told me that they discovered their sexual orientations rather late. Ayame specifically explained that she did not know anything other than heterosexuality, because there were no news on the topic or discussion on TV that she had ever seen when she grew up.

“I thought I was the only one whose friendships with other girls did not go well. Only I got so attached. Days when I could not speak to them I got really depressed. I thought that was friendship. I did not realize I was a lesbian. Once I entered university or high school, I realized there were others like me”<sup>5</sup>

Allowing students to learn about LGBT issues would spare others like Ayame from the pain of thinking there is something wrong with them. Scholars have found identical experiences among LGBT individuals. Abe’s (2010: 57) interviews revealed that even though her interviewee had known his whole life he was homosexual, he never realized there were others until he became older as well. Sayaka stated that, even though she knew, many others do not even know about sexual minorities when they are young, and introducing inclusive sexual education in school would not only ensure LGBT students that they were not alone, but also lead to greater understanding among heterosexual students.

A friend, Haruna, shared similar experiences with me. She told me how she had seen her friends become so happy once they started dating men, so naturally she thought that only if she found a man to date, she would become as happy as them, but that had not been the case. She enjoyed their company but she felt uncomfortable by their touches. When I asked if she knew what asexuality was, she only shook her head and looked confused. As I explained it, her look changed to curiosity, and like the cases above, Haruna was surprised to find that there were others who felt like her. What

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ayame, Feb. 2018.

makes her case different is that she knew of LGBT, which implies that even efforts made for awareness fails to highlight sexualities such as asexuality and intersexuality.

### 5.2.3 *Family first*

The female participants raised the topic of family, focusing on their pressure to marry and have children. Minami had been told by her mother to choose a man when time comes for her to settle, and Ayame, who is homosexual, could not come out to her father because she knew he was looking forward to her creating a family and having children. Minami also feels pressured to have children in the future due to the declining birth rate and ageing population. The declining birth rate is something that one is constantly reminded of while living in Japan. For sexual minorities, it is also a reminder of the choices they should make according to the existing norms, their families and even the government. It is, I would argue, an example of how biopower operates, making the social body conform to the norms that are in place to control it.

Naturally, the stigma of deviating from the norms causes reluctance to openly come out. To some, it might seem like a deception to hide one's sexuality from one's family. However, Chalmers' (2002: 50) findings suggest that, unlike in the west, it is perceived as kinder to one's parents to hide it, and thereby harder for many Japanese to come out. Despite that, it is still argued that coming out is necessary in order to challenge the prevalent assumption that heterosexuality is "a universal norm".

Since these norms are so prevalent, homosexuals have developed strategies to fit in while not neglecting their sexualities. McLelland (2000b: 115) explains how counterfeit marriages have become a mean to live up to the pressure to marry and have a family. Typically, a lesbian and a homosexual man agrees to marry each other to conform to the expectations of the society while at the same time being free to practice their own sexualities. Thus, they marry in order to create the family the society demands of them to fit in, while at the same time maintaining their gay identity outside of the household. This form of marriage is also beneficial for the man since "marriage is necessary in order for a man to advance in his career and preserve his public image" (McLelland, 2000b: 103-104). Drawing on Foucault's theory of power, the counterfeit marriage is a result of the power structures, or the social norms, that operate in the

society, and can be seen as a “strategy” employed by individuals who suffer from oppression due to the forces in place.

The differentiation between marriage and romantic love can, in terms of Butler’s framework, enable homosexuals to negotiate their identity to match the social expectations, and when circumstances allow for it, express their sexual identity in contexts where the social norms do not act upon them. It seems to me that both Ayame and Minami negotiate their identities similarly, although presently not taking it as far as marriage.

Although a counterfeit marriage is an option, McLelland’s findings suggest that it is more common among older generations (2000b: 103). The idea of marriage as something other than a relationship based on romantic love has changed, likely as a result of global equality movements. Kazuya compared the social policies to those of more progressive countries, stating that Japan should follow their example and strive to implement policies that would allow homosexual couples to adopt children together. However, since it is practically impossible to adopt children while unmarried, this is just another way in which homosexuals are subject to misrecognition as per Fraser’s definition. And should a child be adopted outside a marriage, the child will be registered as “child out of wedlock” in the family register, something that would make the child vulnerable to discrimination (Tamagawa, 2016: 167).

