FAKE FAMILY, REAL FEELINGS

ZEMI RESEARCH CONVENTION 2026

TEAM SMITHSKIE

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Exploring Japan's rental family service and how social expectations shape kinship and belonging

What is Rental Family ?

1. Introduction

• Rental family service = a service where you can rent a family member

• **Whom you can rent?**

1. father	4. grandfather	7. uncle/aunt
2. mother	5. grandmother	8. grand children
3. children	6. siblings	9. other members

Diversity of kinship?

→
- **How are families changing in Japan today?**
- **Does this reflect the gap between social expectations and reality of family?**
- **What is the definition of family?**
- **Why do people rent a family member?**

(The Mainichi, 2025, November 22)

2. What do Rental Family Services provide?

Emotional Support

to **fill emotional and social absences in their lives**

ex). The company offers the warmth of a supportive family—whether struggling with career decisions, need advice on everyday matters. Since the same staff members will continue to work with clients, a natural relationship of trust will develop over time. (Family Romance, n.d.)

Substitution

to **fulfill transactional family roles**

ex). A service to act as stand-ins for parents during a meeting between the two families to formally announce the engagement to the partner's parents

(Family Romance, n.d.)

→ **What exactly are people paying for ?**

3. Why are these Services needed??



Family Norms

Expectations about what a **"normal"** family should look like & how family members should behave.



Social Expectations

Pressure to appear **socially acceptable** and meet others' **expectations.**



Shame & Stigma

Fear of judgment when personal relationships do not match social norms.

What Does This Reveal?

When social and cultural norms construct conventional family structures, people who don't fit these expectations may face unequal social/practical disadvantages

Conventional Family Expectations → **Unequal Social Pressure & Disadvantages** → **Rental Family as a Coping Mechanism**

Temporary relationships help individuals navigate particular social situations.

(Allison, 2015; Alexy & Cook, 2019; Farmer, 2004; Le, 2022)

4. What does Rental Family tell us about "Family?"

1 What is Family?

Cultural Anthropology

- Kinship is shaped by cultural practices and social roles, not just blood or marriage (Schneider, 1980).
- Relationships can be established through performed everyday interactions and care.

2 Who Provides Care?

Medical Anthropology

- Family provides emotional support, care, and social connections, However, care is also a social responsibility, not just a personal act (Buch, 2015).
- Rental families offer family-like support as a paid service, but not everyone can afford it.

3 Who is Responsible for Care?

International Relations: Feminist Analysis

- Feminist IR argues that private relationships, care, and family are fundamentally connected to power, labor, and economic structures (Enloe, 2014).
- Rental families reveal how society's normative family expectations demand real labor, capital, and resources.

5. Conclusion

Rental family service don't simply solve the underlying problems of users. Instead, they provide a **temporary** person, relationship, or social role that someone needs in a particular situation.

What is the meaning/implications of working in this industry?

Can AI replace rental families, or do we need humans?

Can these services be considered as a form of (social) care?

Rrferences

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