### 5.3 Media

In this chapter contemporary media representations are discussed. There is one section on how the media portrayals are perceived of by sexual minorities and thereafter there is a section on recent developments (and motivations behind those).

In the last thirty years, sexual minorities have become significantly more visible in printed as well as broadcasted media. McLelland (2000b: 32) refers to the early 1990s as Japan’s “gay boom”, presenting examples of how in particular homosexual men received attention in media and entertainment. Welker (2008: 48) describes the gay boom as “the decade’s surge of representations in the mass media of (predominately male) homosexuality”. Although the boom led to “an increase in the visibility of gay men”, the representations have generally not been regarded as positive among gay

viewers (McLelland, 2000b: 32). However, the increased visibility enabled magazines to publish more about gay related issues, and McLelland outlines a number of them where homosexuals were given space to seek advice. Through these magazines, bars catering towards a gay clientele were also given the chance to advertise themselves, and as a result, awareness of gay communities could spread more widely. It is worth noting, however, that these magazines and movies dealt almost exclusively with male homosexuals, and references to lesbians were a rare sight (McLelland, 2000b: 33). Despite this visibility, he adds, it did not lead to a greater openness towards homosexual individuals on grass-root level. This is, however, not to say that there were no spaces for queer people to seek connections and expression before the gay boom. There were magazines catering to a queer audience throughout the post-war period, such as the famous “Barazoku”, aiming at gay men, and “Allan” and “June”, which were popular among non-heteronormative women (Welker, 2008).

### 5.3.1 *Portrayals and perceptions*

There is a general consensus among my interviewees that LGBT representation in media is negative. However, Ayame, Nana, Sayaka and Kazuya all agree that compared to only five years ago, there have been improvements. While Ayame has noted an increase in LGBT issues in news reporting, the others largely focused on negative aspects. Kazuya and Sayaka both confirm earlier studies by pointing out that homosexual men in particular are portrayed not as normal people, but as funny characters that are subject to ridicule. Sayaka would wish to see gay people appear more natural, as seeing how sexual minorities are treated like they are not normal makes her uncomfortable. Nana, on the other hand, focuses her discussion on the choice of words. The degrading term *okama* for describing an effeminate homosexual man (often in drag) has been generally replaced with the more common word *gei* (gay), which she worries might become a degrading word unless they stop using it that way. Ayame also brings attention to the word *okama*, although her focus is more on the fact that people who perform as *okama* on television make themselves the subject of ridicule. The fact that it is their job to be made fun of is something that makes her angry, because people of all generations are watching. While children learn from what



they see, older generations might have their prejudices confirmed. She means that if they only studied a bit they would not find it so amusing to make discriminatory jokes, but some people don't use other information sources than the TV.

Nana's concern with language and choice of words is highly relevant to the perception of sexual minorities. By looking at the language, many cultural aspects are revealed, something that Abe (2010: 11) also agrees with. As she puts it, "[l]anguage both reflects and structures reality". This claim is supported by the fact that the Japanese terms *homo* and *gei* only refer to male homosexuals. She concludes that the "lack of words referring to female homosexuals, reflects the longstanding history of more visible male homosexuality in Japanese society" (ibid.: 11). The same implications are present in McLelland's work as well. According to him, Japanese media has a "tendency to focus on unusual aspects of gay life", causing gender normative homosexual men to have difficulties identifying with their same-sex attraction (McLelland, 2000a: 461). The negative connotations the words to describe homosexuality carry could be another reason for the persisting reluctance to reveal one's sexual identity.

Kazuya's, Sayaka's and Ayame's ideas of men as subject of ridicule are confirmed in a number of earlier studies. Mackie (2002: 211) points out that representation of homosexuals in media reinforces negative stereotypes in the sense that homosexual men are often used as subject to ridicule in comedy, and lesbian women are rarely given any public space at all, apart from some genres of lesbian porn, produced for a heterosexual male audience. This is supported by McLelland's findings, as he states that "it is clear that [...] many Japanese people have rather stereotypical ideas about homosexual men", often associating them with effeminacy (McLelland, 2000b: 58-59). He also states that representations of homosexuals doing ordinary things living like ordinary people have been largely absent in Japanese media. The stereotypical representations make, according to McLelland, homosexual men reluctant to come out, since they would then be associated with negative stereotypes. In terms of Foucault's theory of power, the media becomes a form of "support" for the strengthening or maintaining of the heteronormative gender roles. The use of such portrayals to further suppress sexual minorities is clearly, in my understanding, a strategy to maintain the status quo and making it difficult for activists to be seen or taken seriously.

The association with comedy does very much impact the way people perceive of homosexuality. During a *goukon* (a form of group date) I attended back in 2014, one of the men, Kouki, told us he had found Boy's Love and gay porn manga in his brother's room, while laughing in embarrassment. The other men in the group mocked him and they made degrading jokes. I interrupted them by asking what was so funny about it, and told them there is nothing wrong with it. Kouki defended himself by explaining it to me (the only foreigner in the group) in an educating manner: "You see, in Japan it is not normal to be gay. It is something we laugh at here because normal people are not gay. It is strange."<sup>6</sup> It is possible that he chose to bring up the subject of his brother, not only to make us laugh, but also to portray himself as a suitable partner by distancing himself from his presumably gay brother. I strongly believe that stereotypical and negative media portrayals prompted this behaviour and made him less willing to accept homosexuality.

### 5.3.2 Recent developments

Despite many negative comments about the Japanese media and their portrayals of sexual minorities, there have been some improvements. In one instance, the notably conservative NHK, the Japanese national broadcasting service, brought attention to sexual minorities by inviting sexual minorities to compete in *Kouhaku*, a music competition that is aired every New Years. Traditionally there is a red team of female singers and a white team of male singers, but in 2007 there was a pink team consisting of LGBT musicians (Abe, 2010: 7-8). Although it was a one-time event, it was still a milestone in the progress towards social acceptance.

More recently, the same broadcasting service aired drama series that not only portray sexual minorities, but also even have transgendered and homosexual main characters. In January this year, a four episode series about a transgender woman who also identifies as lesbian was aired. When a supporting character expressed confusion over her female appearance and her claim to be lesbian despite not having gone through a gender reassignment surgery, she explained to him in an educational manner. This, I

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<sup>6</sup> Informal conversation, Nov 2014. Note that this conversation took place before the first partnership certificate was introduced.

interpret as an effort to educate the audience. The show also presented other issues transgendered individuals might face. When she was ridiculed, objectified or offended, the perpetrator was portrayed as the one at fault, and if she did not educate the perpetrator herself, a supporting character often did so in her stead. Although sometimes simplified, it did indeed seem like the purpose of the series was educational.

There are other examples that indicate an effort in educating the broader public through TV. At the time of writing, NHK is airing a series that not only focuses on a homosexual man, but one who is non-Japanese. The main character is a Canadian man who married a Japanese man. The Japanese man passed away and the Canadian decided to go to Japan to see the country where his late husband grew up. He goes to stay with the late husband's brother, who lives alone and has a child. Although the couple was childless, the Canadian man tells the brother about gay rights in Canada. Surprisingly, the topic of homo-adoption is also brought up in a positive light, which is rather progressive, especially considering what Nana told me about how homo-adoption had been spoken about in national TV only a few years ago. The topic of adoption is indeed controversial since it is something only married couples can do, and thus, this series introduces themes that are otherwise non-existent in Japan.

There has also been some progress in news reporting. Despite the general invisibility of particularly lesbian couples, media did report on a symbolic wedding ceremony between two women in 2013 (Tamagawa, 2016).

It is clear that the question of marriage equality is increasingly discussed in the public. In February 2018, Yahoo Japan (2018) held an online survey asking whether or not Japan should legalize same-sex marriage. Although the results showed negatively, it is still significant in that the question was raised to the public. It must be pointed out, however, that this was an open poll so the results cannot be said to represent the whole population.

Other attempts to familiarise the Japanese population with sexual minorities have been initiated as well. One such attempt is the "Out in Japan" initiative, where organizations and individuals collaborate to publish photographs of LGBT individuals with the aim to shed light on sexual minorities (OUT IN JAPAN, 2015). By doing so, they support coming out and encourage people to be comfortable with themselves. The portraits are of ordinary people who want to contribute to spreading awareness by

having their image and some basic information, such as age, occupation and sexuality or sexual identity along with their coming out story. By doing so, they show how sexual minorities are a part of the society and they show the public that they exist. Drawing on what Ayame said about not realizing until rather late that other homosexuals exists, I believe OUT IN JAPAN uses an incredibly important approach to promote visibility. Not only does the project show that sexual minorities do indeed exist, it also sheds light on the diversity among sexual minorities. As discussed above, the media has a tendency to apply certain characteristics to sexual minorities, such as effeminacy to homosexual men. The photo gallery OUT IN JAPAN has produced breaks the stereotypes and offers the reality of diversity.

All of this is an indication that there has been a shift in power relations, where the media increasingly present a more accurate picture of sexual minorities as a part of the reality. I believe this shift is partly to appeal to the seemingly more open younger generation, as well as appealing to an international audience. As the Olympics are to be held in Tokyo in 2020, the Japanese government also has incentive to work for LGBT equality. International media will be focused on Japan, and it is very likely that they want to avoid the negative publicity that Russia received during the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014. By maintaining an image of a progressive rights movement, those in power can benefit from it and gain popularity among the LGBT allies.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis has been to understand how the institutional changes towards LGBT equality directly influence individual lives of sexual minorities. The implementation of partnership certificates in a number of wards and cities have shed important light on the issue of LGBT equality, and so have the recently increasing realistic portrayals of sexual minorities in media.

### 6.1 How are the partnership certificates perceived by LGBT individuals?

The intention behind the partnership certificates might at first glance seem to be an attempt to progressively advocate for marriage equality. However, as Teruki explained, its purpose was first and foremost to enable sexual minorities to access the social welfare that were otherwise unavailable to them, since there are benefits that only those registered as family in the family register can receive. It was also an attempt to bring visibility to an issue that is rarely spoken seriously about in media. Thus, the certificates were not only a mean by which they could recognize same-sex couples, but also a strategy to force media and politicians, and even the general public, to seriously discuss the issue. The actions have brought attention to the widespread unawareness of LGBT issues, leading to increasing work on visibility and education. Although the attitudes among my interviewees vary to some degree, they all agree that it's a positive step forward. However, some feel that it will not change much unless the society does not understand and accept them as equals. In addition, among citizens responding to the survey Shibuya Ward distributed, there were concerns of being exposed through the family registry. That, I argue, is evidence for the need for national protections against discrimination of sexual minorities that protect them in theory as well as practice. Therefore, in my understanding, the certificates are useful in that same-sex couples achieve a higher level of social recognition and access to benefits, but are, in terms of protection against discrimination, inadequate. They are a symbolic victory for the LGBT community, but at the same time evidence that sexual minorities are far from being equally recognized as equal citizens.

## 6.2 How do LGBT individuals negotiate their identities in relation to the social expectations?

From both my interviews and existing research, it is clear how conformity is highly valued in the Japanese society. Those who do not conform to the norms face the risk of social exclusion, and the fear of that is one of the main reasons many LGBT individuals are reluctant to come out. There are a number of strategies that sexual minorities may employ in order to avoid social exclusion and other forms of discrimination, although some, such as counterfeit marriages, are becoming less common as awareness increases. Still, some interviewees expressed conflicting feelings about being open with their sexualities. While they are attracted to the same sex, the expectations and the pressure they feel from their family causes reluctance to reveal their sexualities to their parents for fear of disappointing them. The emphasis on pleasing their parents' wishes for them to have families is a reflection of the strong social norms in place. The interviewees also seem to agree that what is most important for them to be comfortable with being open about themselves is an open environment where the people know, accept, and understand them, which in some cases leads them to have distinct social circles where they express themselves according to their level of comfort. Thus, they balance what they reveal and what they hide based on their surroundings. However, although I cannot claim it to be representative for all LGBT individuals, there seems to be a consensus that such balancing should not be necessary.

## 6.3 How can the pressure to conform to the social norms be reduced?

Most interviewees stressed the need for better education on sexual minority issues. From this study, it is clear that the inadequate education on sexual minorities can have major consequences, and the HRW report illustrates the urgency to change that. Many young LGBT individuals discover their sexualities late and until then they might think there is something wrong with them. The regularity of derogatory remarks from both teachers and fellow students cause high levels of stress and induce students with fear of being exposed. Often, the topic of lack of education was brought up several times in each interview. That, I assume, is an indication that proper education is an aspect that

needs priority in order to progress towards greater acceptance. Further strengthening this assumption is the fact that Shibuya Ward focuses on awareness among teachers, to ensure correct information can be available to both personnel and students in schools, and that research have seen a correlation between the level of education and acceptance and inclusion.

#### 6.4 What impact does media have on sexual minorities' lives?

The negative stereotypes portrayed in media combined with the lack of knowledge do clearly have consequences for sexual minorities, often making them feel uncomfortable. The perpetual narrow stereotypes of homosexual men as either transvestites or overly effeminate strengthen the associations between homosexual men and stereotypical female characteristics. Thus, many stay closeted in order to avoid being associated with such characteristics. However, it is improving. While homosexuals are still strongly associated with comedy, and degrading words and comments are still heard in both entertainment shows and among politicians, it appears some efforts are increasingly being made to show the reality of sexual minorities as normal people who live normal lives much like everyone else. The important aspect of this is that programmes that focus on a fair representation often problematizes the discriminatory actions or degrading remarks these character suffer from. It is becoming more educational while highlighting struggles and thereby seeking understanding and sympathy for the LGBT characters from the audience. Although the stereotypical portrayals and derogatory language are still highly prevalent, the increasingly fair portrayals bring some light to contrast them.

I believe the internet has contributed substantially to awareness and openness, particularly among younger generations. International influences on LGBT rights movements increase visibility and make information accessible for practically anyone in Japan. The initiatives online, such as OUT IN JAPAN, among others, take an approach unlike many others where they simply aim to increase visibility and inform the broader public of the existence of sexual minorities in every part of society. Showing the population that sexual minorities exist everywhere is an essential part of increasing

visibility, as it confirms that many people are different from the cis-gendered, heteronormative image, and thus, making it more difficult to deny them equal rights.

In conclusion, the changes that we see in Japan right now have been rather fast the last couple of years. The most significant change seems to be that the issues of LGBT equality have been brought to public attention, increasingly being discussed in politics as well as entertainment media. Despite the increased visibility, however, the actual impact on individual lives seems to be rather insignificant, and it does not reduce the pressure to conform to social norms. It is unlikely that much will change for the individual person unless policies or laws that explicitly aim to protect sexual minorities are put into place and acted upon. Even so, the interviewees did express confidence in the progress and, although most found them insufficient, they agree it is positive progress nonetheless. It brings them hope that there will be less prejudices and more acceptance and openness towards diversity.

Throughout the writing of this thesis a number of cities have announced plans to introduce partnership certificates for same-sex couples, illustrating the on-going process, further inducing hope for equal recognition in the future.

Although this study cannot be considered representative for all sexual minorities in Japan, the findings do present some common views among six unrelated individuals. Despite increasing visibility and equality advocacy, the fact still remains that most stay closeted. Thus, the title of this thesis: “Rainbows and closets”.



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